

EMBODIED ETHICS: THE CONDITIONS AND NORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN PARTNERING

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Every time someone asks me, “what do you think makes a good dance partner” I hesitate. I pause for a number of reasons, most importantly because I think the question is loaded. “A good dance partner for you or in general?” I always want to ask. There is so much that one could be looking for in a partner. Some want someone that will make them look good, others want to develop mutual understanding, reciprocity, perhaps trust. In my experience, this rhetoric is common across genres from tango to contact improvisation to classical ballet. The question is fundamentally normative – what makes anything good or suitable or worthwhile? The fact that the question is being asked in dance is no surprise – people don’t want to waste their time. Finding a good partner depends heavily on one’s value system with respect to movement. “Good” can also refer to aesthetic values, such as having good technique, as well as moral values such as avoiding harm and satisfying some kind of condition of care and empathy. Since the values in partnering are fundamentally relational, it seems prudent to be able to evaluate a good partner on the basis of aesthetic value as well as ethical ones. Regardless of one’s motivation and value system, whether it be intrinsic or extrinsic, I believe that partnering is a joint, communicative act. In other words, partners are always communicating something to each other in and through their movement.

It is perhaps because partnering is a communicative act that it is often described as a physical dialogue. The nature of dialogue has been a steadfast topic in the history of human thought, in traditions from Ancient philosophers to contemporary thinkers. I have been drawn to the work of philosopher of language H. Paul Grice, who suggested that conversation follows a cooperative principle (Grice 1986). His work introduces an incongruity between what people intend to communicate and what might actually be communicated. In my years of practice both dancing and coaching, I have observed a similar incongruity between how movement is evaluated (by practitioners and observers alike) and the coordinated movement itself. Here, I will focus on how partners communicate to each other and how this communication can be evaluated on the basis of certain norms. Thus, this chapter investigates both the conditions of partnering, and some of the norms which make the communicating in partnering “good”ⁱ.

Defining the conditions systematically can be useful for evaluating partnering, since the standards of assessment of what makes a good dialogue (and thus a good partner) need to conform to some kind of criteria. Two questions that emerge with respect to the motives of moving together are 1) what values promote good partnering and, 2) what does one need to know for those values to be upheld in practice? Answering these questions is tricky given the complexity of motivations on which physical interactions are pursued. There are many reasons to partner, some of which relate to aesthetic values of exercising cultural identities, engaging in active physical exercise, finding a romantic partner, expressing the ineffable, and so on.

Through my time observing and working with professional dancers in different forms, I have seen duets that have all the “right” elements (e.g. competence, refined sensitivity) yet dancers will sometimes admit that they felt something missing. Instead of looking at the motivating factors for engaging in the act of partnering, I will interrogate the communicative aspect which I believe is present regardless of form.

In this chapter, I argue that communication in partnering is a physical exchange of information on the basis of ethically-bound conditions. Simply put, partners can cause each other harm. Thus, the criteria of communication in partnering is always within an ethical domain, where action runs along a continuum ranging from the ethical to the unethical. To make this argument, I will first lay out the conditions to which the relevant norms of evaluation can adhere. These conditions include proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact. Rather than provide a how-to guide for communication, I will examine a critical vocabulary for practically approaching communication in partnering. Section I begins with the conditions of communication, followed by Section II which examines the norms of communicating *well*.

This discussion, which takes a philosophical lens to identify and parse the finer points of normative language, will not lead to a generalizable argument that is applicable in all cases, nor will it arrive at a prescriptive framework. Nevertheless, I believe my inquiry into norms may give insight into how one determines what makes partnering successful. There will likely be points of disagreement with my characterization, but I believe the framework I present here is ultimately useful for dialogue about normativity in dance in a broader sense. This investigation may serve to inform dialogue (verbal and physical) between practitioners (to articulate what is working and what is not), as well as to present tools by which an observer can evaluate the quality of interaction between partners.

In what follows, I will fluctuate in the use of personal pronouns in reference to an imaginary partner (e.g. she, he, one) to maintain the fluid possibilities of partnering. I have chosen to investigate both the inanimate and animate, because I believe such inquiry reveals the very real possibilities of how agency and choice play a role in partnering. As I investigate the broad implications of partnering, I will not focus on revealing hegemonic ideologies within dance forms, such as heteronormative approaches that establish fixed roles (e.g. leader/follower). Instead of analyzing specific approaches, my aim here is to establish the conditions that underlie physical interaction in order to examine the relationship between ethics (i.e. the potential for harm) and communication (i.e. exchange of information) in partnering.

A final note about the significance of gender politics in partnering. My focus here will be on partners independent of gender, to examine how something as simple as walking together while holding hands may be performed as a series of codes upheld for aesthetic reasons other than explicit communication. My interest is in how conditions such as proximity and orientation function as active, physical dialogue between partners. Even though certain roles, such as a lead position, may often be assumed by a male and a follow position by a female, it is more significant here to explore the ethical dimension of each role independent of gender as the roles themselves involve clear functions that may trigger ethical consequences. I will turn to the problem of ethical consequences in the next section.

I: Conditions of Communication

In this section, I will discuss the conditions of physical interaction in partnering, including proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact, as well as how partners communicate through these conditions. In particular, I will discuss two factors that facilitate and constrain the communication between partners, agency and predictability. This discussion will lay the groundwork for the second section, in which I will consider how these conditions are ethically-bound.

To begin inquiry into the conditions of communication in partnering, I start with the simple idea that partnering requires interaction. In other words, interaction is a necessary condition of partnering. Without interaction, partnering is not possible. For interaction to be possible, however, certain conditions need to be met. If we take the term at face value, interaction seems to presuppose action *between* some entities. We can thus assume that for interaction to be possible, there needs to be some kind of encounter—in other words, a meeting of two or more bodies. For partnering, this encounter must be possible in the physical domain.

Feasible and possible, however, are not synonymous – an interaction may be possible but not feasible given certain factors. Consider a simple example of taking a dance class. It is possible to take class if there is a dance studio near me. It is impossible if I am in an area where there is no dance studio. It is not feasible, however, if the dance studio is closed, or if I do not have enough money. It is also not feasible if the teacher I wanted to take class with is ill or on vacation.

Sometimes dancers claim that certain actions are not possible, but it may be that they mean the action is not feasible. Consider for example a lift in which one dancer cannot lift another because the first dancer is not strong enough to perform a deadlift. This may seem like a matter of possibility. Indeed, the action of lifting may be subject to particular aesthetic ideals such that the first dancer's weakness, paired with the aesthetic convention of something such as an overhead deadlift, makes a *particular* lift impossible. However, there may be a way to execute a different kind of lift if the two dancers arrange their bodies in a certain way such that a lift becomes feasible. Thus, we should consider what constraints are acting on the interaction between partners.

Environmental factors may also make certain partnering situations unfeasible, such as the floor being too slippery or the deejay not having the right music to dance a particular form (e.g. tango, salsa, swing). Such environmental circumstances, while ostensibly extraneous, significantly affect the quality of partnering by presenting factors that can make interaction theoretically possible but practically unfeasible.

Given interaction between two partners, a physical encounter is necessary for interaction to be possible. The encounter regulates or provides the conditions for an exchange on the basis of some physical communication. Communication in partnering is based on (at least) three conditions: proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact. Certain forms of movement practice will have different rules about each of these conditions, but for the purposes of this paper I will examine each condition abstractly, outside of any particular form.

Proximity refers to the distance at which partners encounter each other. Partners direct their movement in three dimensions: forward/back, side/side, up/down. Orientation refers to the relative physical position of each partner to the other(s). Partners orient to each other in

three dimensions: forward/back (i.e. pitch), side-to-side (i.e. yaw), and spinal rotation (i.e. roll). Proximity can be considered a function of space between partners, in which direction is negotiated through shifts of weight toward and away from a shared center. Orientation can be considered a function of shape between partners, in which relative position is negotiated through rotation and translation in the torso and hips. Point(s) of contact refers to the mode of interaction such as touch, breath, eye contact, and rhythm, as well as external elements such as sound (e.g. music). Partners may use multiple points of contact to establish shared focus, such as when partners create complex rhythm through touch, breath, and gaze.

It is important to note that proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact can all be determined or prescribed in advance. In some forms, proximity, orientation, timing, and touch are established as part of the rules of the dance such that partners will be connected through multiple points of contact within specific body positions (e.g. tango). In other forms, these conditions are negotiated through the practice in real-time, without prescribed rules (e.g. contact improvisation). They may also be determined compositionally, such as in complex choreography that requires intricate timing and bodily architecture with multiple points of contact.

If proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact become prescribed in too much detail, partners may fail to attend to one another because they are attending to the steps and the music rather than to each other. This is particularly important to consider when evaluating the execution of partnering, rather than the composition alone. Each condition can be very nuanced, such that despite facing each other, one partner may have a slight rotation away from the other, or a slight pitch backwards or to the side. These slight orientations may be understood as signs that a partner would rather not be partnering. In this way, quality of orientation may refer to the attitude of each partner toward the other(s).

Communication between partners will only be possible given an encounter, just as it will be constrained (e.g. stronger or weaker) given certain factors. To understand how partners communicate on the basis of these conditions, I will examine two factors systematically: agency and predictability.

I begin with intentional encounters with inanimate matter first and then with intentional exchanges between human agents. I have inserted the word “intentional” here in order to examine a particular kind of action on the part of an agent. Following Donald Davidson’s (1963) work on philosophy of action, “whenever someone does something for a reason, therefore, he can be characterized as a) having some sort of pro attitude toward actions of a certain kind, and b) believing (or knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering) that his action is of that kind” (Davidson 1963, 1). Davidson suggests that intentionality requires a specific reason that an individual can both know and name. I find Davidson’s philosophical work relevant here because I will examine pursuit of communication as a specific (i.e. intentional) reason for physical (inter)action.

I can encounter and act upon inanimate things, such as a wall, an instrument, or a digital device (e.g. smartphone). For example, I may encounter a wall with the purpose to practice leaning, shifting, and displacing my weight to build strength, coordination, or even courage to be off-balance. My exchange with the wall will be rather limited, since the wall has no agency of its own. A limited exchange in this scenario is favorable, however, since I have a particular purpose in mind when encountering the wall. While it is possible to act upon a wall, it is odd

to say that the wall has agency. The wall does not choose to support my weight, it does so simply by the design of its reinforcement. Moreover, while my actions do have some effects on the wall (since I apply pressure, the wall matches my force with an equal and opposite force as per Newton's third law of motion), the effects are likely too small to be observable or significant.

But acting upon a wall, however useful as a means to practice holding and releasing weight, is significantly different from acting upon an instrument designed for interaction (such as a musical instrument or digital device), let alone another person. While a clarinet or a wall cannot make choices, individuals can make choices about how they encounter and respond to the subject of their interaction. To say that there is an exchange happening between myself and a wall or musical instrument may be strange, given that the basis of communication is entirely contingent on me being the agent and thus having agency to choose the proximity and orientation. Importantly, a wall cannot establish a point of contact or choose to share focus. Nevertheless, I find it useful to begin with this limited encounter to investigate agency.

Agency here is not treated as a binary, on-off aspect of interaction, but rather a continuum from weak to strong where one can determine degree based both on the quality and quantity of the choices each agent is able to make. Agency here can thus be defined as having the possibility of choice, where degree of weakness and strength is based on the range of possible alternatives. My physical interaction with a wall is limited compared to one with another person, given the possible choices I can make. A wall can neither lift nor lead me, though it is dependable if I lean on it with all of my weight (depending, of course, on how well it is reinforced). It is predictable, to the extent that it does not collapse while I am applying pressure and force. A musical instrument is more complex than a wall, and thus less independent as it is in many ways designed for interaction. Perhaps a clarinet, given that it is designed for interaction, can hone one's agency more than a wall, because by listening and attuning to one's clarinet, one can exercise more choices within the interaction in ways that may not be possible with a wall. For example, the clarinet has distinct mechanisms that respond to certain parameters, many of which require specific knowledge (either through training, extensive practice, or some other means of spending time understanding the mechanisms). No sound will come out of a clarinet if I am not simultaneously producing breath into the mouthpiece while stabilizing the reed with my embouchure. The clarinet has recognizable effects based on how I interact with it, all of which are predictable contingent on my familiarity and expertise with the clarinet.

We learn something about agency when we consider the ways in which inanimate matter is responsive to our actions. While the clarinet cannot play without me, it responds differently given the way I interact with it. For example, a clarinet will respond differently in the cold than it will in hotter weather, because the wood expands and contracts under different temperatures. A clarinet is different, however, than any old two by four hunk of wood resting in my garage. A two by four will also expand and contract given different temperatures, but a clarinet is more flexibly dependent on ambient circumstances given the fact that it has distinct mechanisms that will respond differently given the circumstances. A clarinet is more responsive (to both the weather and me) than a two by four. Moreover, my clarinet will play differently than my partner's clarinet, and so if I attempt to treat another person's clarinet the same way as I would my own, I may run into some trouble. But to say that the clarinet has agency is rather odd.

Animate subjects are far less predictable than inanimate matter. This makes human interaction more complicated, at least because of the fact that individuals, unlike inanimate matter, have agency. It is useful, however, to consider the difference between weak and strong agency. This will depend on the types of constraints that are present for each partner. If I come to a social event of a movement form I have no experience with, interacting with a partner may not be feasible because I will find their movement potentially random or too complex. Similarly, an advanced dancer in a different form may have trouble interacting with me upon realizing that their actions have no recognizable effects on me. While the interaction is ostensibly possible, it is unfeasible given my lack of experience with the present form.

The degree of agency partners can exercise is sometimes governed by the form of partnering. For example, in some forms certain features of proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact are fixed, yet each partner can still make choices, albeit a limited number. A certain dance may require partners to orient toward each in close proximity, with touch as a point of contact by connecting palms on one side of the body and through a half embrace on the other side. A certain dance may also involve roles, such as leader and follower. Leaders may have a distinct task, such as changing the timing, direction, and spatial orientation of a following dancer. If the action of the leader has no recognizable effects on the follower, the interaction will not be sustainable because the follower is too independent. On the other hand, the interaction will be too taxing for the leader if the follower exhibits too much dependency.

Sometimes agency depends on the aesthetic and formal conventions of the genre being practiced, at other times agency is something dancers can explicitly negotiate. For partners to physically negotiate both their individual agencies and their joint agency, they need to be able to differentiate their own individual actions, as well as their joint action, with respect to proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact. In part, differentiation of action means that partners recognize the physical effects they have on each other's movements. I will return to recognition and awareness in the second section of this paper.

Computational theorists Lars-Erik Janlert and Erik Stolterman (2017) point out that interaction is contingent on actions having recognizable effect, in which recognizable effects relate to the level of independence of the subject of an interaction. For example, a wall is independent given that my actions have no recognizable effect on it. Although a wall is dependable and predictable, it is odd to say that the wall is interacting with me, and even odder to say that the wall has agency. My action on a clarinet does have recognizable effects, such that certain actions will lead to a response while others will not. In the case of the wall or the clarinet, there is only one agent (me) interacting with (or acting on) inanimate matter. Between inanimate matter like a wall and clarinet, we can also consider a non-human animate subject, such as a cat. I call to my cat and she responds differently. Sometimes her ears perk up, sometimes she looks at me, sometimes she even comes over. But her responses differ, and it is difficult to predict how or when she will respond. She seems to exercise her agency by choosing when to sit with me and when to go about her own business. My cat is less predictable than my clarinet or a wall.

How partners negotiate unpredictability depends on their ability to differentiate their actions. If partners can read each other's movements (or they can talk to each other), then they may be able to fairly easily accommodate unpredictability. There are many more possible choices for how to re/act with a dance partner than with a wall, clarinet, or cat. If I am

unfamiliar with the form of partnering, however, interaction may prove to be difficult or perhaps unfeasible if I perceive movements as random or if I am unable to differentiate them because they are too complex. As Janlert and Stolterman note, “we cannot interact with what we perceive as randomly behaving systems, whether it is because they are truly random or because their behavior is too complex for us to deal with” (Janlert and Stolterman 2017, 52). What we perceive as random or complex will likely depend on the context, as well as our own background and personal histories.

Predictability is a function of the likelihood of an event occurring as well as one’s certainty. For example, if I want to influence my partner’s timing, direction, or orientation I need to know where his weight is, which is possible to feel through the pelvis. A novice may be unfamiliar with this and may try to influence their partner by applying pressure to the shoulders, causing the facing to shift (orientation) but not necessarily accessing weight and center (direction). Influencing my partner’s timing, direction, or orientation requires more than being certain about weight placement – I also have to feel in which direction and with which orientation my partner is already moving. Thus, it is more than just being in the right place at the right time. I need to be aware of the range of actions possible while moving, as well as my goals for influencing my partner, perhaps in accordance with a particular score. Even if I know what is coming because of the pre-determined score, I will still have to negotiate proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact in real-time.

Agency and predictability modify the quality of a physical interaction. I am unlikely to make deliberate choices if I cannot predict what will happen. Unless of course I am a risk-taker, in which case my relationship to agency is somewhat unusual because I am less concerned with the effects or consequences of my actions. One might object to this point about not being able to interact with unpredictable things by asking about a game of roulette. There is indeed something strange going on in the situation when we choose to encounter randomness and chance such as the kind in gambling. In the normal circumstance, when I approach a clarinet and there is no relationship between my pushing keys and sound coming out, I would quickly seek a different clarinet or a way to fix the one I have. This is likely to be true about how we interact with computers and phones and all sorts of other things that behave other than how we expect. This is true even of the way infants interact with others, which we can here consider as human agents with limited agency. In a simple study, Tronick et al. (1975) demonstrated that after several minutes of interaction with a non-responsive (e.g. straight-faced, expressionless) parent, an infant (as young as six months) “rapidly sobers and grows wary [...] makes repeated attempts to get the interaction into its usual reciprocal pattern. When these attempts fail, the infant withdraws [and] orients his face and body away from his mother with a withdrawn, hopeless facial expression” (Tronick et al. 1975). This simple study demonstrates how one is apt to react to an encounter in which one is unable to interact with a subject.

Yet people do, however, come back to roulette tables despite the aleatoric nature of gambling. By choosing to be a risk-taker, I exercise my agency in a wagering type of activity. Ostensibly my priorities are less with the interaction and more with the associated feeling of risk. Thus, what is predictable is both the emotions I will feel in taking a chance, as well as the emotions I will feel if I win, which is worth the risk and thus a particular exercise in agency. It is interesting to consider risky behavior in the context of interaction. Some suggest that risk is

an observer's phenomena, meaning that the person engaging in "risky" behavior either does not care about the outcome or does not legitimately consider their action to be risky. Consider for example driving a car 180 kilometers per hour. If I am in the passenger seat, I may be having an anxiety attack. The driver, on the other hand, either believes she has full control and nothing bad will happen or does not care if something bad will happen. In both cases, she is exercising her agency in a way that has less to do with whether she can predict the outcome, and more to do with the associated feeling of risk, which to her is predictable.

The other kind of objection to making choices in the face of unpredictability is that human agents are only somewhat predictable. Acting in the face of uncertainty is a particular challenge when interacting non-verbally. But partners can glean a lot of information within the nuances of physical interaction in order to negotiate unpredictability. It is not how well I can predict what my partner will do, but how well I will be able to adapt to what my partner will do given an unexpected encounter or circumstance. For one, we can never truly know if a partner will be ready to respond, so we must attend to how our partner communicates through proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact. Acting with certainty may mean acting from expectation, which can further inhibit our attending to relevant stimuli, particularly if something unexpected happens. Fixed knowledge, or assuming that because something worked a particular way before, it must always work this way, detracts from the process of attending to relevant stimuli. I will return to this in the second section.

We can regard predictability in partnering within different paradigms. For example, a rule-based system will state that actions are governed under certain imperatives, versus a discovery-based system in which there are very few specific rules. This is a simple, reduced way of viewing differences between codified and improvisational practices. In all cases, the ends of the interaction are important to consider when understanding the agency of each partner. If, for example, my intention in partnering is to be disruptive or subversive, I will ostensibly encounter my partner differently than if I intended to communicate well.

Partners' teleological concerns will influence how they perceive, interpret, and articulate their actions. Aesthetic conventions may dictate how partners ought to exercise their agency in accepting, rejecting, or ignoring actions. Moreover, having particular goals (whether explicit or implicit, individual or shared) within an interaction will further restrict what partners consider appropriate. In whatever partnering paradigm partners choose to practice (e.g. lead/follow, improvisation, predetermined choreography, etc.), each partner must accept the constraints of the form as well as the fact that actions are always communicative. When working with dancers, I often use the maxim "everything you do matters—it doesn't matter what you do" to remind movers that all of their actions have consequences, and it is a responsibility to evaluate what is appropriate in the moment. The notion of consequences is particularly important when considering the norms of interaction, which will be the focus of the next section.

II: Norms of Communicating “Well”

In the previous section, I discussed the conditions of physical interaction (encounter and exchange) in partnering, as well as the ways in which agency and predictability affect how partners communicate with each other through proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact. In this second section, I will turn to how partners (or observers) evaluate communication between partners on the basis of norms such as competence and receptivity. In particular, I will examine how certain values, such as beauty, trust, and responsibility, lead to normative problems in evaluating partnering. Broadly, these normative problems fall into three categories: (1) definition (partners don't know actually what the norms are), (2) agreement (partners know the norms, but they don't agree on them), and (3) differentiation (partners don't know how to measure whether the conditions are being satisfied).

It is worth noting that encountering a subject is in some significant way different than encountering an object – but how do we understand what makes something an object versus a subject? Even without getting into the ontological problem, this question is fraught with cultural and historical problems. Consider how a person may be perceived as an object (e.g. property), just as an inanimate object (e.g. wall, clarinet) can be personified into a subject. This becomes problematic when we consider the range of possible interactions. A musician playing an instrument and a blacksmith turning a lathe are clearly interacting with materials in different ways. It is beyond the scope of this work to launch into a full investigation on the nature of subjectivity. Moving forward, I will examine how subjectivity (that which relates to the subject, rather than that which opposes an object) bears critical relevance to the norms of interaction that make communication in partnering successful.

I understand partnering to have multiple levels of perception, including at least the visual, kinesthetic, and tactile, all of which require some level of interpretation. Such interpretation can be executed in the moment. That is, through movement itself, without necessarily thinking about it, partners make interpretations about the quality and character of the communication within a partnership. For example, we can consider the ways in which partners use force to change direction, timing, or orientation. Partners may use excessive force, which may be interpreted as a lack of care or responsibility, or partners may use such little effort to achieve action that movement is interpreted as responsible and caring. In both cases, there may be little to no cognitive reflection happening in the moment outside of the movement itself. Context (i.e. the space wherein the practitioners are situated (stage, studio, salon), as well as the cultural and formal backgrounds of the practitioners and audience) will undoubtedly play a crucial role in how something like efficiency is exercised by dancers. Competence and receptivity will determine whether partners are aware of what they are communicating and whether they have the means to deliberately communicate what they intend to communicate.

If one accepts that actions in partnering are always communicative, we run into two closely linked problems. One is the evaluation of meaning – if actions are communicative, what is it that partners are communicating to each other? The other problem is how we evaluate the success of the communication. The first problem might assume that communication must have a linguistic referent. In other words, if action is communicative, then must I be able to linguistically articulate what the action meant? Before getting into linguistic meaning, we must

consider the normative dimension of communication with respect to agency. Are partners actually free to make their own choices, or are they responsible to each other such that certain choices are inappropriate? To borrow language from analytical philosopher Immanuel Kant, are partners autonomous (i.e. free-willed) agents, or are they heteronomously bound¹? Simply put, if partners are autonomous then they are free to make choices, independently and on account of each other. If an act is autonomous, it is done because the agent reflectively endorses it. It is a product of reason. If it is done heteronomously, it is a product of desires or emotions that are not legislated or endorsed by reason. The heteronomous subject is a victim of his desires, emotions, and drives. The dancer who is attuned to the actions of his partner and behaves as he does *because* he is so attuned acts autonomously. The autonomous dancer can make decisions independently of whatever his partner is doing, or he can make choices on account of what his partner is doing. Either way, he can reflectively endorse them, rather than just being driven to do what he does because of unfettered desire or emotion. If an agent is heteronomous, then her actions are a product of unfettered desire or emotion, bound and limited by particular factors.

Let us consider the way partners act toward and react to each other. Partners make choices about how to constrain particular elements including proximity, orientation, and timing—sometimes constraining many elements together, and at other times less so and in different amalgamations. In each scenario, the actions of each partner will reflect the quality of their agency and the extent of their competence, but extenuating circumstances can turn an autonomous agent into a heteronomous one. For example, my partner, while perhaps bound to the constraints of the form, has the autonomy to decide the quality of re/action, as well as the agency to accept that my action warrants a particular reaction in the first place. If, in an overhead lift, my partner suddenly becomes afraid, then her unfettered fear may cause her to become rigid and no longer able to reflectively endorse trust in me as a partner. While it is possible for her to make a choice, her fear makes some choice unfeasible. She does not reflectively endorse or reason about the fact that I have control and am in a position to keep her safe. My awareness of my partner's sudden rigidity will likely contribute to how our interaction unfolds (e.g. whether or not the lift will be successful).

This scenario is useful to analyze insofar as we can understand the awareness each partner has of the constraints elicited by the other, as well as those potential conventions and values ascribed by any given form of partnering. This is at least one of the many reasons why having a grounded theory of conditions may open nuance of evaluation, in the moment, by practitioners and scholars alike. That physical interaction involves certain ethical dimensions, such as trust and care, within an extremely nuanced space of extenuating circumstances makes much more important the case for understanding what and how we are communicating.

But these conditions are never neutral. Sometimes partners communicate things that they don't intend. In particular, through proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact, partners can unintentionally communicate a lack of care. The important aspects to consider with respect to ethical conduct are 1) whether each partner *values* communication (or whether one is simply upholding a conventional gesture), and 2) whether each partner has the refined awareness to attend to what they are communicating.

¹ See Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*

Some people may come to partner because they are seeking to find a romantic partner, to exercise power, to make money, or any other number of reasons that may not place value on communication. Of course, these motives need not necessarily conflict with communication. Consider for example how individuals may come to a partnering event (jam, milonga, competition, etc.) to seek new students or satisfy individual needs of touch and social engagement. Such motives can be enacted with sensitivity and care, or at the expense of others' comfort. Being aware of these possibilities may open and enhance dialogue between partners by making values explicit, just as lack of awareness may lead to trouble because motives go unspoken.

We can also consider how competing values such as feeling good and attending to one's partner may disrupt the awareness of communication if feeling good comes at the expense of attending to my partner. One partner may become so involved in the experience of moving that they forget about their partner. The same may be true if one partner becomes so engrossed with the music such that they no longer pay attention to their partner's actions. The tension in partnering between ethics (trust, vulnerability, agency, responsibility, etc.) and aesthetics (beauty, power, speed, etc.) makes it hard to evaluate formulaically when something is awry and why. To what extent does understanding the motives depend on familiarity with the setting and conventions of the paradigms people are working within (e.g. international DanceSport competition, contact improvisation jam, tango milonga, etc.) as well as the aesthetic values of the form or the preference of the dance-maker? That is, can we really say what movement is "supposed" to look like, let alone feel like? If we move beyond the composition of physical interaction, to examine partnering as a discourse that explicitly values communication on the basis of ethically-bound conditions, we can begin to examine the evaluation of quality within how partners relate to each other by negotiating proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact.

This kind of evaluation is complex because physicality is not the only factor at play. By orienting to others, we are subject to the psychological dimensions of ourselves and our partners. The ever-changing relationship between partners perpetuates an emergent experience (physically, psychologically, emotionally, energetically, etc.) wherein each partner affects the other. Factors such as previous experience, aesthetic conventions of distinct movement practices (e.g. tango, classical ballet, flamenco, etc.), and emotional states effectively influence not only how receptive a partner will be, but also what is salient within an interaction. My partner may be less receptive to me because I smell bad or remind him of a hated enemy. Despite being coordinated, strong, and physically present, my partner may be unreceptive because he is scared, bored, nervous, or any other number of emotional possibilities. Thus, even though the focus here is on physical interaction, there is clearly more at play than the bodily dimensions.

One way to understand the receptivity of one's partner is through what I refer to as a threshold of resistance. This threshold can be experienced by applying a minimal amount of pressure to an area of one's partner (palm-to-palm, shoulder-to-shoulder, pelvis-to-pelvis, etc.), and increasing pressure until the partner has to make a choice of whether to move with the pressure or resist the pressure. One's threshold of resistance is contingent on one's environment (the threshold will be different if one is standing on ice versus if one is standing on concrete), one's emotional state (one's threshold will be different if one is upset versus if one is content), and one's relational state (one's threshold will be different if one trusts one's partner versus if

one does not trust one's partner). If I am upset, I may take things more personally and be less physically forgiving. This can translate to using more force than necessary to execute an action. It may also translate to moving slower than I would were I not upset. The same is true if I am excited – I may be too emotionally aroused to be receptive to my partner in an efficient way. Environmental and emotional factors will always play a role in receptivity.

Having the goal to communicate and actually being receptive to what is being communicated are also ostensibly manifested in different ways. In this way, receptivity is more than just registering what is going on (within myself, my partner, my surroundings). Receptivity suggests that due attention and weight are committed to the phenomena of negotiating the threshold of resistance within partnering, which requires both awareness and competence. Along with the psychological features, training, habits, and previous experiences are also significant to receptivity. My partner may be more receptive to me if we share a common background. That is, if I am trying to execute a complex lift but my partner only has experience executing the lift (rather than being lifted), he may be less receptive simply because he lacks the requisite experience and coordination. Alternatively, I may be partnering with someone who has some certain experience, having trained for a number of years. If I lead a movement my partner has never seen or experienced kinesthetically, he may be less receptive simply because he is unfamiliar with the movement. My partner may not understand the types of movements that are appropriate within the form, thus he may be ill-equipped to make choices because he feels there are too many possibilities (too much agency) or very few possibilities (too little agency).

Receptivity is a pairing of the relational dimension with a temporal dimension. If I move too quickly or not quickly enough, interaction will be possible but likely unsuccessful. For example, my partner runs toward me and I anticipate catching her by bringing my arms up too quickly. In doing so, I miss the chance to be receptive to her and she smacks into me. On the one hand, timing is a problem of interaction and on the other, it is a problem of competence. In both cases, the value system of each partner will play into how the interaction is negotiated in practice, including how it relates to the aesthetic conventions of the form.

We are here presented with two major incongruities: 1) partners may communicate something other than what they intended because of a lack of awareness and/or competence, and 2) partners may communicate in such a way that is incongruous with the values they purport to have. Certain values, such as such as feeling or looking good, may overshadow values such as care for each other such that communication becomes less nuanced or overlooked altogether. Partners interacting without explicit awareness to the ways in which their proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact have ethical dimensions might not be positioned to appreciate the depth of receptivity. Given the intimacy of partnering, lack of awareness puts partners in a position to harm each other physically and psychologically.

While the verbal rhetoric of communication and ethics is common in partnered dance forms, not all partnered interactions prioritize communication (let alone ethics) in a way that concepts like responsibility and agency are *physically* salient. In other words, one may use words like trust and care, but in practice one may use more force than necessary because the value of certain aesthetic conventions takes precedence over the physical care of negotiating proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact in real-time. While partners need not have an explicit goal to communicate, there will still always be an exchange of information. Thus,

partners need to be responsible agents over their own actions. To be responsible is to understand the appropriate responses potentially available, in the moment, in ways that are ethically appropriate given the constraints and resources within a given form of movement.

How can one tell whether one is going through the motions of partnering as a code dictated by an aesthetic convention versus explicitly communicating through proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact? Sometimes this is apparent immediately, as dancers lack the differentiation to understand how their proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact influence their partner. Janlert and Stolterman (2017) note the significant difference between unintended and unattended interactions, wherein constituents may be oblivious to consequences of actions (unintended) or otherwise unaware of the features of an interaction (unattended). The choices of each dancer will provide limitations on some movement, while making other movement available. But if the action of one partner is too predictable, the other(s) may lose interest. In other cases, the incongruity only becomes clear when something goes wrong. For example, one partner lifts the other and then accidentally stumbles. The ability to recover from accidental missteps is contingent on a certain competence – namely, how well the partners recognize the available choices to avoid injury. If the partners are communicating poorly, recovery may be unfeasible and injury will ensue.

Conclusion

While it may be impossible to directly address the tension between aesthetic experience and ethical values practically in a prescriptive sense, parsing the normative questions lends support for understanding at least some of the ways by which claims about connection can be reasonably and justifiably evaluated. That partnering can cause harm means the ethical dimension will always coincide with the aesthetic one. Normativity of this kind is a form of pluralism: the standards which determine what is right for one are likely quite different from the standards which determine what is right for another. Yet the matter of standards persists in practice, and so a critical investigation of normativity can elucidate deeper understanding of the standards within dance partnering more broadly. To avoid relativism that ends in “anything goes” mentality, we can interpret norms as constraints that hold under certain conditions (e.g. agency, predictability, competence, awareness). For the purposes of this inquiry, the constraints investigated here are defined as partnering with the particular goal of communicating well. Communicating well can thus be understood as a relationship that comes to be when partners interact in a way that is appropriate to a) the context and b) each other. Communicating well requires each partner to recognize the ethical effects of their action. Simply put, partners need to recognize that they can harm each other and there are tools to make deliberate choices such that they will successfully adapt if circumstances change unexpectedly.

In my doctoral research with professional dancers, titled *Reciprocal Practice*, I have investigated how partners attend to the ethical dimensions of their interaction, such as how particular lifts, floorwork, or foot patterns involve trust, care, responsibility, and so on. Dancers share that when these ethical dimensions are made salient they understand the choices they can make, which leads to feelings of deeper connection and attunement to one another. Claiming responsibility over self *and* another, as well as trusting oneself *and* one’s partner that things will work out well, clearly have a significant impact on the practice of partnering. It is clear

that taking an apathetic approach to sharing and/or shifting weight in relation to one another may cause significant harm, while spending valuable energy trying to control the situation tends to inhibit freedom. Successful partnering seems to necessitate agency and even the taking of risks. In terms of physical dialogue, the greater the nuances of movement, and indeed the more articulate each partner can be toward each other, the greater the potential for connection to emerge.

Taking a step forward into any particular practice, what happens when individuals move together (“partnering”) with a purpose other than to communicate, such as exercising a cultural identity, seeking a romantic partner, fulfilling work in order to make a living, or indeed without any particular purpose at all? An approach in which dancers are not attending to their communication may render an exchange a different thing altogether, such as two coordinated monologues. It is possible to extend the argument by saying those individuals moving together without purpose are not, strictly speaking, engaging in the practice of “partnering”. This, however, seems rather unfair, as the practice of moving together need not be purposeful and certain movement practices that utilize the term partnering cannot be criticized simply because constituents are exploring the infinite possibilities of interaction. It seems, however, the only way to approach the ethical dimensions of partnering is by first understanding communicative potential of movement itself, especially the conditions that need to be satisfied (e.g. a physical exchange based on proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact) in order for certain norms to adhere (e.g. competence, physical eloquence, receptivity, mutual understanding). *Physical* dialogue is especially difficult because bodies are always changing, which is why formulaic study can be so disruptive to the act of communication, and the subsequent emergence of connection. Assuming connection can only emerge from responses that are contextually suitable (i.e. appropriate), one must always be listening and responding to change.

The notion of suitability will often appear in practice, which is also relevant when considering transitions between different forms of partnering practice. From my own research, I have seen how ballet dancers may struggle with first attempts at contact improvisation in the same way that contactors may struggle with the strict rules of leading and following in ballroom and Latin dancing. I will be honest that it is my desire for everyone to practice “ethical” partnering, which requires making explicit each partner’s motivation for engaging in physical practice. The desire to partner by making communication explicit is something I often refer to as “reciprocal practice”, which is related to my own aesthetic preference as a performer and choreographer. My practice of partnering is first and foremost reliant on listening through different modes of interaction, while following the prescriptions or codes set about by a particular culture tends to come second (to the chagrin of many of my colleagues). When I personally engage in different forms, I am admittedly less interested in the way something is “supposed” to look than with my own aesthetic preference of deliberate communication, which lends itself well to some forms over others that have stricter norms of engagement. I am often interested in developing forms further, researching how connection may emerge from different ways of engaging in physical dialogue, and so it is necessary for my practice to be informed by different techniques. Thus, the driving question of the research is what can emerge when reciprocal practice is in dialogue with traditional dance forms? So much more can be said about the nature of these norms, yet the goal was simply to outline the way in which partnering can

be evaluated on the basis of physical exchanges through proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact that are always ethically bound.

So, when people ask me what makes a “good” dance partner, I suggest one who communicates clearly, makes their thinking visible, and is willing to negotiate values together. Values in partnered movement such as these are always informed by culturally and historically contingent practices of movement. Partners are free to express themselves insofar as they employ forms of articulation that are already established within their dynamic, the form, or the broader culture. Partners may investigate new or alternative articulations, but they do so only in a domain of cultural practice. I believe taking this kind of normative approach to partnering may overturn prevalent concerns with one’s own subjectivity in favor of a joint (or indeed collective) agency in which ethics are explicitly salient. To be ethical in the practice of partnering is thus to communicate competently and receptively with the physical means available, while acknowledging the culturally-embedded practices of negotiation that already exist and the ways in which one’s practice contributes to the ongoing development of movement cultures.

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