

The Aesthetic and Ethical Consideration of Dance Education

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Abstract

This article examines the aesthetic stance choreographic educators should take when teaching students how to choreograph and engage in dance work. In the field of philosophical aesthetics, there has always been a heated debate about the importance of aesthetic and moral values in evaluating art. Four camps are involved in this debate. This article investigates the negative and positive implications of the philosophical and choreographic educational implications of three camps: aestheticism, moderate autonomy, and ethicism. However, since educators must consider the compatibility of aesthetics and ethics, the interplay of aesthetic and ethical values held by moderate moralism is an appropriate position for dance educators to take when coaching students.

Keywords: dance education, choreographic education, moral education, philosophical aesthetics, aesthetic and ethics

1. Introduction

The aesthetic object of art dance contains one side of moral outlooks and feelings and other aspects of aesthetic forms. These have been main debates within the field of philosophical aesthetics, which is—if the ethical value of an artwork may be considered when determining its aesthetic value holistically. These two positions influence how people evaluate an artwork, how artwork takes a position in society, what is the relationship between artists and viewers. In debates of artistic value, Noël Carroll (2000) outlines the different aesthetic positions that are Radical Autonomism/Aestheticism, Ethicism, Moderate autonomism, and Moderate moralism. They are great or less different in the value of art qua-art. Since dance is an art and not science, the former being should lie committed to its value of aesthetics rather than ethics, as aestheticists and moderate autonomists claim—the value of artistic qualities should be beyond qualities of moral value (Posner, 1997 & Anderson and Dean, 1998). However, it cannot be denied that dance evokes feelings and brings into existence an articulation of human feelings, thus ethicists and moderate moralists claim—these (moral or immoral) feelings affect the aesthetic value of artworks (Gaut, 1998 & Carroll, 1996).

While much has been written about artistic value in literature, theatre, and architecture (Mullin, 2002, Lagueux, 2004, Kieran, 1996), not enough attention has been paid to dance educational implications in this debate. Therefore, this article focuses on what position of philosophical aesthetics should educators take in terms of dance education. In the discourse of dance education, it implies whether students should be protected in a space they can freely express their ideas without being criticized; or if students should be aware of the statements and assertions they made in artworks. Although aestheticism is appealing because it protects the critical expression of students and their works, this makes it hard for teachers to teach their students to create a work aesthetically, critically, creatively, and morally. It is because there are multiple dimensional relationships between choreographers and artworks, choreographers and audiences; and audiences and artworks in the discourse of dance—it rings hollow only focusing on the aesthetic form of the artwork or moral value of the artwork. As an educator, I am aware it is essential for students aspiring to work in the choreographic field to understand that a dance work contains one side of choreographic techniques and styles, and one side of an expression of one's own voice—evokes emotional responses and feelings of audiences as well as conveys the message towards audience and society. The educator should ensure students can be pedagogically accommodated in both aspects.

In this article, the first section provides three examples of controversial dance works which imply the situation of tension of aesthetic and ethics in the dance field. The second and third sections argue that three camps: radical autonomism, moderate autonomism and ethicism are insufficient, for they have many absoluteness states when judging an art qua-art, and fail in the discourse of dance education because of the irreconcilable of aesthetic and ethics. The next section illustrates the value interaction of aesthetics and ethics, which this article defends, is appropriate in terms of dance education because of its reconcilable. Furthermore, this section also demonstrates reasons of defending moderate moralism as the appropriate view in choreographic teaching.

2. Controversial Danceworks

Vaslav Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun*, 1912, caused an uproar in France at its premiere as it was conflictive with traditional ballet including the form of costumes and theme of ballet, which was considered obscene and indecent. It shows the fauna masturbating—presenting sexual awakening and erotic metaphors on stage, such as making love to a scarf that the most attractive nymph had left behind as she fled in its final scene. In the 1980s, the presentation of sex and sexuality in public was a symptom of declining morals and a sign of social decadence, which was against the behavior code people followed. Gaston Calmette, editor-in-chief of *Le Figaro* newspaper, was criticized for its animalistic and lecherous faun, movement with filthy and bestial eroticism, and for dancing in crude and indecent movement (Lowen, 2018). However, there were some supportive voices for its “perfect fusion and direct cohesion” by Louis Schneider and for its “perfect union of pantomime and music” by Louis Vuillemin (Caddy, 2012).

Yet there is no shortage of sexually explicit content and so-called adult themes on global performance scenes even in the contemporary era. Recently, *Eternal Damnation To Sancho And Sanchez* by Javier de Frutos in 2009, shows the character of a pope on stage acting in obscene behaviors that conflict with the sacred image of the pope in daily life, including the shocking character of a hunchbacked pope sexually abusing boys and pregnant nuns. After its premiere, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) canceled the performance due to its violent sex and immoral value delivered (Thomas, 2009). Dance critic Judith Mackrell defends “—its rituals climax in some of the most graphic scenes of sex and violence seen on the dance stage,” and it is also praised for its funny, tight, and well-structured choreography (Mackrell, 2009). Nor has moralistic judgment been restricted to sex and sexuality. *The Rite of spring* by Vaslav Nijinsky in 1913, its primitivism and bestial nature of the dance conflicted with the graceful ballet movement at that time in which dancers, in costumes performed odd, peculiar, and violent movements, forgoing elegance and fluidity in favor of convulsive jerks echoed the unusual story of pagan sacrifice in the production. The aesthetic value and moral value of these dance work is in tension. These arguments are not a new debate within the field of philosophical aesthetics. However, in terms of educators, the consideration of these dance works from educational implications is necessary as it can further influence how students create and engage with these dance works critically, compassionately, and creatively. As an educator, it is also important to identify how to teach students when encountering controversial dance works or making a statement in their own works.

3. Aestheticism and Moderate Autonomism

3.1 The Argument of Aestheticism and Moderate Autonomism

“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written”—remarked Oscar Wilde, a typical example of a radical autonomist. The common argument for autonomism is—moral values are irrelevant to the value of art qua-art and there is no ethical assessment in artworks as there is no ethical value in them, therefore, does not influence an artwork's aesthetic value judgment. Richard Posner—a supporter of radical autonomism/aestheticism, states since moral content in a work of literature is only “raw material” and can be obsolete due to its limitedness in time, the moral value of rightness or wrongness should not be considered when judging the value of art instead focusing on its aesthetic value which Posner calls emotional powers: the work's formal properties providing unique pleasure (Posner, 1997). Monroe Beardsley details this argument by stating literature contains ideas, but he denies—“getting the ideas into the work constitutes an act of assertion,” which is because the writer does not assert anything and conveys no information, and literary work then is neither a ‘message’ nor a ‘communication’ in the conventional sense (Beardsley, 1958). Autonomists intent to protect artwork from censorship and the influence of morality, politics or society. It gives artists the power to play with various human experiences, in its design without requiring personal loyalty and behavioral commitment.

Even though autonomists are likely correct in their assertion—the aesthetic value of art, such as: properties, line, beauty, etc., can transcend time and culture, they in fact, do consider inadequately in the difference in moral outlook to individual and different genres of dance. Firstly, although Beardsley is likely correct in stating that artwork contains ideas but conveys no messages or assertions; the ideas, can mobilize viewers' emotions, physical responses, and can even be blasphemy against their beliefs. For instance, individuals who watch *Eternal Damnation Sancho and Sanchez*, which violates their religions, are revolted as it is likely hard to withdraw their religious beliefs into isolation. This moral perspective is unlikely to change over time, and it is difficult to expect

individuals to admire it while viewing a performance that contradicts their religion.

Moreover, the absoluteness of aesthetic assessment held by autonomists is not an appropriate criterion for certain danceworks such as narrative danceworks, are intended to provide moral insights or pleasure of experiencing morality rather than aesthetic experiences. Noël Carroll argues—the presuppositions and incomplete are the essences of narrative art, thereby prescribing participants to fill in and supply content artists left out, while the success of a narrative work is mobilising the moral emotions that are ineliminable (Carroll, 1996). Contemplating these remarks, moderate autonomists might agree some genres of artworks can be morally evaluated in regards to ethical address, but it has no bearing on their aesthetic value (Anderson & Dean, 1998). However, their definition of aesthetic value is limited, as numerous artists prescribe specific emotional responses from their audiences. It will be devoid of artistic value if audiences do not respond as intended to the artwork, because the intended response is integral to the artistic or aesthetic design of the work (Carroll, 2000). For instance, one cannot understand the fauna making love with the nymph's scarf scene in *Afternoon of a Faun* unless one feels that is the poetic expression of affection to the nymph. It is a failure in its artistic design of the work if audiences do not admire and enjoy these kinds of poetic expressions.

3.2 The Educational Significance of Aestheticism and Moderate Autonomism

In relation, the core objective of choreographic teaching is whether students should be taught to focus on the art itself or its influence on audiences and societies. It is common for students to ask these types of questions: Do choreographers need to consider audiences? Can choreographers openly express their views? Does choreography convey a good perspective or present a creatively choreographic method? These questions are relevant to focus on the aesthetic qualities of a work of art or the ethical features. Given teaching and learning that are visible to all, students form their understanding of choreographing by learning what the instructor thinks. If a teacher holds the perspective—a dance-work's aesthetic value is independent of its ethical value, students can be freely engaging with art creation and be protected from restrictions of moral and political judgements when being creative. In addition, autonomists claim art has no educational function and art cannot not make people better people (Posner, 1997). This implies dance educators in classes should place greater emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of a work of art than the qualities of messages in dance-works. Clive Bell claims it is pointless to evaluate an artwork in terms of morality as qualities of moral value is beyond the artistic qualities (Bell, 2005). If art is not about educating viewers, educators may encourage students to be freely immersed in aesthetically creating based on pure movement, choreographic pattern, visual effects but may discourage concerning the contents received by audiences and society.

Despite the enhancement of aesthetic ability if students are taught more about aesthetics, it appears risky if educators instruct students to focus solely on the aesthetic and formal characteristics of a dance-work. Students may be unaware of the repercussions of making an intention and statement in a dancework that is harmful, blasphemous, or even against people's beliefs, cultures, or politics. These artworks with moral or immoral significance, such as Amy Mullin says, are important due to their imaginative exploration of moral concepts, values, and emotions (Mullin, 2002). Still taking *Eternal Damnation Sancho and Sanchez* as an example, if selected for inclusion in the arts curriculum for the purposes of analysing its aesthetic, if it is praised or endorsed, this will send a signal to students—they are still free to convey and perpetuate certain ideas and values despite immorality, or they will blaspheme other's beliefs, even if it may cause some people to believe the rightness from the scene of the pope sexually abusing. Although as William Summer states the concept of rightness and wrongness are bound up with the people of a culture or a society (William, 2007), it seems audiences' or viewers' attitudes toward people or affairs, may still be influenced by moral perspectives in danceworks. The one-sided aesthetic value lacks reconcilability between ethical and aesthetic evaluations and judgement—either in dance educational implication or the value of an artwork.

4. Ethicism

4.1 The Argument of Ethicism

In contrast, it appears impossible for moralists and ethicists to recognise *Eternal Damnation Sancho and Sanchez* or *Afternoon of a Faun* as an artwork. Berys Gaut argues if a work exhibits ethically objectionable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically flawed; and if it exhibits ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically admirable (Gaut, 1998). The art in this context is not merely the appreciation of aesthetic, but the intertwining of aesthetic and ethics, the achievement of complex ethical significance and imagination, and the expansion of moral comprehension. Such as Kieran argues the primary purpose of art is to promote a morally imaginative understanding in the world and to foster the acquisition of additional moral knowledge (Kieran, 2006 & Kieran, 1996). Nonetheless, what is the standard for moral failings? Gaut elaborates on this by stating—"the attitudes of works are manifested in the responses they prescribe to their audiences...If these responses are unmerited, because unethical...So the fact that we have a reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an aesthetic failure of the work, that is to say, is an aesthetic defect" (Gaut, 1998). Given the relationship between aesthetic and ethics, the

required response relates to the assessment of aesthetic value. If the prescribed response is unnecessary and unwarranted, they are failures of the art as art, such as romantic dramas are not moving or horror films that do not terrify. Therefore, moral flaws in a work, especially the prescription of immoral cognitive-affective responses, constitute aesthetic flaws. Gaut may judge the artistic failure in *Afternoon of a Faun* is that audiences are instructed to find the story erotically and romantically appealing, to admire the movement of sex fantasies, and to view a scene of people engaging in sexual activity with a scarf. These responses are unjustified and immoral.

However, Gaut's position is likely unpersuasive. The argument against ethical criticism of art, which Carroll (Carroll, 2000 & Carroll, 1996) refers to as the "common denominator argument," rests on an undeniable fact—a great deal of art is morally irrelevant. In fact, many danceworks that explore pure movements are morally irrelevant and complete absence ethical perspectives, which have nothing to do with ethical worth. If abstract art is evaluated morally, it is deemed "conceptually confused" (Carroll, 1996). It should be assessed in terms of criteria other than ethical criteria. For instance, *Suite by Chance* by Merce Cunningham, 1953, values exploration of the sequence, durations, and directions of pure movement in the space, as well as the revolutionary choreographic method of using a coin toss. As not all dancework is related to ethical issues, the standard artistic value must be determined by criteria other than ethical value. The next argument against ethical value as the value of artwork qua-artwork is that artworks prescribe emotional responses especially the prescription of all immoral or unmerited cognitive-affective responses counted as aesthetic defects. Carroll argues moral flaws are sometimes aesthetic flaws and "artworks can be immensely subtle in terms of their moral commitments" (Carroll, 2000). The possibility of unearthing moral flaws is so incidental and even unnoticeable that morally sensitive audiences are sometimes able to avoid or fail to be deterred by moral flaws in an artwork.

4.2 The Educational Significance of Ethicism

On the other hand, art has an educational function and can instruct audiences on what is morally correct, but only when a work succeeds in such engagement and clarification (Gaut, 1998). In this context, the value of art as art should be determined by its moral value, as the primary functions of the arts are moral education, human understanding, and the cultivation of moral insights. A work's cognitive content is relevant to its artistic value if it employs artistic means to convey and induce comprehension or insight (Kieran, 2006). Consider, for example, choreographer Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* 1960, a story of the perseverance of African Americans from slavery to freedom and performance of spreading African American culture. Although this work may expand the influence of African American culture and focus on African American history, its artistic value extends far beyond. The performance's portrayal evokes a profoundly imaginative understanding of the performers' historical journey and range of emotions: from sorrow and yearning to joy and triumph, which tempts the audience to perceive, imagine, and carry home the historical, emotional, and religious understanding of their lives. The work presents what Ailey considers to be an appropriate understanding of this history and these people, and will likely dictate how audiences imagine, react, and comprehend the conveyed attitudes.

Such as that Ernest Ziegfeld has listed that one of the objectives of the art education curriculum—is to deepen one's appreciation for historical arts while increasing understanding of earlier civilizations and their contributions to contemporary culture (Ziegfeld, 1953). It implies educators should influence students in appreciation of the arts. In choreographic classes, the training of students' eyes to perceive the relationship between choreographer and dancework and the subtle relationship in danceworks and society. Gaut asserts art can instruct us on right and wrong, reveal worldview, new ideas, and discriminatory abilities, reorganize our thoughts, emotions, and motivations to correspond with it as well (1998). As an educator—she/he may need to develop students with the ability to appreciate and think aesthetically, morally, and imaginatively, the ability to distinguish like or dislike, right or wrong, the ability to respond emotionally to the artworks, and the ability of aesthetic sensitivity. Moreover, Mullin (2002) writes—artworks have moral significance in social life—can teach us not to harm members of our society and community, thereby demonstrating the significance of artwork in our world. If a dance educator recognises the moral value of a dancework transcends its aesthetic value, they may encourage students to consider how to morally prescribe a response from audiences and to pay attention to the impact of the choreographer intentions, claims, or moral perspectives on the audiences.

Regarding dance education, ethicism's absoluteness of moral assessment may not be acceptable. It does not provide a safe space for liberal students, art in society, or the free creative expression of artists. Students and artists are prohibited from expressing and appreciating critical views on morality, society, or culture because these views are censored from such moral and political judgments. It also places educators in a difficult position. Educators cannot include controversial artwork in the arts curriculum, as it will provoke negative reactions and have far-reaching personal and social repercussions. Nonetheless, it is not to say that ethicism's argument is false, but it cannot provide a relatively open space for students and educators in creative and educational environments. As with autonomism, it fails to reconcile ethical and aesthetic evaluations and judgment within the educational implications of dance or the worth of a work of art.

5. Moderate Autonomism and Moderate Moralism

Given the difficulty of radical and moderate autonomism, and ethicisism in terms of the value of artwork and dance educational implication, Carroll adopts a position called moderate moralism that aesthetic and ethics are the value interaction. Carroll argues moral flaws are not always correlated with artistic flaws, given that some works of art, but not all, can be morally evaluated so long as they involve our moral understanding such as narrative art (Carroll, 1996). Since the reconciliation of aesthetics and ethics is educationally crucial for dance educators in choreography-classes when considering how to teach students and how to engage students in distinguishing or creating danceworks, the position of the value interaction of aesthetics and ethics is appropriate position for dance education.

First, the essence of some artworks is to make dialogues with audiences because of its incomplete structures that requires audiences to fill in the gap or mobilise their emotional responses (Carroll, 1996 & Carroll, 1998). The reason this matters in a dance educational sense is because educators should aim to ensure students should be carefully responsible to deal with the relationship between dancework and audiences. Such as that “Audiences are a crucial element to any art form, particularly the performing arts field” (Assaf, 2013). If a dancework provides unstated presuppositions that audiences fill in or respond to by using their own belief, cognition, and knowledge; choreographers should ensure audiences to elicit the right moral response. As Carroll says—“many artworks depend for their effect upon the artist’s understanding the moral psychology of the audience”. For instance, a dancework laugh at or degrade a particular race or culture but the creator’s intent to elicit audience’s appreciative agreement. But the moral sensitive audiences are not willing to absorb this evil notion morally and aesthetically, then this dancework failure in its advocacy of evil ideas causes moral and aesthetic defects.

In addition, some such danceworks aim to arouse the audience’s moral emotions and elicit their emotional response, thereby provoking the audience’s moral evaluation and acknowledgement of the dancework (Carroll, 1996 & Carroll, 1998). It is also crucial in the choreographic educational sense because it relates to how educators teach students to deal with the medium of dance; how to educate students to have ability to make appropriate use of the medium that an audience can perceive. As the body is the medium of dance, the audience can be emotionally mobilised and cognitively stimulated, which is called kinesthetic empathy (consisting of one’s knowledge of the movement they observe and how that makes them feel). The feelings audiences have while watching a performance are mobilised by multiple sensory, cognitive, and emotional brain processes (Hagendoorn, 2004). Thus, if the body is a medium for communicating emotions to viewers and eliciting the viewer’s own emotions, the expression of all these various emotions by the body may need to be morally assessed. That is because dance’s physicality is related to emotions such as pleasure, pain, anger, and guilt, in which a viewer’s perception of emotion in dance is affected by personal and cultural factors (Carter and Hanna, 1985). These mobilised emotions like anger and pleasure, contain ineradicable moral components. Therefore, if a dancework evokes an incorrect moral evaluation from the audience, it will fail to evoke an emotional response.

Moreover, the artwork contains knowledge or ethical claims either truth or falsity, aptness, or inaptness that people can attain, and this knowledge can cultivate their ability for improvement and expansion of moral understanding (Carroll, 2000). Based on this insight, audiences can achieve moral insights and can be influenced from the artwork that can deepen and expand audience’s imagination of what it was like if they hold such moral outlook in real life or fictional life. This matter is also important pedagogically. Students should realise the work they create is going to form sound or unsound understanding of how one should act or make judgement about others or affairs. Wayne Booth writes—“... the fact remains that insofar as the fiction has worked for us, we have lived with its values for the duration; we have been that kind of person for at least as long as we remained in the presence of the work” (Booth, 1988). The knowledge learnt from dance performances is through several senses and emotions, will be retained longer (Carter and Hanna, 1985).

Although some skeptics may say art cannot provide the moral education or moral insight if truth or knowledge are already known to audiences, it is narrow because moral education involves practices of how to appropriately apply these precepts to concrete situations and how to manipulate abstract percepts (Carroll, 2000 & Carroll, 1996). Indeed, although the audience may already know the knowledge before watching the performance, they can practice their moral understanding or add new knowledge. It is because the dancework provides imagination that audience can have immersive-experience practice of precepts or moral outlooks in which audiences can deepen the moral understanding through perceiving the performance. Also, if a performance subverts moral outlooks we have in common, it can provide the experience of imaging how will be like to live under such precepts. Therefore, when choreographers make a statement in work containing moral or political messages, they should critically, compassionately, and morally deliver such messages. Thus, it is a part of teaching them to critically understand and appreciate the dancework.

Not all moral flaws in an artwork are aesthetic flaws (Carroll, 2000). Moral commitments in works of art can be so subtle that morally sensitive audiences are unable to discern them, but they can be evaluated once they are

uncovered (Carroll, 2000). The relativity of its value judgments makes room for abstract danceworks that are morally too obscure, abstract, or inaccessible. Those formalistic danceworks that locate the significance of dance in the technical execution of the movements rather than in the intended emotional expression of the dancer—who can still elicit emotional responses, whether the artist-creator or performer intended to do so (JAEGER, 2009). Occasionally, moral commitments in such danceworks are too ambiguous. But these danceworks might still prescribe the audiences' response to appreciate meaningfulness of movement or structure of choreography, can be evaluated if they are unearthed.

6. Conclusion

This article has provided a brief description and critique of ethicism and autonomism. Radical autonomism asserts—the overall value of an artwork is determined solely by its aesthetic value, whereas moderate autonomists provide a more moderate argument in which they may concede—artwork has moral significance, but it still cannot affect its aesthetic value. Ethicists assert moral value transcends aesthetic value and influences the overall value of an artwork. These three camps with views for art as art have been examined philosophically. The analysis of controversial dance cases, dance educational lenses, and the positive and negative implications for dance students of the aesthetic and ethical standards of works of art from these three camps have been provided.

Regarding dance education, educators must consider the compatibility of aesthetics and ethics. The perspective of interaction of aesthetic and ethical value held by moderate moralism is the aesthetic stance choreographic educators should adopt when teaching students how to choreograph and engage with dancework. First, teachers should ensure their students can address the relationship between the danceworks and the audiences, as the essence of certain artworks is to spark a dialogue with the audiences. The second point is—teachers must ensure students can deal morally with dance's medium: the body conveys emotional feelings to the audience. As these emotions contain irremovable moral components, the emotions evoked by the body or movement may lead to moral evaluations. Hence, due to educational value of danceworks, teachers should ensure students comprehend and take accountability for what they say in danceworks. The relativity of value judgments from moderate moralism makes room for these abstract danceworks which is appropriate for formalistic danceworks containing subtle moral commitment.

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