

How can we tell the Dancer from the Dance?: The Subject of Dance and the Subject of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: One of the most important aspects of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy is his criticism of the traditional concept of praxis. In Aristotelian philosophy praxis is properly oriented towards some end, and in the case of human action the ends of praxis are oriented towards the agent's good life. Human goods are, for both Aristotle and contemporary neo-Aristotelians, determined by the potentials of human life such as rationality, communality, and speech. Deleuze's account of action, by contrast, liberates movement from an external end. In his books on cinema Deleuze argues that we need to think of events in terms of their power, and not as movements within an already determined image of life. In order to think events as such we need to confront the power of the virtual. This is achieved by a philosophy of life in which becoming is not a means towards the realisation of some end. Rather, becomings are best seen as counter-actualisations: ways in which the already-constituted actual world always bears a power to become other than it already is. If we consider dance in this new context, then dance is neither expressive of an already existing life, nor a pure act that is self-sufficient and self-constituting. Rather, dance is a confrontation with life as a plane of open and divergent becomings.

This paper seeks to explore what dance means for philosophy and, in particular, the ways in which the figure and possibility of dance link the concepts of philosophy, meaning and life.¹ I will conclude by arguing that a faithful thought and experience of dance cannot be included *within* philosophy but would require a new style of philosophy. In so doing I follow Gilles Deleuze, whose philosophical books on cinema enabled a transformation of the process of philosophy in the style of cinema. In the first part of the paper I will describe a traditional notion of philosophy in which dance would be a meaningful action only within life, a life that bears its own meaning and is oriented towards the reflective grasp of meaning. In the second section I will explore the ways in which a seemingly more

radical concept of dance has been used to challenge traditional philosophy's privileging of meaning. Finally, I will argue that both appropriations of dance for philosophy preclude a real philosophy of dance or, more appropriately, a dancerly philosophy.

1. Dance, ethics and the meaning of life

In her recent book, *Natural Goodness*, the Aristotelian philosopher Philippa Foot argues that human beings, specifically as instances of purposive life in general, possess natural norms.² Foot's argument relies upon a certain relation between meaning and life, in particular the meaning of the notion of a 'good' life, which moral philosophers have mistakenly categorised as a special type of linguistic usage. Whereas other terms in our lexicon might have an object and be capable of argument and verification, we often think that moral statements have a peculiar style of grammar and that this style is the expression of subjective preferences. This, Foot insists, is not the case. We are mistaken if we follow subjectivism by seeing attributions of goodness as nothing more than the expression of speakers' attitudes or evaluations. Rather, the meaning of 'good' is founded on the specific form of life which is deemed to be good, and a good human being for Foot is a moral human being – this goodness being grounded in our nature. Morality is one of the many (but also definitive) goods that further human life. Morality, Foot argues, is necessary in an Aristotelian sense, 'We can't get on without it'.³ The meaning of 'good' and 'bad', which *might* be subjectivist in the case of works of art, is certainly not arbitrary in the case of living beings, for living beings may or may not flourish; what allows them to flourish – to enhance and expand their being or what they properly are – *is good*:

To be sure, almost anything in the world can be said to be good or bad in a context that sufficiently relates it to some human concern or to the needs of a plant or animal. But features of plants or animals have what one might call an ‘autonomous’, ‘intrinsic’, or as I shall say ‘natural’ goodness and defect that may have nothing to do with the needs or wants of the members of any other species of living thing, and in this they are notably different from what is found elsewhere in other things in the world outside, as for instance rivers or storms. Judgements of goodness and badness can have, it seems, a special ‘grammar’ when the subject belongs to a living thing, whether plant, animal, or human being.⁴

Human life’s ‘intrinsic’ or necessary good is virtue, defined as acting well not just for bodily life but also for the ends of friendship, love and society: those goods enabled by *language*, or our capacity to establish mutual ends across time and culture.⁵ We are capable not just of acting, but also of asking *why* we act; in so doing we can think about the end of our lives and think beyond mere contentment to happiness: ‘happiness’ here is understood as the enjoyment of *good things* – attaining and pursuing the right ends. Happiness constitutive of the good life is not bodily joy or pleasure but the meaning and ordering of pleasures according to the idea one has of one’s own life.

In order to establish whether an activity is intrinsically good – tied to the very meaning of what counts as a proper life – or whether the activity lacks this ‘Aristotelian necessity’, Foot draws upon the example of a dancing bee:

The dancing of a homecoming bee leads other bees to a source of nectar and so plays a beneficial role in the life of the hive. But at one time this supposition was queried. So suppose it were not true after all that other bees found nectar by reacting to the movements of an individual returning to the hive; in that case, unless the dance played a part in the life of the dancer itself, unless it was something that a homecomer needed to do for its own good, there would be no merit in a bee’s dancing and no ‘natural defect’ in an individual bee just because it did not dance.⁶

An activity is good, intrinsically, if it furthers life. Foot’s example allows us to make a transition to Aristotle himself and his distinction between two types of movement. Movement is a potential, for what a thing is essentially is unchanging, and so its movements or actions are added on to it as potentials that it may or may not realise. So, a body may have

the potential to become warm or cold, but these are accidental and do not alter what the body *is*, nor do these changes or movements realise or actualise the being’s form (its reality, what it properly is, or its own way of being).⁷ But there are some movements that are not accidental potentials – things a being may or may not do that do not affect its being – but are proper or proximate potentials: movements that bring what something is into its proper being.⁸ This notion of proper potential has a two-fold significance. First, it allows us to think of some movements and changes not as accidental but as ways in which essence is realised. Second, if essence must be realised then it is always possible, but not proper, that a living being might not realise its potential. A human being who did not reason would fail to be human, would have negated their proper potentiality. In the case of Foot’s bee, if the bee were merely dancing because it *could* dance – accidentally – then dancing would not be an intrinsic good. But if dancing is just what allows the bee to live and become a bee, by furthering its life, then it would be necessary – though not essential – in an Aristotelian sense: necessary because it allows for life, but not essential because it is possible to think of *bees* still being *bees* without dancing.

In the case of humans we might ask what proper potentials are: what are not only those movements that a human being *can do* but those movements that realise or actualise human being? We can take the example of dance. All human beings have the potential to dance, but not all human beings are dancers; nor do human beings *qua human beings* require the potential to dance. On an Aristotelian account of human flourishing we require thought, deliberation, virtue, friendship in order to live as humans, but we could imagine all this without bodily movement in the form of dance. We could, even if we added some form of art to what it means to be human, exclude dance as a specific potential. In one sense, then, dance is one accidental activity among others, neither intrinsically nor – if we consider Foot’s bee – exclusively human. Aristotle’s theory of potentiality does, however, offer more for allowing us to think about how activities such as dance might relate to human potentiality in general. In addition to distinguishing proper potential from accidental potential, Aristotle also offers a definition of unactualised potential: that is, potentials may have a being even if they are not currently actualised.⁹ So, a dancer

who is not dancing is different from any other human who is not dancing because a dancer *is a dancer* only through this developed potential; the potential is definitive for this body, and the dancer has this potential even while this potential is not activated. Only in learning to dance, *actually doing* what is for all of us merely *possible*, does a human in general become a dancer. Furthermore, in addition to differentiating potential in its proper and full sense from what is merely possible, Aristotle also makes a difference between kinds of potential. Some activities, such as building a house, are movements that aim at actualising some external object; so I have made a house once it is built, or I have run a marathon once I have covered 26 miles. But other activities are at each moment of their actualisation fully actualised; when I see I am not on my way to seeing, for at each moment of seeing I am realising my potential to see. I do not have to have arrived at a point where I can then judge that I have seen.

This also has a two-fold significance. First, some potentials – including both human happiness and dance – are *energeia*; when they are in act they are fully in act.¹⁰ Second, and more importantly, full actualisation is normative in a deep and rich sense. Potentials are *properly* that which ought to be brought into being; realisation is not one good among others, it is goodness as such. Beings *ought* to realise what they are, actualise their potential. Those potentials that are at every moment of their occurrence full actualisations (such as thinking, living happily and – *by analogy* – dancing) are exemplary of life. Life just is realisation, or movement that brings form into being (for forms themselves do not alter). At each moment in a human life – at each moment that we realise, choose and direct our own being in accord with human goods – we are fully human; we do not arrive at the end of life in order to become human.¹¹ Becoming-human is not on its way to any end other than itself. Similarly, dancing – unlike writing a novel that would have an external object of completion – is, at each moment of its actualisation a dance; one does not have to wait until the completion of the performance to produce the dance. Dancing might be a more appropriate image of human creative becoming than, say, crafts that are governed by the making of an object outside the creative activity itself; in dance the activity is itself the realisation.

While dance is, therefore, neither intrinsically nor essentially human it might offer an image of human self-creation through realisation, for human lives are not activities for the sake of some external end; one acts and becomes in order to be human. And while dance is an accidental human possibility, and only a proper potential for the dancer – for only the dancer must have the potential to dance in order to be a dancer – we could see dance as an *instance* of what is essentially, intrinsically and definitively human. The bee's dance, if we could call it that, served its nutritive and minimally perceptive life; because this is the only life or soul bees have, dance could only be good if it were good for helping the bee to live. But human souls, in addition to nutritive and perceptive potentials, have rational potential. The human good, and proper movement, is not just what furthers physical life; it is also what furthers rational life. From our potential to speak together and form communities we can also act for ends beyond our own bodily life, ends such as honour, friendship and love. Indeed, the specifically human form of motion or activity – that movement which actualises the rational soul – is happiness. Happiness has three features which allow us to think of the role of possible activities such as dance. First, happiness is not achieved for some other end; it is that for which all other ends are sought and is an *end in itself*.¹² The idea of the end in itself defines the human, for whereas all other beings might be defined according to their physical life function, human life sets its own end; its proper activity is rational self-determination.¹³ The self has no end outside itself, and realises its potential in reflecting upon this end-determining capacity. Second, happiness is an *energeia*; the activity of happiness is not one that we do to realise some state. Unlike baking or building, which are activities on the way to achieving some object or bringing a task to completion, when we are happy we are fully happy; being happy is the ongoing realisation or actualisation of a state. Third, this realisation of the meaning of the human through the activity of happiness – which is self-creation – ties the properly acting human to art. The potential to dance, therefore, would be *one* way in which human beings, liberated from merely nutritive and perceptive life, might actualise their power to form themselves as themselves. It is open to the human not to be determined by physical life, not to be governed by physical ends, but to craft itself in a chosen, deliberated and

self-forming style.¹⁴ Unlike other arts that depend upon an extra-human medium, in dance the human itself becomes a work of art. Dance both typifies and allegorises the human soul as liberated from mere life; life appears in dance as self-creation and self-realisation – a self-causing movement, rather than a movement produced by some external cause.

On the one hand, then, dance would be exemplary of those activities that are *energeia*: when we dance we are not dancing in order to achieve some end outside the dance. The dance is the end itself; at each moment in the dance we are fully dancing, and we do not have to complete the dance to say that we have danced. In this sense, considering dance as an *energeia*, dance might be analogous to, or a figure for, the idea of the end in itself: an idea that is properly actualised in human moral life, a life that has no end other than itself, no end other than the realisation of the properly human. Human life is, and is defined by, its potential to realise itself freely. On the other hand, dance might be more than an example or figure; dance might be thought more radically as an activity that challenges the Aristotelian understanding of action as the realisation of proper potential. It is this second possibility that will be pursued in the next section.

2. The rays of light are filled with dancing women

(*Les rayons sont plein de danseuses*, Pierre Reverdy (1964), ‘Après le Bal.’)

What if dance were to be liberated from its figural or potential status, such that dance would be neither a metaphor for rational life nor an example of the way in which humans realise their creative potential? Dance might then be thought of as a motion or act that is not the realisation of some proper form – the human – but a departure from *what is* – a pure becoming that is not the becoming of the human. It is in dance – if we recall Nietzsche’s figure of the bacchanal – that the self loses itself, becomes other than itself. Dance would, then, need to be considered less as an expression of a potential that pre-exists the actual dance, and more as a potentiality that is brought into being only as it acts or exists. Such a pure potentiality would not be limited by a proper end – what it ought to bring into being – nor by a preceding ground, nor by the form it expresses in this or that style. Dance would be style not as that which is added on to a body, but as the body in creation

itself: style not as that technique through which creation takes place but as pure creativity with no end or ground outside itself.

On the Aristotelian model humans do have a proper good, and morality is just the realisation of this good in living well with others, with a sense of ourselves and a sense of the human. The meaning of the human, its good, is precisely this capacity for meaning or self-definition. Dance is one of the ways in which the self might define or express itself. And dance would also be a metaphor or figure for this self-creation, a becoming that produces itself through its own activity. In order to challenge this notion of the human as defined through meaning, where activities such as dance would be in the service of meaning production, the dancing body has provided a way of thinking beyond the teleological understanding of action – that we act for some end, even if that end is the end of being human (an immanent telos).

How has dance been deployed against meaning, or the idea of life as a bringing to realisation the form of what each being is essentially? To a certain extent – and the difficulty lies here – the answer is already intimated in Aristotle. We do not dance in order to create an object outside the act of dancing – *poiesis* – for the dance is its own end (as *praxis*).¹⁵ But on an Aristotelian understanding of life we can look to an action and ask its intention – what is it for? – which would then refer us to the self *who acts*. The dance may be an action that, in a certain sense, is for its own sake insofar as it does not create an external object, but we dance or undertake these types of action in order to express ourselves, to create human lives, to present our ways of being. Art, on an Aristotelian understanding, is *for life*, one of the ways in which we create who we are for ourselves and others, through time, *and with a specific idea of ourselves as the agents we are*.

However, if dance were truly an end in itself we would need to think of an action or movement with nothing outside itself: not the dance of a self who dances in order to express meaning. There would be dancing *from which* one might subsequently conclude that dance *as act* was subtended by a proper potential of which it is the realisation. (One can think here of Judith Butler’s general notion of the performative: there is acting, moving, doing or existing from which one then posits an underlying subject who supposedly gives this performing a proper form.¹⁶) What if dance

liberated itself from meaning, from essence, from what something or selfhood *is*? Dance would not be a fragment or instance of action dependent upon a prior potential; it would be act itself, fully realising itself, no longer haunted by a potential that may or may not come into being. There would be no ground of life that subtended the dance; life itself would be dance – an acting or doing that creates itself through style and variation: not the variation *of* a body, but body as nothing more than variation. This possibility is explored in the idea of dance that informs the philosophy, literature, and philosophy of literature of Friedrich Nietzsche, W.B. Yeats, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.¹⁷

First, one needs to consider the possibility, not of a self who acts, nor of a self who realises or actualises what it ought to be through intrinsically good actions, but of an acting from which the illusion or effect of self is produced. Dancing is crucial here in deconstructing the opposition between potentiality and actuality, where potential is (traditionally) actualised by arriving at what it ought to be. The dance *as act* is at once fully actual, not the expression of some prior ground that it represents only in part, but at each moment fully itself, referring to nothing other than itself: not a signifier of some prior intent, nor the expression of some being before the act, but pure act in and for itself. And dance is also pure potentiality. The revolution in the Nietzschean tradition of thought is to consider the full reality of potentiality as *power to*: powers are not accidents added on to substance, potentials that may or may not be realised in subjects. On the contrary, life just is will to power, a striving that might actualise itself, but may also be fully real even in its non-realisation.¹⁸ For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is a power or will that does not realise itself, but this non-realisation nevertheless has force and effect, even if that force is reactive. So, the will that fails to act – say, a will that embraces the morality of asceticism – is nevertheless a power; we need only look at the Christian religion to see the ways in which *not acting* has had force and effect in history. But by extension an active power acts fully, and is not haunted or diminished by anything other than its own effect; active power is potentiality that does not have to produce some actual end outside itself (*poiesis*), but is at each moment of its acting nothing more than itself (*praxis* that is not on its way to realisation but is fully real in all of its moments).

In his early writing on Nietzsche, Deleuze describes this law-giving creativity through the figure of dance, where life is no longer directed to an end beyond itself: ‘To create is to lighten, to unburden life, to invent new possibilities of life. The creator is legislator – dancer’.¹⁹ A reactive power fails to realise itself precisely because one of its actions – say, the creation of an image, figure or norm – separates itself and begins to govern action. An exemplary instance of reaction would be ‘man’, produced through action but who then appears as a ground that ought to govern action; the dancing self of pure act, who has now power or being outside acting, then becomes a norm towards which action is directed: ‘Evaluations are so distorted that we can no longer see that the carrier is a slave, that what he carries is slavery, that the carrier is a carrier of the weak – the opposite of a creator or a dancer’.²⁰ The full Nietzschean moment of liberation occurs when there is no longer a self who acts *within* a time distributed into a before and after; rather, there are acts, movements which are true for all time. The dance unfolds eternity. The dancer, whose movement is liberated from purpose and personal intention, is action itself.

Not surprisingly, this tradition of thought that sets dance against the self of intellection, cognition and purposive action is explored most fully in modern poetry. In ‘Among School Children’, a poem that explores the Platonic and Aristotelian attempts to grasp the eternally true in static ideas above life, W.B. Yeats provides an image of a life that is fully itself only when it is not labouring to some end beyond itself, but where each moment is fully real – not diminished by hoping or striving for anything more than itself. There is not a self who then dances, but a dance from which one might subsequently (but reactively) posit a dancer:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?²¹

As in Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and the tradition of French poetry that includes Pierre Reverdy’s ‘After the Ball’, dance is associated with the differential

power of light, a power to differ and bring into being *nothing more than the power to appear*, a power that has no permanent being outside its effects. Thus, Reverdy's poem continues: 'Je tourne, je tourne sans rien voir les flots de rayons des lamps électriques' [I turn, I turn seeing nothing in the electric lamps' rays of light]: this is a light, like Mallarmé's 'lustre',²² which is not the source of illumination *for seeing*, but a light that is nothing other than itself, disclosing nothing other than itself. Rilke also writes a poem, 'Spanische Tänzerin', where the dancer, as flame, comes into being only with the act of dancing and being seen to dance; there is no permanent being that subtends or orients that dancery becoming:

A match is struck: the centre blazes white
before the flame spreads out in all directions
and, all around, the orange tongues ignite
The audience in a circle. All at once
she comes alive and flares into her dance
and suddenly the dancer is all fire.²³

Active powers are at each moment nothing more than the actualisation or ongoing exertion of potentiality as *power to*. One could think the fullest reality, then, not as a form towards which becoming ought to strive but, as Gilles Deleuze will do, as an infinitive: the real is not achieved by potentials arriving at what they ought to be; the real is potentiality as actuality. Life just is a series of powers liberated from any of their actual effects: 'to green,' 'to think', 'to dance'. Such an act would not be referred back to a definitive life, self or subject for whom we could say that the act was expressive of its essence; the existence (or bringing into being) would be the act itself. And, according to Deleuze, this would mean that the only true essences would not be beings as subjects, but infinitives, *powers to*.²⁴

For Deleuze, like Nietzsche before him, this pure potentiality that is nothing other than its own existence, whose essence is nothing other than its own power to exist, is tied to the figure of dance. Nietzsche, most famously in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, begins Zarathustra's descent and journey with the prophet appearing as a dancer²⁵, with Zarathustra gradually destroying all those images that have impeded power. First, Zarathustra demands that God no longer be an external point of law or being: 'I should believe only in a God who under-

stood how to dance.'²⁶ This allows Zarathustra to begin the crossing or passage whereby man overcomes his 'own' being: 'Now I am nimble, now I fly, now I see under myself, now a god dances within me.'²⁷ The truly liberating dance is also tied to laughter, for like dance laughter is a movement of the body that is at once expressive of the body without being a signifier (a feature that will become significant for Deleuze): laughter is joy itself, the convulsion of the enjoying body. The dancer who laughs is for Nietzsche the image of the overcoming of man; rather than attending to what the body does not do, Zarathustra appeals to what is still possible:

You Higher Men, the worst about you is: none of you has learned to dance as man ought to dance – to dance beyond yourselves! What does it matter that you are failures! How much is still possible! So learn to laugh beyond yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you fine dancers, high! higher! and do not forget to laugh as well!²⁸

In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze insists that we move beyond the logic of the signifier in thinking about the emergence of sense from life. Deleuze's argument establishes the full reality of sense, the full reality of the virtual events of life – the incorporeal events that are released through expression but not reducible to expression.²⁹ So, when bodies meet – say, an eye that encounters light – there is at once a corporeal mixture, but also an incorporeal event; the eye sees red, and in so doing can also see a power *to red*, a singularity that is at once in the body but also perceivable as repeatable for all time.³⁰ Thus, essences for Deleuze are these eternally real potentialities. They are not possibilities – what we can see as accidental or variable in what we encounter – they are affects that we can discern as having a power for all time; the red we see here has a being or potential that is perceivable in other styles, at other moments, for other observers. Sense, therefore, is the effect of bodies, but allows those bodies to perceive their truth for all time. Essence is just the power to exist, and so essences are not *brought into being*; they are powers to be, potentials; their essence is to exist.³¹ Further and more importantly, one should not see actualisation as *inevitable*, whereby acting would be enabled by a potential that ought to arrive at a certain point or

end; only ‘counter-actualisation,’ or seeing the open potential in all acting, releases us from the illusion of a life whose sense is determined in advance. The body displays itself in dance both as actual (with all its present possibilities) and as counter-actual (releasing its powers that were neither determined by, nor limited to, its bodily being). An action in dance, mime, or theatre, for example, is at once the same *bodily* action but is also acted *as a presentation* of the action; the body presents what any body could do for all time and any time, the body’s virtual power:

Counter-actualization is nothing, it belongs to a buffoon when it operates alone and pretends to have the value of *what could have happened*. But, to be the mime of what *effectively occurs*, to double the actualization with a counter-actualization, the identification with a distance, like the true actor and dancer, is to give to the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualization. It is to give to the crack the chance of flying over its own incorporeal surface area, without stopping at the bursting within each body; it is, finally, to give us the chance to go farther than we would have believed possible. To the extent that the pure event is each time imprisoned forever in its actualization, counter-actualization liberates it, always for other times.³²

Essences are no longer pure forms located above existence; they are the power of existence itself in all its differential joy. It is through this logic of sense that Deleuze at once moves beyond the signifier – or the idea that meaning is the effect of an unreal system laid over an undifferentiated reality – while moving towards dance as the privileged figure of life. For if sense is the surface that releases from bodies the incorporeal events that they express, then dance is the maintenance of this surface. Deleuze refers to this as ‘counter-actualisation’: instead of essences as pure infinitives or ‘powers to’ being instantiated in an actual body, we are given the singularity itself, we see the movement in its virtual openness, as it would be for any body, for any time:

Is it possible to maintain the inherence of the incorporeal crack while taking care not to bring it into existence, and not to incarnate it in the depth of the body? More precisely, is it possible to limit ourselves to the counter-actualization of an event – to the actor’s or dancer’s simple, flat representation – while taking care to prevent the full actualization which characterizes the victim or true patient?³³

Like Nietzsche’s dancer, the dance for Deleuze is neither a norm towards which bodies ought to strive – some ideal that existence must express – nor a mere existing that would express some prior norm of human creativity. In dance the body is both itself and the *sense* of the body as potentiality, what the body can do, not what the body is. Dance as praxis is opposed to acting *as poiesis*; that which is effected or created in dance is nothing other than the effecting body expressed in its effecting power.³⁴ This means that dance is not an action located within time – a time directed to the realisation of some end – but an act or event that releases what is true or potential for all time: ‘it is the present without thickness, the present of the actor, dancer, or mime – the pure perverse ‘moment’.³⁵

3. More divine than the gods

And how could we not feel that our freedom and strength reside, not in the divine universal nor in the human personality, but in these singularities which are more us than we ourselves are, more divine than the gods, as they animate concretely poem and aphorism, permanent revolution and partial action?³⁶

On the one hand, we might place Nietzsche’s (and Deleuze’s) dancer in a specific theological tradition. As Etienne Gilson makes clear, the great genius of Aquinas was to think God through an existential rather than an essential ontology.³⁷ Whereas Aristotle begins with essences, such as a good or perfection that must then be realised fully (so that God is then defined as the highest instance of certain concepts), Aquinas defines God as pure existence or ‘act-of-being’. Essences, such as goodness or this or that determined form of life, only come into existence through God. God is not the existence of this or that essence; He is nothing other than existence, a pure act of being, determined by no essence or form other than His own power; His potentiality does not have to come into being for He is being itself. He realises or expresses, not a specific propriety or form of life; He is realisation of life as such. His essence is to exist.

Nietzsche’s dancer who is liberated from the burden of being what he ought to be, who no longer strives to achieve a form other than what he is, bears the burden of this theological image of a life that is nothing more than itself: pure expression, action or

existence unimpeded by any norm or already existing being. Similarly, Deleuze's thought of maintaining the dance of sense, remaining above constituted actuality in order to experience the power of the virtual that may or may not be brought into actuality, is – as his insistence on the eternity of the dance of sense makes clear – also a rendering divine of bodily life. If one were to read Deleuze strictly on this point one would arrive at a remarkably theological and metaphysical understanding of life: life is a potential to become; actuality emanates from this life and ought always to be subordinate to the virtual power of which it is an effect. Dance would properly be *not the actual body* but the sense released by that body. Sense here would not be *meaning* (as a proposition or intention) but a singularity – that which transcends bodies as potentiality and renders meaning possible. The image of the dancer is the image of a body that is not longer *its self* (personal, intentional, located in time) but is dance itself: the dancer dances upon the surface that separates actual from virtual, here from eternity, the particular from the singular. Thus, dance is a figure for a life liberated from itself.

On the other hand, if we take a cue from Deleuze's books on cinema we might look to dance not as a figure for life or sense in general, but as an event within life that might transform our way of thinking about life.³⁸ To begin with, one might note that this light, unburdened, impersonal dancer or pure act is in accord with the body of classical dance. Like the standard account of realism in literature – a style that presents itself as the 'voice of us all' before stylistic variation – the highly trained body of classical dance is so formed as to minimise the actual existence of the body, becoming pure movement, pure expression of a timeless choreography. By contrast, contemporary dance all too often works with the weight, resistance, contingency and actual (as opposed to virtual) singularity of the body – that which cannot be willed, repeated, formed, styled or rendered fluid and mobile. In his first book on cinema Deleuze pointed out that whereas Bergson dismissed cinema, because it seemed to represent a time cut up into discrete units and therefore typical of the spatialization of time, Bergson ought to have realised that cinema was truly Bergsonian. For the actual event of cinema – cameras acting as observers without a human point of view, creating multiple durations and images freed from intentional subjects – enabled the radical potential of

Bergson's philosophy, a philosophy that sought to think time beyond human action. Similarly, we might ask what post-Deleuzian philosophy might be if the experience of dance redefines – rather than exemplifies – life. It is in dance that the body presents itself as at once the most resistant of media – not pure act and fully realising potential, but the ongoing experience of one's own bodily life as subject to the weight of existence. After decades of philosophies of the body – much of it Deleuze-inspired – we have yet to think a body that is not the body of willing, striving and self-creating life. The body has been thought of as the site through which gender is performed,³⁹ the surface effected through desire⁴⁰ or as that through which mind gives an image to itself.⁴¹ Such a tradition is tirelessly critical of the Cartesian body as a substance that would be supplemented by mind. But perhaps the mindful body, the body whose dance is fully the dancer and nothing more, has not fully grasped the inertia of life. That which does *not* realise itself, that which haunts, impedes and deadens life: such a body – a body of pain, struggle and inhumanity (rather than post-humanity) is offered in those forms of contemporary dance that work against the illusion of the classical weightless body *and* in those other Deleuzian reflections that ask us to confront the violence and necessity of life as that which occurs to us and assails us.⁴²

In his later work with Félix Guattari dance is no longer presented as a figure for sense or the incorporeal. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari look at dance as one of the modes of territorialisation: the ways in which space is produced by relations among bodies, bodies marking a distance from each other. This spacing has to negotiate the chaos that always threatens to introduce too much difference. Dance is no longer the image of a life unfolding, differentiating and expressing itself in *pure* creative power; it is now the way in which actual bodies, through relations, produce specific spaces. There is no longer style as such, in general, but stylings of matter producing bodies in their relations:

Critical distance is a relation based on matters of expression. It is a question of keeping at a distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door. *Mannerism*: the ethos is both abode and manner, homeland and style. This is evident in territorial dances termed baroque or mannerist, in which each pose, each movement, establishes a distance of this kind (sarabands, allemands, bourées, gavottes . . .). There is

a whole art of poses, postures, silhouettes, steps and voices. Two schizophrenics converse or stroll according to laws of boundary and territory that may escape us. How very important it is, when chaos threatens, to draw an inflatable, portable territory.⁴³

The ‘raw aesthetic and territorializing factor’ is just the way in which all life bears a certain ‘religion’, or capacity to organise, group and mark space. But this grouping or dancing of bodies that produces a specific ground also opens up a *deterritorialisation*; for it is here that the movements take up a certain rhythm that allows – as in *The Logic of Sense* – for qualities released from bodies:

We always come back to this ‘moment’: the becoming-expressive of rhythm, the emergence of expressive proper qualities, the formation of matters of expression that develop into motifs and counterpoints.⁴⁴

Considering the ways in which the movements and rhythms of bodies establish a space and territory (but also allow for a refrain that shifts from *function to expression*⁴⁵) allows for a dancerly philosophy. Such a philosophy would consider the ways in which the movements and relations of bodies at once mark out a certain territory and code, at the same time as the movement expresses a repeatability that is deterritorialised: hence the power of all dance to transform functional movements produced through the struggle with life into rhythmic expressions that divert from striving and function. The art of dance, then, is inhuman: not because it overcomes a ‘man’ mired in normativity and physical ends, but because there is *movement as such* that is released in always singular bodies though never reducible to those bodies:

Not only does art not wait for human beings to begin, but we may ask if art ever appears among human beings, except under artificial and belated conditions. It has often been noted that human art was for a long time bound up with work and rites of a different nature. Saying this, however, perhaps has no more weight than saying that art begins with human beings.⁴⁶

Notes

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² Foot 2001.

³ Foot 2001, p. 17.

⁴ Foot 2001, p. 26.

⁵ Foot 2001, p. 55.

⁶ Foot 2001, p. 109.

⁷ Aristotle, *Categories*, 191a27–31.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics* 2.7.

⁹ Aristotle, 1047b31–5.

¹⁰ Aristotle, 1168a7–9.

¹¹ Irwin 1988, p. 367.

¹² Aristotle, 1103a23–6.

¹³ Aristotle, 1166a10–13.

¹⁴ Aristotle, 1166a14–20.

¹⁵ Irwin 1988, p. 608.

¹⁶ Butler 1993.

¹⁷ In *Dissemination* Jacques Derrida sets Mallarmé’s figure of both dance and mime against the Platonic ‘decision’ to establish a ground of being – the ontological – that subtends relations and which can then be the object of mimesis. By contrast, Mallarmé’s writing aims to achieve the doubleness that is not *non-being* of dance or mime. Here, the text would not refer to or repeat an action; in acting it would be at once subject and object, inside and outside, active and passive – producing itself only in referring to or alluding to itself: ‘*There is* mimicry. Mallarmé sets great store by it, along with simulacrum (and along with pantomime, theater and dance) ... In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without reference, or rather a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth or presence’ (Derrida 1981, p. 206).

¹⁸ Nietzsche 1969, p. 138.

¹⁹ Deleuze 2001, p. 69.

²⁰ Deleuze 2001, p. 79.

²¹ Yeats 1956, p. 214.

²² Derrida 1981, p. 208.

²³ Rilke 1992, p. 103.

²⁴ Deleuze 1990, pp. 184, 214.

²⁵ Nietzsche 1969, p. 40.

²⁶ Nietzsche 1969, p. 68.

²⁷ Nietzsche 1969, p. 69.

²⁸ Nietzsche 1969, p. 306.

²⁹ Deleuze 1990, p. 33.

³⁰ Deleuze 1990, p. 53.

³¹ Deleuze 1990, p. 105.

³² Deleuze 1990, p. 161.

³³ Deleuze 1990, p. 157.

³⁴ Deleuze 1990, p. 150.

³⁵ Deleuze 1990, p. 168.

³⁶ Deleuze 1990, p. 72.

³⁷ Gilson 1957.

³⁸ Deleuze 1986.

³⁹ Butler 1993.

⁴⁰ Grosz 1994.

⁴¹ Gatens 1996.

⁴² Deleuze 1994.

⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 320.

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 322.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 320.

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