

## THE NOTION OF DANCING

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Some of our most important philosophers believed in--if for different reasons--the importance of dancing. Socrates took dancing lessons from the famous Aspasia, Plato spoke of the uneducated man as danceless, and Nietzsche, who mistrusted gods who did not dance, recommended dancing in the curriculum of an educated man. Even though dancing now flourishes perhaps more than ever, analytical philosophers have not paid sufficient attention to the aesthetics of dancing, and the trickle of articles which have been written have been less helpful than one might have hoped in clarifying our notion of dancing. In what follows I want to set out an analysis of the primary use of the expression "x is dancing."<sup>1</sup> Like many empirical locutions, "x is dancing" probably will turn out not to have a very precise analysis. There will be, for example, several different sorts of cases in which its application will be problematic; yet, there will be a wide range of cases to which every competent speaker of English would apply the term. Nevertheless, if what x is doing has a sufficient number of dancemaking features, we are not free to deny that x is dancing. Whatever else, for example, may be in reasonable dispute about Alica Alonso, that she is dancing when she performs Giselle is not open to question.

Contrary to what contemporary avant-garde dancers advocate, the expression "x is dancing" cannot be applied to just any kind of movement. Avant-garde dancers, like other avant-garde artists, believe they can incorporate anything they wish into their dancing--e.g., suddenly in a dance someone barks out a very good

and seriously done dog imitation (Yvonne Rainer once did this), or the dancers unexpectedly sit down to take an intermission, talking, scratching, and the like (Cunningham once did this). Aileen Passloff once did a solo called Asterisk in which she simply walked briskly around the stage in heels and a dress. If many of the avant-garde productions are accepted as genuine cases of dancing, we will have to surrender distinctions which seem at least intuitively correct. We could not, for example, distinguish between merely repetitious movement (e.g., hammering a nail, rowing a boat, etc.) and dance movement, between dance movement and kaleidoscopic movement where there is constant change but no progression, or between fragmented or spastic movement--step, pause and jerk, step, pause and jerk--and dance movement. We need not demand of contemporary dancers that they adhere to traditional aesthetic canons which now seem passe, but we can demand they surrender an almost vacuous use of the term.

I am not at this point going to settle the question of what sort of analysis to use; rather, I am going to assume the relationship between the analysans and analysandum is one of logical necessity and sufficiency because this best illuminates the problems inherent in analyzing the locution. After this I will outline a plausible alternative, one suggested to me by Peter Achinstein's work on semantic and nonsemantic relevance.<sup>2</sup> Achinstein holds that for certain terms the relationship between the properties cited in the analysans and analysandum is one of relevance. If a property is relevant for being an x, then given that an item possesses certain properties and lacks others in such a way that it is a candidate for being an x, the fact that the item possesses (or lacks) the property in question normally will count, at least to some extent, in favor of (or against) concluding that it is an x; and if it possesses (or lacks) sufficiently many properties of certain sorts, the fact that the item possesses (or lacks) the property in question may justifiably be held to settle whether it is an x. For example, consider the Black Swan pas de deux. The fact that Odile possesses the property of moving rhythmically to Tchaikovsky's music normally counts, at least to some extent, in favor of concluding that she is dancing.

## II. THE COMMON SENSE VIEW: ITS MERITS AND DEMERITS

To begin with, dancing requires a medium, the medium of bodily movement. A person who does not move

cannot be said, in any sense of the term, to be dancing. This does not imply a person need be moving at all times during his dance. Just as a musician makes use of musical rests, so a dancer makes use of movement rests. Furthermore, it is important that the dancer travel through space while moving his body. Similarly, this does not imply the dancer never stays in one place, only that over the interval of his dance, he normally covers some space. It is hard to say how much space the dancer has to cover, but if he stands in one place over the interval of his dance, normally he cannot be said to be dancing, though he might be said to be e.g., hopping, turning or jumping. Even a waltz done sur la place would not be a case of dancing, though it would be an instance of doing a waltz step.

Although all dancing involves movement, not all movement is dance movement, just as all music involves sound, but not all sound is music. Since movement is fundamental to dancing and since dancing has leaned heavily on music, we might try the following analysis:

- (1)  $x$  is dancing over interval  $i$  if and only if (i)  $x$  moves rhythmically in accordance with music played during  $i$  and (ii)  $x$  travels through space.

By use of the vague expression "in accordance with," I wish to bring out the relationship of dancing to music is itself in need of analysis. To discuss the issue adequately would take me too far afield; yet because it is important, I must pause to comment on it. It is tempting to think, along with Balanchine, H'Doubler and a host of others, that dancing is a visual interpretation of instrumental music in which dance movements are united with the music by sharing its rhythmic structure and overall emotive qualities. The problem with this account is that counter-examples are not difficult to find. For instance, in Le Jeune Homme et la Mort Roland Petit juxtaposes violent choreography against Bach's tranquil Passacaglia and in Rainforest Cunningham pitches lyrical choreography against Feldman's non-rhythmic and non-melodic continuum of orchestral sounds. Whatever kind of music choreographers choose, their options today as to the rhythmic and emotional relationship between music and dancing are wide open.

The analysis has several unwanted consequences. First, it rules out free dance (which presumably we want to call dance) wherein dance movement is freed from its dependence on instrumental or vocal music. To

emphasize aurally the visible rhythm of bodily movements, the dancer often resorts to stamping his feet, clapping his hands, or slapping parts of his body. In the second place, the analysis rules out dancing done in silence, such as Jerome Robbins's Moves, Doris Humphrey's Water Study and David Linchne's La Creation. Although dancing has leaned heavily on instrumental music and presumably will continue to do so, perhaps because melodic and harmonic tones are imbued with emotive qualities which provide an atmospheric mood, rhythmic accompaniment theoretically is not necessary.

The analysis is also faulty because ice skating is not correctly classifiable as dancing though it has the properties cited in the analysis. I do not contend that conceptually dancing cannot be done on ice; a person dressed in ordinary street shoes, fortified with a lot of nerve and blessed with a bit of luck could whirl off a Viennese waltz on ice. But I do contend that ice skating is not dancing, despite the fact that it shares some qualities, e.g., lightness, smoothness and similar use of meter, with some kinds of dancing. The reason for this is that basic to the notion of dancing is the notion of stepping (generic sense, i.e., general term for running, hopping, leaping, turning, etc.) from one foot to the other. Consider again the Viennese waltz which has a basic step pattern of down, up, up--a reach with two catch steps. Once a person puts on ice skates, he can no longer do the basic step pattern but must change it to three gliding steps, and in doing this he draws not from the dancer's fundamental repertoire of steps but from the skater's. In dancing stepping from one foot to another is the foundation from which step patterns are built, while in ice skating the foundation lies with gliding from one foot to another. To be sure skaters use a few stepping motions such as running on toe, but they use them sparingly and can rarely use them extensively.

Consider, further, the following facts about dancing and ice skating. They are listed in directories such as the telephone book under separate categories. Dance critics do not review skating performances, except maybe to pinch hit at the last moment for someone who has taken ill. Similarly, Dance Magazine, Dance Observer and other dance periodicals do not report on ice skating events. Universities offer advanced degrees in dancing as they do in music but not in ice skating or football. Dance competitions such as the Varna do not accept ice skaters. Practices such as these bring out, though they do not prove, that the

categories under which we classify these activities are exclusive.

Consider, also, Ashton's Les Patineurs. Through the use of superb stagecraft and dramatic setting, Ashton shows us how dancing may be like ice skating. In a series of none divertissements, he creates a style of movement authentically suggesting the accidents and acrobatics of ice skaters. Every step and stance is rigidly controlled in the characteristic stiff-thighed and straight-backed glide of ice skaters and is bounced off a slowly accelerating, rippling rhythm of skaters building up speed. Even though Les Patineurs is very much like ice skating, it is not on this account dance skating, since it is not sufficient for the truth of "Les Patineurs is dance skating" that dance skating resembles ice skating.

It might be objected that ice dancing threatens trouble for my argument. But I contend to say that ice dancing is a form of dancing is like saying narrative dancing is a form of drama. Both use the elements of story-telling and expressive bodily movement. However, whereas in drama narration through voice control is the basic aesthetic category, in dancing the quality of the movement takes aesthetic precedence. Again, in drama bodily movement is an aid, however invaluable, to expressive interpretation of words, but in narrative dancing the story, however important, is secondary to expressive bodily movement. Even though dance drama leans heavily on the elements of drama, we do not, thereby, call it a form of drama. Similarly, even though ice dancing borrows from the elements of dancing, it is not, thereby, a form of dancing. Furthermore, ice dancing cannot without difficulty, adapt basic dance steps to the ice medium, nor, when successful, can it sustain them for any length of time. Moreover, although dancing can be performed without the use of gliding steps, ice dancing cannot, except perhaps in very simple cases. Again, although ice dancing can be performed without the use of dance steps, dancing cannot, not even in the simplest cases. In light of the above considerations, I think ice dancing is more properly classified as skating which is a bit like dancing than dancing which is a lot like skating.

In general the problem with the above analysis is that though it initially accords well with our intuitions, it fails because there are just too many counter-examples. Another objection is that the analysis neglects important descriptive features of

dancing. In the literature on dancing, no discussion is complete without an account of the expressive and representative elements of dancing; yet, they make no appearance in the analysis.

### III. THE NOTION OF RELEVANCE

I want to suggest that the relationship between the properties cited in the analysans and analysandum is one of relevance, where properties relevant to dancing are characteristic of many kinds of dancing. Perhaps the best way to explain this is by comparison with the term "religion."<sup>4</sup> The property of believing in supernatural beings (gods) is relevant though neither logically necessary nor sufficient for being a religion. If a cultural entity exhibits certain other properties (e.g., prayer and ritual), the fact that it includes belief in supernatural beings will normally count, to some extent, in favor of concluding that it is a religion (though possession of other properties may count against this). And if it possesses sufficiently many properties of certain sorts, the fact that it includes belief in supernatural beings might be taken to settle the matter. If it does not include such a belief, it is not necessarily excluded from being a religion. However, the fact that a cultural entity lacks belief in supernatural beings will normally count as some reason against concluding that it is a religion; and if it lacks certain other properties as well, this fact may be taken to settle the question.

We need, moreover, to distinguish between semantically and descriptively relevant properties. Suppose we are asked to justify the claim that someone who is moving rhythmically to the beat of the music while traveling through space is dancing. I would reply that such properties tend to count in and of themselves, to some extent, toward classifying someone as dancing. As a matter of fact, someone who is moving this way is normally classified as dancing solely in virtue of having such properties. They are among the ones which constitute a final court of appeal when considering matters of classification, and such properties, we might say, are intrinsically dance-making ones. Suppose, on the other hand, we are asked to justify the claim that someone in an enchanted forest, on the stage of Covent Garden, who is acting like a swan, is dancing. Among the possible replies is that such properties do not tend to count, in and of themselves, toward someone being classified as

dancing--that is, it is not true that someone is classified as dancing solely in virtue of having such properties. These properties do not constitute a final court of appeal when considering matters of classification. They are not intrinsically dance-making ones. Rather, the possession of such properties (among others) counts in favor of classifying someone as dancing if they are found to be among other properties which are intrinsically dance-making ones.

The distinction between semantic and descriptive relevance can be expressed by saying: Given that  $x$  is a candidate for an instance of dancing, a property is semantically relevant for " $x$  is dancing" provided that  $x$ 's having (or lacking) that property tends to count in and of itself, to some extent, toward (or against) an  $x$  is dancing classification. On the other hand, given that  $x$  is a candidate for an instance of dancing, a property is descriptively relevant for " $x$  is dancing" provided that  $x$ 's having that property tends to count toward an  $x$  is dancing classification solely because it occurs along with the semantic properties.

#### IV. THE SEMANTIC AND DESCRIPTIVE PROPERTIES OF DANCING

I will develop the distinction between semantical and descriptive relevance by looking at a typical and familiar case of dancing, Swan Lake; and asking whether lack of P in and of itself counts, to some extent, against classifying what the dancers are doing as dancing. In virtue of lacking P, do we think of what they are doing as not the best examples of dancing, not the most typical or standard instances of dancing. Sometimes whether lack of P counts at all against classifying what someone is doing as an instance of dancing may not be definitely answerable. However, when we have all the properties in the set, we clearly have an instance of dancing (e.g., Sleeping Beauty, Romeo and Juliet, Cinderella, etc.), just as when none of the properties are in the set, we clearly have an instance of nondancing (e.g., playing football, baking a cake, watching television, etc.). But in between cases will arise in which we will hesitate to say whether they are dancing, and this may be the reasonable reply.

In light of the above discussion, I will list what seem to me to be the semantic and descriptive features of " $x$  is dancing":

1. x uses a medium of bodily movement which allows x to step from one foot to another. Although this is a semantic condition, the medium of bodily movement, by itself, is necessary.
2. x's movement lasts for some substantial interval i. Although occurring over an interval is a necessary and semantic condition, the length of the interval is contingent.
3. x travels through a space g. Similarly, while occurring in space is a necessary and semantic condition, the amount of space covered is contingent.
4. x uses rhythmical bodily movement either (a) in accordance with or (b) in coexistence with a musical or other auditory accompaniment. This is a semantic condition because if, for example, the Swan Queen Odette were to continue what she was doing in silence, this would count, to some extent, against classifying what she was doing as dancing. She would, however, still be dancing because what she is doing has sufficiently many other properties.

By contrast the following conditions are descriptively relevant for dancing because it is not true that someone is classifiable as dancing solely in virtue of having these properties:

5. x uses movement of the sort which is expressive of emotions or feelings.
6. x moves with dynamic variation. Dynamics provide the texture of movements, i.e., smooth and sharp plus gradations in tension (e.g., slow-smooth with force, fast-smooth without tension, fast-sharp with tension, etc.).
7. x uses choreographed movement.
8. x uses occupational gesture. Occupational gesture in its simplest form includes those movements made by people at work and play, e.g., the embroidery of the Young Girl in The Rake's Progress, the spinning of Giselle in the ballet of the same name, etc.
9. x uses pantomime. Conventional, pantomimic gestures stand in the place of speech and are

found in the scenes d'action of ballets such as Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty and the dance-dramas of the Orient.

10. x uses movement accompanied by a narrator.
11. x uses costuming.
12. x uses scenery.

These properties are also subject to variations in degree. For example, if x uses rhythmical bodily movement in accordance with the music for the entire duration of his dance, condition four is satisfied; if for no time, it is not satisfied. For times in between there will be some for which it will be unclear whether the condition is satisfied.

#### V. SUMMARY

Although the above overview has been sketchy, it presents a modest attempt to clarify our concept of dancing. I began by showing that the most popular analysis of dancing--the one which takes it to be rhythmical bodily movement done to music--is inadequate because it lets in ice skaters and rules out free dance and dancing in silence. Without arguing fully for the point, I have suggested that basic to the notion of dancing is stepping from one foot to another while basic to the notion of skating is gliding from one foot to another. Furthermore, I pointed out that an analysis of this sort fails to do full justice to the richness of our concept of dancing.

The main thrust of the discussion has been to outline a plausible alternative, one which takes the relationship between the properties cited in the analysans and analysandum to be one of relevance. Of these, some are semantically relevant, others descriptively relevant. Although much more needs to be said on the subject, the above serves to indicate the direction we might take to unsnarl some of the tangles involved in the aesthetics of dancing.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In this use x ranges over persons, whereas in derivative uses x ranges over other objects, when, for example, we speak of gnats dancing in the air or marionettes dancing with human grace. Moreover, I shall not be concerned with dances of animals such as the mountain chickens of British Guiana, stilt birds of Cape York, Australia, or anthropoid apes of Teneriffe. Since secondary senses of the expression (save those that are obviously metaphorical) can be analyzed in terms of its primary sense or can be considered an extension of it, I shall confine my analysis to its primary sense. Moreover, even though we cannot rule out nonhuman rational beings among those objects capable of dancing, I do not think they should be mentioned in the primary analysis. Should we be visited someday by dancing Martians or the like, I suggest we then extend the use of the concept to countenance these creatures.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Achinstein, Concepts of Science (Baltimore, Maryland, 1968), pp. 1-66.

<sup>3</sup>See George Balanchine, Balanchine's New Complete Stories of the Great Ballets, ed. Francis Mason (Garden City, New York, 1968), pp. 465 and 466, and Margaret H'Doubler, "Dance and Movement," The Dance Experience, ed. Myron Howard and Constance Gwen Nadel (New York, 1970), pp. 189-96.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the analysis of "religion," see William P. Alston, Philosophy of Language (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), pp. 84-9.

<sup>5</sup>In what follows I rely heavily on Achinstein's notion of relevance.