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## **Dance as Embodied Ethics\***

Einav Katan-Schmid, Aili Bresnahan, and Sara Houston

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we propose that one of the many possible ways that dance might embody philosophic thought and discourse is via embodying ethical practice. Each author contributes a different perspective on the relationship between dance and ethical activity. We invite the reader to go through this account in two ways: as separate ideas and as interrelated thoughts.

Katan-Schmid views ‘dance’ as a metaphor for ‘embodied ethics’. She analyses dance as an embodied activity of decision-making which regulates the tension between co-existing physical dynamics. Following from the idea of ‘dancing’, she asks us to think of ‘embodied ethics’ in performative terms – as a contemplative activity.

In her section, Bresnahan shows how dance practice provides examples of applied ethics within traditional western philosophical categories of both virtue ethics and consequentialist ethics.

Houston argues that dance can encompass an ethics of care. She demonstrates how dance with an ethic of care involves attentiveness, putting the person before the form, and for the dance artists to give up a degree of control and autonomy over the work made.

As a mutual account, it is our view that dance contains practices – including but not limited to dancing – that constitute ethical activity along all of the lines discussed above, be they metaphoric of ethical action, applied directly towards a goal of human flourishing or societal good, or an ethics of care for and with one another. Dance, on all of our accounts, contains careful, thoughtful work on balance, self-development, and attentiveness to the needs of the whole while contemplating, comprehending, and considering the essentials of any individual part within. As such, we together have views that themselves exist in relations with one another and are not in contradiction, although we are aware that we have by no means exhausted the possibilities for dance as embodied ethics here. We invite you to think through dancing with us as you try on the views expressed below.

### **Dancing as a Metaphor for Embodied Ethics**

Einav Katan-Schmid

I ask the reader to view ‘Dance as Embodied Ethics’ as a metaphor. I invite an understanding of one thing: ‘dance’, in terms of another: ‘embodied ethics’. As I sense it, this metaphor *feels* quite actual. Moreover, I am aware that the shared instinctive feeling here – that dance interweaves aesthetic knowing with ethics – is timely (see Bannon, 2018) and does not stand alone. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, for example, state that the metaphor of dancing is an alternative to the current war-like culture of argumentation. They ask their reader to imagine ‘a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way’ (Lakoff/Johnson 2008 [1980], 5). I would like to

further develop this image and to suggest that ‘dance’ enables thinking of decision-making in terms of embodied comprehension of dynamic interrelationships. Thus, tacit and contemplative decisions are made beyond rigid definitions.

My notion of ‘dancing’ here is schematic. I draw from my knowledge – as fragmentary and contextual as it is – a broad sense of ‘what dancing *means*’. I am aware that there are mock combat dances, that not all training-cultures are ethical, and that some stylistic expressions do not aim to please their viewers. However, I look here at ‘dancing’ as a general idea. In its broadest far-reaching sense, ‘dancing’ is the human activity of moving aesthetically. Like all other physical techniques, dance movements are both social and personal (Mauss, 1938). In addition, while dancing, bodily movements are tailored to their aesthetic purposes and their performance is neither practical nor existential (Valéry 1957 [1938], 1390-1391; Katan-Schmid 2016, 57-59). So, bodily movements in dance are self-referential and are conducted due to an exchange between knowledge, sensitivity, and imagination. Thus as I view it, ‘dancing’ holds three characteristics, which are significant for human understanding: it is personal, cultural and reflective at the same time.

Take for instance a pirouette as a metaphorical component of ‘dancing’. In order to regulate balance within a spin a dancer needs to swiftly move the leg into a *Passé*, to rise into a *Relevé*, to find the position of the arms, stretch up and contract the core of the body and, critically, fix the gaze onto one focal point while constantly moving and whirling. There is a technical know-how – acquired through practice during the experiential history of training – but every time anew there must be an activation of knowledge through feeling, interpreting, and fine-tuning to the

present momentum. A dancer jumps into the experience of a pirouette without having full control over all the instants of movement in advance. Attentiveness is required to both the environmental conditions and personal capacities in that moment so as to transform and direct the body into effective movement. This process involves many small moments of decision-making which are both embodied and consciously felt. The activity is contemplative; to dance is a process of feeling, tacitly analysing and attuning dynamics.

American Pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, defines the intelligence of an artist as maintaining a perceptual balance between doing and undergoing (Dewey 1980 [1934], 47). In line with Dewey's definition of aesthetic perception, within dancing a dancer activates a genuinely felt understanding of what the movement needs and accordingly regulates the aesthetic balance between leading and responding to bodily forces. Achieving the pirouette demands a correlation of the understanding of what is happening physically with the imagining of the future development of this movement and so leads *toward* this development. Leading the progression of movements, feeling their momentum, and undergoing the complexity of current dynamics are relevant to a successful performance in any imaginable kind of dancing.

Maintaining aesthetic balance implies embodied agency (Bresnahan 2014a; Merritt 2015) of a dancer who contemplates doing because it involves tacitly attuned decision-making within the feeling for the dance. In line with Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor (2008 [1980], 5), the actual work of dancing is an aesthetic labour of sustaining immediate understanding regarding what a movement needs in order to lead into the fulfilment of that movement. 'Aesthetically pleasing', as Lakoff and Johnson phrase in their metaphor as the goal of a dance, is a regulative idea, which

leads the aesthetic balance between directing dynamics to undergoing their current momentum. This work demands a constant attunement of self-dynamics, knowledge, sensitivity, and an understanding of the mutual related effect of all current undergoing aspects of the dance. Not all movements aim for the spinning of the pirouette but in all dancing activities I can think of there is a common process of adjustment between knowing and feeling in order to coordinate a rhythmic flow (or a break of it) from a variety of dynamics. Beyond stylistic taste, graceful dancing expresses the sensitivity of the embodied agency of the dancer who is responsible for a continuum of swiftly made decisions and knowledge regulation.

‘Dance’ – or more precisely: ‘dancing’ as ‘embodied ethics’ – is an image worthy of inquiry according to what we think of ethics in an ever-developing world of knowledge and of diverse and disunited experiences (Bannon 2018, 28; Tong and Williams 2018). The image of dance offers a view on the interrelation of dynamics in regard to traditions (like the technique of performing a pirouette), the effective knowledge they embody (finding operative bodily tensions for leading a spin) and the sensitivity for existing – always exceptional – conditions for fulfilment (like regulating momentary feelings of collapse into a spin). In any act of dancing, such knowledge must be re-enacted, re-comprehended and re-adjusted in relation to present momentums and their progressions. What if we understand, for instance, social engagements as a dance, with balanced communication as their regulative goal and ethics as the contemplative activity of leading toward fulfilment? In this case ethical decision-making could be understood in *terms of* sensitivity for diversity of dynamics, leading them toward a mutual exchange. The metaphor of thinking on ‘embodied ethics’ in terms of ‘dancing’ leads me to think of the embodied agency of a person who conducts decision-making within an enduring attentiveness

for the interrelations of co-existing, often disunited, social forces rather than a mere following after pre-formed norms. In case we consider communication as a regulative goal, ‘embodied ethics’ could be seen as an activity of recognizing one’s own knowledge, reconsidering and readjusting it in relation to new information that manifests within an exchange.

## **Dance as Applied Ethics**

Aili Bresnahan

In Western philosophy theories of ethics often fall under one of three traditional categories:

1. Virtue ethics theories of what is good for human beings, construed in terms of character development or virtue (Aristotle’s idea of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing);
2. Consequentialist theories of what is good for others or of human society overall (as in, for example, John Stuart Mill’s theory in *Utilitarianism* and, in contemporary form, John Dewey’s philosophy);
3. Kantian deontological theories based on what is right in accordance with universal principles that are true for human beings (see *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*).

It is not difficult to imagine how dance practices might be construed as ethical action on the first two of these theories so it is only these two that I will address here. Regarding virtue ethics theory, dance can contribute to human flourishing by helping human beings to develop their physical, artistic, and civic capabilities. Dance can also help us to flourish by helping us to experience a *katharsis* of the emotions. According to Aristotle, *katharsis* occurs when we

experience strong emotions such as pity or fear when watching tragedy, which helps to purge us of negative and excess feelings (Aristotle (1984 [c. 335 BCE]), 230, 6.1449b22-27).

An example of dance as Aristotelian tragedy is exhibited in the photo below. Boston Globe staff writer, Evan Allen, describes it this way:

At first, the dancers were joyful, leaping in circles and wrapping in a bear hug the young man portraying slain 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot to death by Cleveland police at a playground in November 2014.

But then the drumbeat turned staccato, his body jerked, and the other dancers rushed him in attack. He fell dead, his white shirt now smeared with black paint to symbolize bullets. (Allen 2016)

Photo 1. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF. **Demetrius Burns laid on the ground while playing the part of Tamir Rice during an interpretive dance at the Black Lives Matter rally at the TD Garden [Boston].**

Dance is also a practice with consequentialist benefits. First, the kind of dance regarded as fine art can create ‘higher pleasures’. In Mill’s view, higher pleasures are those that require faculties of intellect, education or feelings that are worth more due to their qualitative value than are the lower pleasures of animals in their contribution to overall societal good (see Mill 2017 [1863], 5-6). However, it can be argued that even ‘lower’ forms of dance, such as some forms of pole dancing, can contribute to the overall balance of societal pleasure.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Dewey, held a consequentialist theory of ethics which held that the results of an action for human life determines whether it is a moral action or not (Dewey 1985 [1932], 295). His ethical theory also requires that these actions spring from a human self that is motivated by the desire to help rather than harm others (Dewey 1985 [1932], 295). Dewey treats art, including the performing arts, as primarily aimed towards the creation of heightened and unified aesthetic experiences. If we find that these experiences can constitute what is good for human life, then it is a short step from this to the claim that dance is ethical action (see Bresnahan 2014b). Indeed, Dewey acknowledges that dance can affect people in ways that have deep ethical import for the creation of social good. Dewey points out, for example, that:

Cooperation and sympathy are fostered by the activities of *art*. Some of these activities are spontaneous, but most of them serve some definite social end and are frequently organized for the definite purpose of increasing the unity and sympathy of the group. The hunting dance or the war dance represents, in dramatic form, all the processes of the hunt or fight, but it would be a mistake to suppose that this takes place purely for dramatic purposes. (Dewey 1985 [1932], p. 45)

Indeed, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States – a grass-roots civil rights action group ‘whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes’ – has inspired dance, poetry and song as part of its efforts to build community and morale among its members, as well as to express its social and



political message (Black Lives Matter website; see also Lavington 2016 and Schaefer 2016).

Dance troupes in connection with Black Lives Matter and other ethically-engaged groups have used dance as a form of protest action in public spaces, such as in front of police stations and other government organizations whose behaviour that they wish to change (see Saldivar and Easter 2017). These examples show that dance can count as ethical action in the service of the good.

### **Dance as Ethical Engagement and Connection with Others**

by Sara Houston

1. Nora's eyes light up and she extends her hand upwards to a young man, who has his arm outstretched toward her. He takes hers, swinging gently to the music of Frank Sinatra. Nora has dementia. She always attends her care home's weekly dance class. Her carers claim this is the highlight of her week.

2. Bienvenue has fled his homeland and now lives in a guarded refugee camp in Chad. He thanks God that the dance company N'Dam Se Na comes every few months to dance with them. Today the dance group freestyles, sharing a circle like a hip-hop cypher. Bienvenue's torso moves back and forward in rapid motion, his arms held out to the side as he steps into the ring, taking over from another dancer who finishes with a helicopter spin. His fellow dancers clap and sing out the rhythm.

3. Eva dances several times a week. She has Parkinson's Disease. She works with choreographers attending her city's arts programme. She shows me a film she's made with choreographer Fabio Novembrini. Her fine boned body, its delicacy enhanced by the tremors she experiences, is buried in a pile of red-gold autumn leaves that crackle as she moves.

These vignettes are illustrations of socially engaged dance in action.<sup>1</sup> They are examples where dance artists or companies work with community groups through dance. I say 'with' and 'through' to emphasise that this is not dance being 'taught' *to* people as transmissions of knowledge from teacher to pupil; rather they are illustrations of the use of movement to communicate, to share movement ideas, to integrate, to create, to form relationships, to invent together. These cases are instances of participatory art that are relational, where the sense and intention of relating is one of the most important factors in the process of making dance.

The individuals featured above have all felt the disintegration of something that has been integral to their sense of humanity, their sense of self as a capable actor: Nora's mind, the loss of home for Bienvenue, the deterioration of Eva's control of her movement. To work as a dance artist with people who experience vulnerability requires sensitivity to their needs. I suggest that ethics of care (Noddings 1984) are required to address this in the making of art. Performance scholar James Thompson describes art as having ethics of care, or a form of aesthetics of care; as

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<sup>1</sup> [i] Socially engaged dance and community dance are interchangeable terms. Here I use the term socially engaged dance is used for this discussion in order to stress the notion of social engagement on the part of the dance artist.

‘a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasise engagements between individuals or groups over time’ (Thompson 2015, 437). This requires dance artists to be ‘attentive’ (Tronto 1993, 127) whilst creating work with dance participants. By ‘creating’, I am referring not only to the process of making a performance work, but also the physical process of dancing, of deliberately moving through and carving out space. The practice of attentiveness in socially engaged dance contexts requires knowing or sensing how each participant is doing that day. Particularly for people caught up in a situation that potentially makes them vulnerable, each day may bring its own set of challenges and emotions. In order for their circumstances not to overwhelm and for the dance session to be successful – in terms of being ‘safe’, welcoming, open, respectful, inclusive and enjoyable – the practice of dancing needs to mould itself *around* people, rather than being an inflexible structure into which people fit. This is a different conception to much conventional dance teaching that often uses structures to mould bodies to the technical demands of the form. Essentially, in socially engaged dance practice the person comes before the form.

Person before form means, in practice, a number of different things.

For example, firstly, even before participants enter the dance space, the session needs to be accessible to them: Are they physically able to get to the session and once there, can they get in, or feel that they are catered for and welcome? How does Eva recognise that the opportunity of working with a professional choreographer is for her? Where there are barriers to participation, dance remains exclusive.

Secondly, the dance artist needs to be flexible in approach; to be open to jettisoning the session plan or differentiating movement for individuals. If Nora’s symptoms are worse on any particular

day, she may not be able to do what was planned. Instead of assuming she cannot join in, different movement can be imagined that retains the essence of the original idea. So, for instance, instead of foxtrotting around the room, Nora might stay seated and wave a scarf to the lilt of the music. The dynamic swing is still there in the trace of the scarf. The dance artist needs to come to the space with the question ‘how might everyone in this room feel included in the dance?’, rather than ‘how am I going to teach everyone to dance?’. Enacting notions of inclusivity and openness marks out the session as socially engaged.

In facilitating people to feel included in the dance, it is also about the dance artist giving up autocratic pretensions. Although there are varying degrees of control relinquished by the dance artist within socially engaged dance, it is characterised by a sharing of creativity. Specifically, a sharing of creativity here means participants making decisions, such as what movement they do, how they move and themes used. The effect of this is that the participant may feel they have a voice and presence.

The contemporary dance company N'Dam Se Na works in refugee camps. They specifically embrace types of movements and dances familiar to the refugees and encourage participants to create using their own ways of moving. With this principle, the company acknowledges the cultural worth of these dances, thus signalling to participants the value of their own heritages and knowledge. In taking a step back, the dance artist may instead offer a voice to a different ‘other’; in this case, a group of people who have few legal rights or representation.

Performance projects also may be conducted with socially engaged values. Eva is performing in Novembrini's film; they have been in dialogue for some time. Novembrini attended Eva's dance sessions, participating alongside those with and without Parkinson's. They have been sharing ideas and Eva recognises her bodily need to keep moving, as well as her interest in artistic practices. The decision for Eva to dance for Novembrini offered her an identity that was separated from her disease but acknowledging her specific movement qualities influenced by Parkinson's.

Routinely working with attentiveness and encouraging embodied connectivity is an ethical approach to dancing with others. This approach cultivates practices of listening and responding, as well as a readiness to accommodate the 'other'. It allows the dance artist to connect through recognising the value of what participants bring to the process. Moreover, attending to access and inclusion may more broadly address some of the barriers that traditional pedagogies in many dance forms have erected that actively exclude or marginalise groups and individuals.

## **Conclusion**

As shown above, it is our view that dance has an inherent capacity to promote embodied ethics in a variety of ways: as metaphor for a balanced and attentive process of ethical decision-making, as applied ethics in the service of what is good for human beings and as an ethic of caring for others. Further, it is our view that this application is necessary. We hold that without extending ethics from an abstract notion into applied understanding, without addressing in concrete ways the inclusion of others who are often excluded from society, then 'ethics' is an ineffectual

concept - a disembodied framework - without application and true value for human life. The dance practices we have discussed not only embody dancing then, but ethics; they help to give ethics moving, breathing life. In this way, there is a sense in which we have made ethics *dance*.

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