



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

RESPONSIBLE KNOWING IN DANCE PARTNERING

ILYA VIDRIN NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Introduction

In dancing together, how partners encounter each other plays a role in whether they will be able to sustain their interaction.¹ A tentative approach may be seen as uncommitted, while a domineering one can signal danger. Yet what counts as tentative to one person may be careful to another; and what is domineering to some may be seen as confident to others. Encounters often entail quick, intuitive judgments about skill and trustworthiness. Is this person a suitable partner? Will they cause harm, intentionally or unintentionally? Do they have requisite skills to make the dance pleasant, meaningful, and/or worthwhile? Answering these questions will depend on the values of each partner—if one is seeking pleasure while the other seeks spiritual connection, the underlying desires and motivating factors may be at odds. The quality of movement, while potentially open to interpretation, significantly influences the quality of interaction. These are all psychological features of physical interaction.

This paper considers the concept of partnering as a particular quality of interaction. Elsewhere, I have argued that the act of partnering requires certain conditions; namely, the ongoing negotiation of proximity, orientation, and point(s) of contact—including sound, touch, visual cues, and/or choreographic patterns (Vidrin 2020). My interest in generic conditions of partnering moves beyond particular traditions, protocols, or structures (e.g. duet-form, couple-dance, pair-dance, coordinated or synchronized dances). Rather, I am interested in the interplay of ethical and epistemic dimensions for maintaining physical interaction (even in the ephemeral act of a single dance event that lasts only a few minutes). As such, I am interested in the relationship between

psychological orientation (especially deliberative and non-deliberative beliefs) and physical manifestation—not as a distinction between mind and body, but as an entry point to assessing the relationship between thought and action in dance. Drawing on Western concert dance forms (contact improvisation, classical and contemporary ballet), social forms (west coast swing, lindy hop, blues, fusion) and vernacular forms of South America (salsa, bachata, tango), I have been interested in finding commonalities across forms in much the same way linguists parse out commonalities of verbal language.

How partners go about maintaining their interaction reveals features of their epistemological system, particularly with respect to factors like what they know, what they take to be relevant to the interpretation, and what they value. In this way, the value system (what partners want) and the epistemological system (what partners know²) intersect. Feminist epistemologist Kristie Dotson suggests that an epistemological system “is a holistic concept that refers to all the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession [which] includes operative, instituted social imaginaries, habits of cognition, attitudes towards knowers and/or any relevant sensibilities that encourage or hinder the production of knowledge” (Dotson 2014, 121). Rather than argue for the rightness of one system over another, Dotson’s work illuminates how individuals with differing systems can interact responsibly and fairly. In considering ethical dimensions of contemporary dance forms, I seek to understand how epistemological systems differ within and across traditions of practice, and how the epistemic and the aesthetic intersect to prioritize certain actions.

This essay elucidates normative issues concerning the act of dancing together. Rather than state what the normative issues are, I consider what it means for partnering to be normatively constrained. I will defend a contextualist approach to dancing together, drawing on insights from my own practice as a practitioner in contemporary concert dance, contact improvisation, and social partner forms in order to provide a normative account that considers the epistemic conditions of ethical partnering. Rather than present a how-to guide for dancers, my interest here is illuminating how ethical principles are embodied and enacted in and through movement. I will begin by considering ethically saturated matters of fact in the context of dancing together. I will zoom out to consider how partnering is socially and temporally extended. The uncontroversial claim is that our views on dancing (as dancers and as outside observers) do not emerge in a vacuum but are the product of shared background assumptions, which form and inform broader social imaginaries. Drawing on Dotson’s claim about instituted social imaginaries, I consider the embodied archive of gestures and habits that are collectively shared, implicitly or explicitly, by people who dance together. What are the social imaginaries relevant to dancing together *ethically*? How do dominant social imaginaries express themselves through dancing activities? There may be multiple social imaginaries vying for the same space, and it is certainly possible to draw on and from multiple imaginaries at the same time. Yet how can people respectfully and ethically choose and discern between competing social imaginaries? I will consider the relationship between an ethics of knowing, which focuses on the fairness of interactions among individuals, and a politics of knowing, which considers individuals as constituents of social collectives. The shift from ethics to politics provokes a reframing of individual agency as inseparable from collective agency.

Given the plurality of practices and traditions, dance already poses a sort of problem for what counts as credibility and intellectual authority. How people view dance matters—as a form of entertainment, as a religious and/or spiritual practice, as a reflective, somatic practice; the possibilities go on. While certain approaches and perspectives may overlap, there may also be implicit competing values that contribute to ideas of rightness and wrongness. Each form of dance has its own set of normative commitments—these are what distinguish one practice from another. Indeed, each form of dance partnering involves visual and kinesthetic markers that guide reasoning about what people see (as observers) and feel (as participants). By normative commitments, I mean the contingent rules and expectations about how to move within the form, which may include the kinds of movements, the quality of movements, and the broader etiquette about bodily and relational comportment. For example, if I see three dancers moving in and out of the floor, in constant contact, shifting on and off their postural axes, I might infer the form is contact improvisation. If I see two dancers moving upright, facing each other, maintaining a fixed embrace whilst shifting in intricate foot patterns and leaning into each other, I might infer the form is tango. If I see several dancers moving in synchronized formation to percussive, Carnatic music, I may infer the form is Bharatanatyam. Traditions have their own norms and structures, which of course may be disrupted or broken (e.g., the emergence of Contango or ContacTango, blending contact improvisation with Tango Argentino).

Despite certain aesthetic differences, I believe there is something common across forms when it comes to shared physical action. I believe there are common ethical constraints that come from, among other things, the fact that dancing together is a joint enterprise. Some of the constraints likely follow a basic “do not harm” principle, but there must be some agreement between partners about what they are trying to do, which includes what is permissible and what is forbidden. This is so regardless of dance form, though some dance traditions will certainly have more freedom baked into the expectations, and partners themselves may decide to alter constraints in ways that fit their own practice. The actual agreements may differ, but the generic agreements are likely quite similar. The kinds of questions an individual asks through movement (and indeed, whether they ask questions at all) are products of their frame of reference. As frames of reference do not emerge from a vacuum, I consider the broader social imaginaries around partnering.

At a higher level of abstraction, principles are common, but the specifics are different across dance forms. David Kaminsky, an ethnomusicologist and dance scholar, takes up this question of generic principles in his work on social partner dance, though notably he focuses exclusively on those dances that have been “formalized, standardized, and cosmopolitanized” (Kaminsky 2020, 5). Even broader, there is a rich philosophical discourse around the study of togetherness. Key concepts include John Searle’s *we-intentionality* (1983, 1990), Michael Bratman’s *collective intentionality* (2013), and Margaret Gilbert *joint commitment* (2013), all of which strive to illuminate what makes action intentionally shared. Phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone takes up this question as well in her paper “Moving in Concert” where she suggests “to move in concert with others is, as indicated, to move in harmony with them. To be able to do so is to think in movement, not just one’s own movement but one’s own movement in conjunction with the movement of others” (Sheets-Johnstone 2017, 2). My interest here is in considering the epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic

obligations at this higher level of abstraction. My argument rests on the idea that, across forms, the intersection of aesthetic and epistemic values creates a blend of freedom and constraint that requires serious attunement. Without the requisite attunement, partners may be unduly constraining aesthetic options, fueling false presuppositions, inadvertently disrespecting each other, even causing physical and/or psychological harm.

Rather than suggest that there are specific epistemic, aesthetic, or ethical norms within the act of dancing together, I will consider the differing textures and status of norms. Importantly, my concept of a norm is a descriptive social behavior that is typical or expected of a culture. Though I will not argue for specific types of norms, I think that there are certain attitudes associated with particular branches of thought. For example, a few standard epistemic orientations are credibility, authority, and reliability. When considering conditions of understanding in partnering, one may reflect on how reliable a partner is in terms of their shared action (as well as in terms of personal qualities such as whether they show up on time and/or fulfill promises they have made). I feel strongly that the same concepts may be analyzed through an ethical lens: the reliability of a partner will affect the quality of our relationship and determine the potentiality for harm to occur in that relationship.

In addition to norms that typify social behavior, there are also normative considerations—including conditions and standards of excellence for dancing together (e.g. moving in accordance with each other, listening, rather than just doing whatever movements one wants whenever one wants). These may be different across form, and indeed partners may dispel common standards of excellence in favor of emergent processes (e.g., a curiosity to see what happens if they do not coordinate their actions), but I will take these to be uncommon instances of partnering. The normative considerations can be prescriptive (what partners *ought* to do) and/or evaluative (what are partners doing *well* or *poorly*).

By focusing on the role of reasoning and understanding, I believe we stand to gain a clearer picture of how expectations about interactions inform the dynamics between partners. This, in turn, affords a picture of what partners can actually achieve in and through their connection. I am particularly interested in considering what features of interaction are necessary for maximizing the affordances of the partnership. I say this not as a utilitarian interested in maximizing good *simpliciter*, but as a social epistemologist thinking about the *contingent* goods that are present in relation (e.g., care³). The epistemic picture assumes that there are things that are knowable in dancing together, while the ethical picture assumes that partners are responsible for the things they ought to know.

Matters of Fact

In order to frame the epistemic dimensions of dancing together, partners can consider what they need to know to maintain their interaction. There are the matters of fact about dispositions, such as the ability and capacity of each partner, transient (in-the-moment) facts like physical position and weight distribution (e.g., balancing on one leg, forward-weighted on the ball of the foot, versus

standing on two legs, back-weighted on the heels), as well as broader aesthetic matters of fact, such as the plausible range of stylistic choices that each partner can make (e.g., remaining upright or going off-axis, performing lifts or remaining on the ground, changing level through internal or external rotation of the limbs, etc.). Navigating among physical possibilities, implicitly or explicitly, involves prioritizing and privileging certain information. This is a matter of normative and ethical concern.

As facts, physical movements can be framed in propositional form such that they are true or false. There are also beliefs about these facts, which can also be true or false. For example, one partner may believe the other's weight is balanced between two legs, but the other is actually placing their weight on only their right foot. This would be a false belief about a physical matter of fact concerning balance. We can consider another example in which a dancer is executing a series of actions that form a kind of dance figure, for example, a *boleo*, a *tendue*, or a rock step. There are different schools of thought about what makes a figure right or wrong according to the rules and/or norms of a practice, such that one may have a false belief in terms of nomenclature (e.g., calling something by the wrong name) or trajectory (e.g., missing a key component in the sequence of actions that make the figure what it is). Given that dancing together involves continuous action, it is unlikely that these beliefs will be deliberative; in other words, it is through the shared action itself that partners form beliefs non-deliberatively.

When asked what makes a movement right or wrong, partners need to be clear about the standards by which they identify and evaluate correctness (e.g., physical facts vs. norms of a practice). The tension may then be concerned with the deontic and normative status of physical facts and norms. In other words, what (if anything) do partners owe to each other, what and how should they move together, where is the interaction taking place, and how do the collective histories reproduce or disrupt the norms of the culture(s) in which they are situated? While questions like these may provoke a desire to find contextually situated answers, I find value in considering the potential for overarching associated systems of thought and network of commitments that frame embodied evaluation in a generic sort of way.

Some matters of fact are tradition-dependent; emergent as products of epistemological standpoints which involve contingent evaluations. Given their dependence on context and tradition, these matters of fact are expressed as norms. Precision is one such term: what qualifies as *precise* in one form may not be valued or even relevant in another. For example, classical ballet has certain ideas around precision and control in that there are stringent ideas about bodily shapes and positions. When lifting a partner overhead in a *presage*, the lifter should extend their arms fully, with an erect and upright spine such that the shoulders are down, and the ribcage should be neither splayed in the front nor pinched in the back. The lifted partner should be in a toned position, with a similarly erect and upright posture, with arms and legs shaped in a recognizable position such as fourth arabesque, or *attitude croisée* (Serebrennikov 2000: 14–15). All of these tradition-dependent norms qualify the practice of classical balletic partnering. Contact improvisation, however, is no less stringent in the aesthetic concerns. Where ballet prioritizes toned effort and discrete shapes, contact improvisation prioritizes effortless and continuous

movement without an emphasis on line or shape (Novack 1990; Pallant 2006). Thus, an overhead lift should not maintain a fixed position, but should be in constant movement following the rolling point of contact. The bodies should be toned only insofar as they can maintain receptivity, with minimal effort to prioritize a conservation of momentum and inertia. All of these tradition-dependent matters of fact similarly qualify the practice of contact improvisation.

Some matters of fact are tradition-independent, like predicting the future location of a body. This includes physical markers, such as (at least) the direction of movement, distribution of weight, location of one's center of mass, strength and coordination of particular body parts, muscular tone and tension. These facts are tradition independent because they are structured by the immutable laws of physics. Tradition-independent matters of fact may be true or false, such that partners can be wrong about where they think their center of mass is or that of their partner(s). How partners attend to the information matters for being able to achieve certain qualities of interaction. I recognize, of course, that partners may have no particular goals in mind when dancing together. While a lack of goals is not inherently problematic, it may significantly limit what is possible because partners may not be attending to each other's movement in a way that is conducive to mutual attunement. This may lead to a number of harms, ranging from physical to psychological injury.

As someone who has practiced contact improvisation, contemporary dance, social partnering, and classical ballet, I recognize that the normative status of the 'should' claims mentioned above likely originate within the aesthetic domain. Nevertheless, they have epistemic and ethical textures. I see value in the different ideas of precision—as controlling one's body through effortful coordination of action, as well as the (near) effortless surrendering to the continuous ebb and flow of momentum, inertia, and gravity. I have found it interesting to move fluidly between communities of practice, where partners' attunement to each other is valued through different courses of action and attention. What I have found is that partners must orient themselves toward the relevant matters of fact and norms in order to execute the joint action *together*. This entails awareness of and focused attention to each other, as well as to the circumstances in which they are dancing. But awareness of the relevant matters is not enough to execute certain actions successfully (e.g., overhead lift, intricate footwork with off-axis balances). A high degree of sensitivity toward each other and the affordances of the partnership is required in order to understand what is and is not possible. Thus, sensitive partners recognize how certain beliefs play a role in the interaction.

Dancers form beliefs about what is appropriate and desirable, whether they are aware of it or not. Partners can adopt future-oriented beliefs, forming expectations about how things ought to go (normative) or how things will go (predictive), or past-oriented beliefs about how things should have gone (normative) or how they went (historical). However, certain matters of fact in dancing together only become available in the doing of the action. Partners can also adopt present-oriented beliefs through attunement to what is actually occurring rather than what they project onto the interaction. This is where things become interesting. Partners may believe that they are expressing the requisite amount of attention, perhaps even that they are attending well with sensitivity and care, but their beliefs may be incorrect. Thinking critically about the nature and role of evaluation enables a deeper consideration of what reckoning (if any) can be achieved through intersubjective

dance practices. Establishing a shared vocabulary and parsing out different textures of facts, norms, beliefs, and standards provides the avenue for this kind of deeper consideration.

An important factor to consider in negotiating matters of fact is that of unexpected circumstances. When something unexpected happens, should partners restructure everything? Can partners fit it into existing networks or should they reject it? How can partners effectively incorporate new things into their existing knowledge? There is an emergent question of maintaining the integrity of one's epistemological system. Framing a social imaginary as the landscape of one's epistemological system, partners may consider whether they are willing to alter their social imaginary when something comes along that doesn't quite fit. It is impossible to know exactly how an interaction will unfold in advance, just as it is impossible to know the (near) infinitude of possibilities. But this impossibility should not lead us to skepticism. Just because one cannot know how an interaction will unfold in advance of the action does not mean there aren't clues that portend situated possibilities.

Means of Knowing

The norms of dancing together that are determined and enacted by communities of practice establish the constraints on the qualities and kinds of interaction that will occur in practice. But just because certain actions are typically exemplified (or even expected) does not mean that everyone will act according to the norms. Receptivity will play a role in at least two ways—in the physical sense, in which certain actions are detectable by one's partner(s), and in the ethical sense, in which partners are willing to accommodate and negotiate change. The ethical and the physical overlap here, creating certain expectations and norms that inform practice.

In her writing on expectations and epistemic norms, epistemologist Catherine Elgin has suggested that,

There are generic demands that creditable communities of inquiry must meet. Not only must the commitments be internally coherent and consistent, they must cohere with and be consistent with other things we have reason to believe. If the community inquires into empirical matters, its claims need to be backed by evidence. If it makes predictions, the predictions must (often enough) be borne out. These are entirely familiar requirements. Communities of inquiry make fine-grained commitments that, given their understanding of their topic and the effective ways of investigating it, are locally appropriate realizations of more generic coarse-grained commitments. The failure of their fine-grained commitments to satisfy (or at least approximate) coarse-grained requirements, unless backed by strong reasons to think that the fine-grained commitments need not satisfy them, is a reason to refuse to reflectively endorse their findings. (Elgin 2013, 148)

In dancing together, as in other shared enterprises, I believe partners form what can be called a *modest community of inquiry*. In order to maintain their joint enterprise through movement, partners must attend to possibilities of action in real-time as circumstances change and develop. For example, as a shared dance unfolds, physiological changes will affect the affordances of the

relationship. Sweaty palms may make counterbalance movements more precarious and fatigue or excitement may alter attentional resources (for better or worse).

Fine-grained commitments are those that are tradition-dependent and specific to a given form. While dancing a tango invites improvisation, it is notably more physically limited than the kind experienced in contact improvisation. The coarse-grained commitment in both forms will be something like “respond to your partner in the moment,” while the fine-grained commitments will play out differently. Consider the fact that the tango is typically danced upright, with partners facing each other in a frame position. Given these constraints, it would be considered odd if a partner suddenly dropped to their knees during the dance. But this kind of spontaneous level change would be appropriate and even welcome in a contact improvisation setting. But Elgin’s claim above goes even deeper: when fine-grained commitments fail to satisfy coarse-grained commitments, the epistemic demands reveal ethical textures.

The conceptual framework of epistemology enables a closer examination of checking-in as a practice of knowledge production. Reflecting on authority and credibility, much of the epistemic literature draws on the significance of trust in testimony. In order to engage in fruitful dialogue, there is a default mode of trust that each interlocutor must adopt to be fully receptive and responsive. But in the context of dancing together, default modes of trust may assign too much trust or misguide partners from attending to the right features. Because partnering often entails constant, continuous, and contiguous movement, we cannot know, nor can we be certain of, the ethically saturated relevant matters of fact (weight distribution, direction of movement, threshold of resistance, etc.) without checking.

Given that in dancing together partners form a modest community of inquiry, it is important to consider the means of knowing by which partners understand matters of fact in order to maintain their interaction. That things are always changing within interaction indicates that checking and testing the connection is more than simply a good thing to do; checking constitutes a requirement in order to achieve the kind of togetherness that is pertinent to the act of partnering. One distinction I find important is a difference between constant checking that is skeptical and constant checking that is curious. While both involve a certain level of calibrating to check and test the connection, I separate these two ways of checking as *tracking* and *monitoring*.

Both tracking and monitoring are compartments of assessment. The difference for me is about the orientation toward the other(s). Monitoring involves projecting a single epistemological system (one’s own) and evaluating the interaction through the lens of that system. The associated attitude is one of caution and distance. At first glance, this may not be so problematic. After all, it is important to note that monitoring need not necessarily be born of pernicious intent. It may simply be the product of moving from a (learned) stringent rubric, bringing to bear a set of fixed expectations. In and through their movement, partners may internally be asking something like “are you moving the way you *ought* to move?” Yet the attitude of caution and distance will limit the available qualities of movement, such that opportunities to fully attune to one another are missed. Monitoring can thus be viewed as a kind of surveillance. Partners may monitor each other’s actions

because they do not trust each other, or because one believes they cannot rely on the other(s). In practice, monitoring may be a pernicious sort of act that prevents partners from fully surrendering in a way that enables deeper relation. This is so only if the other partner is in fact trustworthy. If they are not, then surrendering is dangerous. Trust is unreasonable unless the partner is trustworthy, but sometimes we do not have enough information about whether others are trustworthy.

Tracking, on the other hand, is a continuous attunement that orients partners toward possibility. In tracking, partners acknowledge (in practice) that what one is doing will change the other's rubric of evaluating what they are doing. There is a kind of humility that one's rubric is incomplete without the other. This is essentially an argument for interdependence. I believe that what makes partnering unique is not that people must rely on each other, but that they choose to do something together which they could not do on their own. To be available for tracking requires a certain willing predisposition. We have to habituate to be ready, to accommodate both uncertainty and change. In contrast to monitoring, tracking can be understood as a kind of plurality, an openness to take on rubrics that are unfamiliar or previously unknown. To listen for another's rubric involves discerning the norms at play in their behavior as possibly interchangeable with one's own (or at least equally deserving). Straddling multiple spaces, and topographies and epistemic resources at once is also a kind of virtue—it is a form of care.

While both forms of calibration are compartments of assessment, they involve different forms of sensing relation. I view monitoring as actively attending to errors (and possibly even anticipating the worst possible scenarios), while tracking is actively attending to possibility. The case I find compelling to make is that monitoring can be done by one partner or more partners, while tracking emerges from within the partnership. One who monitors is preparing for trouble (only), while partners who track are preparing for anything. This is what I mean by maximizing the affordances of the partnership. Monitoring focuses more explicitly on individual affordances—what can *I* do? What do *I* need to do to achieve a certain action? How do *I* understand which matters of fact are relevant at this moment? The focus on individual affordances may push partners to attend in a way that is at the expense of the other(s), rather than in service of what is possible together, in relation. Looking at the politics of knowing in the modest community of inquiry established by partners surfaces the limits of viewing individuals independently. Tracking enables partners to move from a position of independence to an interdependence that opens aesthetic, epistemic, and ethical possibilities within interaction. Royona Mitra, in her recent work on “Unmaking Contact” raises an important point about the preconditions of dancing together (notably in contact improvisation), such that establishing relation (contact) may be unfeasible given the background histories of participants (Mitra 2021). This point is particularly relevant when considering how individuals approach encountering and maintaining their interaction in dancing together.

As compartments of assessment, both tracking and monitoring illuminate features of trust within physical interaction. That partners have a base level of trust seems necessary to the interaction. But default modes of trust complicate the matter of negotiating, particularly given the tendency to view trust as a kind of attitude that enables off-loading the necessity of checking. There are two

ideas that need to be refined here. One is that trust in dancing together seems to be a predicated form of trust, rather than trust *simpliciter*. The second idea regarding trust may be a semantic or conceptual one, regarding justifiable confidence. I will address each separately.

A standard paradigm in the philosophy of trust distinguishes between two- and three-place relations (Horsburgh 1960, 343; Baier 1986, 236). In a two-place relation, an agent broadly trusts another agent. This would follow a logic such as "I trust my partner." No other clauses or claims need to follow. This is juxtaposed with a three-place relation, in which an agent specifically *entrusts* another agent with some special task or belief. This would follow a logic such as "I trust my partner *to catch me if I fall*." The social imaginary associated with a three-place relation of trust is notably different from one associated with a two-place predicate, or unconditional, trust. It seems, given the way partnering involves the specific act of moving together, a three-place predicate fits best. There are certain things partners need not entrust to each other. For example, in partnering, I do not need to trust my partner broadly such that if my house caught fire, he would go save my cat from dying. The agreement partners make is such that each of their actions will support moving together for the duration of their dance. Thus, partnering likely involves a contextually constrained, three-place relation. The circumstances of dancing together will foster certain expectations, guided by the aesthetic constraints of the particular tradition.

In considering the relationship between expectations and trust, philosopher Katherine Hawley has suggested that, "as a rule, we try to ensure that our trust is mostly directed at trustworthy people" (Hawley 2019, 13). When conceived of as justifiable confidence, trust functions as a normative success term. In other words, trust is an achievement. We trust because we have reason to believe the other is trustworthy. But trust may also be conceived of as a positive expectation: given previous situations, I believe my partner will act the way they always do. Excess trust may lead partners to off-load some of their attention, such that they lose pertinent information. The social imaginary associated with positive expectation is notably different from the one associated with justifiable confidence. The embodied archive of gestures and habits will lead partners to adopt different orientations toward each other. Justifiable confidence requires that we gather evidence of just how receptive and responsive our partners are. Positive expectations, on the other hand, may lead to false presuppositions about the way an interaction will (or should) unfold (which may be based on previous or imagined circumstances).

There is a further distinction worth making between kinds of trust, namely *presumptive* and *tempered* trust (Lavers and Vidrin 2021, n.p.). In presumptive trust, the relation is taken for granted such that individuals assume things will go as expected. Less attention is devoted to certain features of the interaction. In tempered trust, there is greater attention to the relation. Individuals do not assume that things will be as expected, but rather attend to each moment of the interaction. In some cases, tempered trust may be born of suspicion, leading to monitoring. In other cases, tempered trust may be born of care, such that partners calibrate as a way of staying connected and attuned.

Presumptive trust brings us back to the idea of prediction. In some cases, this involves anticipating what will happen next and preparing for the prediction to play out. But this is a narrow conception of prediction, given that predictions need not be linear. As partners move together, affordances come in and out of play based on the choices partners make. The background assumptions and broader social imaginary of each partner will play a role in what kind of choices are available. Partners that monitor through presumptive trust may divide up the space of their interaction in a way that does not allow for alternatives. Partners that calibrate through a tempered trust may be in a better position to attend to opportunities as they arise. From a normative perspective, opportunities are aesthetically and ethically constrained by opening a range of plausible options, while excluding others. This is as true for pre-determined choreography as it is for improvisation. No matter how tightly partners constrain movement, there is space for choice. Even if partners have been dancing together for years and know each other well, they can still surprise each other, which is part of the magic of partnering. Responsible dancers have an appreciation of contextually appropriate yet unexpected ways to attune.

Every dancer has a normative idea about what a good dance is and could be like. These ideas likely change over time and are contingent on (at least) mood, context, and with whom they are partnering. Partners who continuously track demonstrate responsible agency, placing themselves in an epistemically laudable position compared to those who proceed without double-checking. This seems quite intuitive. Double-checking may be something partners do deliberately, on purpose, or something that is part of their nature. In either case, the disposition to double-check can be understood as a kind of humility, which may amount to a kind of epistemic virtue of dancing together. Even if you know, and you know that you know, even if you trust your partner, and your partner trusts you, there is always space to increase certainty and increase sensitivity to certain types of error. On the other hand, there is a threshold at which the degree of sensitivity, coupled with attentional resources, leads to a kind of hypervigilance such that interdependence melds into co-dependence—or even an excess of care (which itself could even be good-intentioned).⁴

While the qualifiers presumptive and tempered signal differences in kind, there may also be differences in quantity. Excess trust may lead to a deficit of care. One may come to think that the justifiable confidence absolves them from checking-in as things change. The underlying belief regarding trust influences the social imaginary in such a way that different facts become physically salient. Knowing which matters of fact and which norms are relevant is the responsibility of each partner. But attending to the right features presumes that those features are salient—that they actually stand out to the dancer in a way that is perceivable. This need not necessarily be a conscious awareness, but rather a kind of habit or even second nature such that partners do not have to actively think about what they are doing. It is likely not the case that every single minute movement and detail requires calibration; in fact, safely off-loading enhances freedom from thinking about those bodily movements that do not affect the partnership. For example, in lead-follow paradigms, the shape and position of hand and fingers on the non-touching side is a matter of aesthetic freedom within a range of stylistically fitting choices. That being said, different traditions will have their own associated social imaginaries regarding the range of stylistically appropriate choices—there are certain rules about the tango that may simply not apply to the

practice of contact improvisation or balletic *pas de deux*. Different traditions certainly have their own types of excellence, which naturally modify the range of choices that are salient and available to partners. But the transfer of weight, the direction of movement, the speed, pace, and rhythm of action—these will require continuous calibration.

The value system of partners plays into how movement is negotiated in practice, including how it relates to epistemic and ethical norms, as well as aesthetic conventions. Partners may ostensibly behave in ways other than what they intended because of a lack of awareness and/or competence. When individuals prioritize their own needs, they may miss opportunities to understand what is possible within an interaction. Partners may also behave in ways that are incongruous with the values they purport to have. Certain aesthetic values, such as feeling or looking good, may prioritize individual concerns in a way that overshadow ethical values, such as care and empathy. While aesthetic goals will likely take priority in dance, the overarching goal is to realize those values without compromising the ethical. Without the requisite competence, the attunement will not be achieved. Without attunement to the relevant, ethically-saturated matters of fact, partners might not be positioned to appreciate the depth of possibility within the affordances of the partnership.

When partners move together, they rely on each other to do the right movement at the right time, which sometimes requires more than the mere uptake of signals. Assuming that dancing together involves having a shared goal of cooperating, partnering requires relating in a continuous and attuned way such that partners are both receptive and responsive to feedback and affordances of their physical interaction and of their environment. In certain movements, signals need to be reciprocal such that *physical* attunement is established, which is likely the product of a habituated disposition. Philosopher Karen Jones suggests an expectation condition for trust, such that the truster expects the trusted agent will be “directly and favorably moved by the thought that someone is counting on her” (Jones 1996, 8). As a general point, this is probably false. The trusted person may be completely unaware of the trust or be indifferent to it.

I believe that partnering requires establishing a joint commitment to mutually attune and negotiate movement on account of each other, such that there is an expectation about the obligation itself. By merely going through the motions, partners fail to recognize that they are relying on the other to do more than merely execute the movements. This is as much true of choreographed partnering as it is of improvisation. Certain traditions may make the negotiation of interaction more salient by requiring an ongoing attunement, while others may leave open the possibility of perfunctory action precisely because the quality of interaction is unregulated. Going through the motions may mean missing particular signals to make the joint venture not only more pleasing, but more responsive and responsible—this is where the ethical dimensions come into a sharper focus. Partnering well is contingent on something more than merely avoiding negative consequences and going through the right motions at the right time.

Giving the visual appearance of real connection is an interesting challenge for dancing together, particularly given the kinesthetic dimensions of the medium. Verisimilitude occurs when partners give the impression of fruitful ethical partnering, but attunement is not actually happening. The

dancing interaction is merely an aesthetic veneer of togetherness. The challenge is that if things do not go wrong, partners are not likely to find themselves in a position where they have to truly negotiate. Perhaps we cannot know whether individuals are partnering (empirically, through observation), *until* they are in a situation where they have to negotiate features like direction, timing, effort, and so on. This introduces a counterfactual dimension, which may explain how time and effort alone do not guarantee ethical conduct. I know a fair number of long-term partners (dancing together for at least three years) who have refined patterns of relation that rely on a perfunctory paradigm of moving together. They are able to achieve a certain constrained level of togetherness, which breaks down whenever things do not go as planned. This is not to suggest that familiarity necessarily breeds perfunctoriness, but rather that time itself will not guarantee that negotiation will be fully operative.

Situating the concepts of verisimilitude and perfunctoriness in the practice of dancing together enables a closer examination of how people interact. That individuals can merely go through the motions or give the appearance of togetherness is important for discerning ways of relating. In this time of reckoning and reflection, I firmly believe that recognizing when people are merely going through motions to give merely the appearance of care is a vital step for the kind of critical evaluation necessary for building ethical and sustainable communities of practice.

The dancing situation offers opportunities for practice, but what is being practiced reflects a social imaginary that may be implicitly held. Adopting a default mode of trust may be dangerous in that partners miss opportunities to calibrate by off-loading attention because of a positive expectation. Withholding trust may lead to monitoring, which further erodes trust and the potential for deeper relation. In this way, dancing together can be understood as a site of intentional practice for practicing care and trust or a space of implicit reproduction of caution and surveillance.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have been reflecting on conditions of responsible knowing. My aim thus far has been to parse out some relevant concepts that support understanding the epistemic dimensions that structure ethical interaction in dancing together. How partners check-in with each other while dancing together reflects their operative social imaginaries, which in turn affects what is possible within their interaction. It may be prudent to ask what social imaginaries are relevant for dancing together. If I am familiar with you as a dancer, I likely know in what respects I can trust you. I can take certain risks that would be unreasonable with a stranger. Yet having shared background assumptions and orientations toward practice allows for strangers within the same form to interact in ways that support mutual understanding. When individuals dance with unfamiliar partners, their patterns of movement may become exposed, such that things they expect to work do not. While both monitoring and calibrating involve continuous checking, there is also the possibility of simply not checking (or checking in a very limited sort of way). Some people may believe they know all there is to know. But assuming knowledge places too many constraints on the interaction. When the overarching goal is achieving shared action *together*, it seems that

interdependence emerges as a recurrent virtue. There is a kind of responsibility realized through joint attentiveness.

Recognizing the conceptual frameworks through which partners understand and move through the world enables a richer account of practice—articulating the active ways partners negotiate matters of fact within the act of dancing together itself. There is a way to apply the conceptual apparatus to understand the ethical dimensions of dancing together in a way that draws partners closer to understanding the nuances of relationships more deeply. In establishing and maintaining interaction in unfamiliar spaces, calibrating can support moving between epistemological systems, integrally attuning, negotiating, and revising shared movement even as we operate within it. To calibrate is to consider and integrate multiple social imaginaries at once, and to habituate ways of moving fluidly between them.

That resources like gestures and habits become collectively shared encourages us to move beyond individual agency to consider the ways in which our actions reproduce broader values. Holding hands, negotiating pace, sharing weight, going off-balance—these are part of intimate social imaginaries that may be neglected in favor of caution and distance. Perhaps this is for good reason—when we do not know others well enough, why adopt a default mode of trust? Dancing together provides a space for questions like this to be posed explicitly. The shared physical space can render critical negotiation active and ongoing—to consider our social imaginaries through shared physical action and to hone virtues such as sensitivity and humility. When treated as a negotiation between critical reflexivity and shared imagining, we can physically experience abstract concepts such as trust, care, and empathy that are otherwise difficult to comprehend subjectively. While dancing together does not guarantee ethical discourse, it does provide a site where the subtle dynamics of interaction can serve as a fertile social soil for the cultivation of collective agency.

Notes

¹ I recognize that not all dance traditions value sustaining physical interaction. For my purposes here, I will consider cases in which partners have a desire to sustain dancing together for an extended period of time (upwards of a minute).

² I use the word ‘know’ here without qualification of whether the epistemic system is theoretical or physical (as in things one understands but cannot execute vs. things one can execute without being able to explain how it works).

³ See my paper on “Conceptualizing Care in Partnering” (Vidrin 2023).

⁴ I am grateful to Noah Lopez for suggesting this insightful comment.

Works Cited

Baier, Annette. 1986. “Trust and Antitrust.” *Ethics* 96(2): 231–260. <https://doi.org/10.1086/292745>

Bratman, Michael E. 2013. *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199897933.001.0001>

Dotson, Kristie. 2014. “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.” *Social Epistemology* 28(2): 115–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>

- Elgin, Catherine Z. 2013. "Epistemic Agency." *Theory and Research in Education* 11(2): 135–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878513485173>
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2013. *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970148.001.0001>
- Hawley, Katherine. 2019. *How to Be Trustworthy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198843900.001.0001>
- Horsburgh, Howard John Neate. 1960. "The Ethics of Trust." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 10(41): 343–354. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2216409>
- Jones, Karen. 1996. "Trust as an Affective Attitude." *Ethics* 107(1): 4–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/233694>
- Kaminsky, David. 2020. *Social Partner Dance*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344756>
- Lavers, Amy and Vidrin, Ilya. 2021. "What Falling Robots Reveal About the Absurdity of Human Trust". *Psyche Magazine*. Accessed March 18, 2024. <https://psyche.co/ideas/what-falling-robots-reveal-about-the-absurdity-of-human-trust>
- Mitra, Royona. 2021. "Unmaking Contact: Choreographic Touch at the Intersections of Race, Caste, and Gender." *Dance Research Journal* 53(3): 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767721000358>
- Novack, Cynthia J. 1990. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Pallant, Cheryl. 2006. *Contact Improvisation: An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173452>
- . 1990. "Collective Intentions and Actions." In *Intentions in Communication*, edited by Philip R. Cohen, Jerry Morgan, and Martha E. Pollack, 401–415. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3839.003.0021>
- Serebrennikov, Nikolai. 2000. *Pas de Deux: A Textbook on Partnering*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. 2017. "Moving in Concert." *Choros International Dance Journal* 6: 1–19.
- Vidrin, Ilya. 2020. "Embodied Ethics: The Conditions and Norms of Communication in Partnering." In *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation: Philosophy, Pedagogy, Practice*, edited by Malaika Sarco-Thomas, 240–259. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- . 2023. "Conceptualizing Care in Partnering." *Performance Research* 27(6/7): 26–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2197480>

Biography

Dr. Ilya Vidrin is Assistant Professor of Creative Practice Research at Northeastern University (USA). Vidrin's work engages with and investigates ethics of interaction, including the embodiment of care, trust, cultural competence, and social responsibility. Vidrin holds a B.S. in Psychology and Neuroscience from Northeastern University, a Master's Degree in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard University, and a PhD in Performing Arts from the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. Most recently, Vidrin has been visiting artist at the Harvard ArtLab, National Choreographic Center, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, EXC 2020 Temporal Communities (Berlin), and the New Museum (NYC).

© 2023 Ilya Vidrin



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).