



## DANCING PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

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### ABSTRACT

In this text, I will explore the idea that dance practice can be a research method in philosophy. I propose that not only it is possible to do philosophy in movement, but also that this kinetic approach to thought has the potential to question and transform patriarchal and colonial biases and paradigms that have been predominant throughout the history of philosophy. Dance enables us to experience our bodies through, in, and by movement, instead of merely talking and referring to the body as an object (as any other object) and conceptualizing its general properties. My thesis is that a thinking body is a body in motion, so if we want to practice philosophy as a way to reject dualism and arbitrary privilege, if we want to philosophize from our own plural and situated lives, dance is a very interesting way to do this. I will analyze Gilbert Simondon's concept of the living, making a sort of diffraction from the experience of participating in a dance workshop directed by philosopher and choreographer Marie Bardet, to show that when the temporality and topology of the living are clarified in experience, it is possible to verify the powers of thought of multiple bodies, so that an abstract body is no longer in question, but a lived, feminized body, marked by singular histories.

*Keywords:* art-based research; dance studies; philosophy of life; feminism; decoloniality

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# DANZAR CONCEPTOS FILOSÓFICOS

## RESUMEN

En este texto exploraré la idea de que la práctica de la danza puede ser un método de investigación en filosofía. Propongo que no solo es posible hacer filosofía en movimiento, sino que además esta aproximación cinética al pensamiento permite poner en cuestión y transformar sesgos y paradigmas patriarcales y coloniales que han predominado en la historia de la filosofía. La danza nos permite experimentar nuestros cuerpos a través de, en y por el movimiento, en lugar de meramente hablar y referirnos al cuerpo como un objeto (como cualquier otro objeto) y de conceptualizar sus propiedades generales. Mi tesis es que un cuerpo que piensa es un cuerpo en movimiento, de manera que, si queremos filosofar como una forma de rechazar los dualismos y privilegios arbitrarios, la danza es una forma interesante de hacerlo. Analizaré el concepto de lo viviente de Gilbert Simondon, a partir de una difracción basada en la experiencia de participar en un taller de danza de Marie Bardet, para mostrar que cuando la temporalidad y la topología de lo viviente se aclaran en la experiencia, es posible constatar las potencias de pensamiento de los cuerpos múltiples, ya no está en cuestión un cuerpo abstracto, sino un cuerpo vivido, feminizado, marcado por historias singulares.

*Palabras clave:* investigación basada en el arte; estudios de danza; filosofía de la vida; feminismo; decolonialidad

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## 1. Dancing philosophical concepts

TO DANCE IS NOT *PER SE* A PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY, but we can dance in order to “do philosophy”. Whether this is possible is the main issue at stake here. In the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle proposes a hierarchy between intellectual—philosophical and scientific—activity, and manual labor. This hierarchy depends on stating that the former knows the causes whilst the latter does not (Aristotle, *Met.*, 981a25 ss). Those who know through experience know less than those who know through reasoning, in such a way that experience-based knowledge is of a lesser category, because it is closer to the body and the senses, and farther from the universal nature of concepts and intellectual processes (activities). Despite its many different forms and certain notable exceptions, this hierarchy has operated continuously throughout the hegemonic view of the history of philosophy. Thinking is something the mind does, and philosophers basically spend their time thinking, using their minds.

Furthermore, this self-image of the philosopher is in many ways gendered. In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates compares his philosophical labor to that of a midwife, in as much as he puts to the test whether the thought begotten by a young man is imaginary and therefore false, or fecund and true (Plato, *Theaet.* 150c). The difference between Socrates and midwives is that he assists young men, while they assist women; *i.e.* he examines men whose souls give birth to thoughts, while midwives examine women whose bodies give birth to other bodies. There are many passages like this one in the hegemonic history of philosophy, in which philosophy presents itself as a type of labor which belongs, even to the extent of being exclusive, to men; in the same line, the history of philosophy is abundant in continuities between male and thought, on one side, and female and body, on the other.

In this traditional mind-body dualist scheme, the body, associated with femininity, has been described as something impure, contingent, emotional, passive, changing and subordinate; as a principle of corruption for knowledge, a source of uncertainty, as something to be controlled, contained, and disciplined. By contrast, the intellect has been associated with masculinity, as something pure and spiritual, stable, active, capable of governing, and akin to universal Forms, principles and Ideas. From Ancient Greek philosophers to contemporary

scholars and professors, philosophy has been gendered and its practice has been identified as something manly. Feminist thought has questioned severely what philosophers have said about being a woman or what is womanly, as well as the inherently patriarchal and misogynist properties of most philosophical methods and discourses. One salient example of this is Sandra Harding's (1986) proposal to understand feminist approaches to philosophy as different critical projects in *The Science Question in Feminism*. There are important differences between acknowledging the existence and contributions of women to the history of philosophy (what Harding calls "the women worthies project", p. 30) and questioning the very grounds of philosophical method and discourse. In the first case, not only are women often reduced to objects of inquiry—both for male or female thinkers—, but also their contributions are seen as "contributions to what men, from the perspective of their lives, think of as history and culture" (Harding, 1986, p. 31). Accordingly, what we find to be good knowledge, adequate arguments and methods of inquiry, is already distorted by the privileged point of view of the white heterosexual western males. The more radical question implies, then, to ask what meanings we assign to history and culture, to science and philosophy, and analyze if they are sexist and misogynist in themselves, or whether it is necessary that they be so. The conclusion is that we need to change the discourse itself in order to remove hostility towards women and abandon patriarchal and colonial biases.

The rejection of the body in philosophy is usually a mark of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. The hostility toward women is experienced differently according to race, class, sexual orientation, etc., as such experiences are manifested through singular and situated differences in bodies, life stories and social situations (Gargallo, 2012). Despite this long tradition of undermining the value of the body, in the past decades, some philosophies have reevaluated the body as being part of the thinking process, proposing new readings of the history of Western thought (from Aristotle to the present), or turning to contemporary cognitive science, linguistics, some art practices, etc. This is part of a movement of vindication of the body, that makes it an object of philosophical inquiry, a matter about which it makes sense to think. Based on Harding's quoted expression, one could interpret this movement as follows: the body is reclaimed in the thinking process, but merely or mostly as an object of reflection, and not as a

subject, or agent of thought. Thus, again, the radical question is, when vindicating the body, its place in experience, in knowledge, in reflection (in philosophy), what needs to be changed in our traditional ways of thinking about thinking, in our methods, and in our epistemological assumptions and principles? We need to ask ourselves how to remove hostility toward the body, and better yet, toward particular, situated and differentiated bodies within philosophical practice. As I aim to show in this paper, such vindication is necessary, as it constitutes an enriched way of understanding certain philosophical questions, it supports the abandonment of prejudiced dualisms and combats the perpetuation of sexist, classist, racist, and ableist biases, to the same extent that it opens new paths for philosophical and artistic inquiries.

Dance is relevant in this context because it allows us to experience our bodies through, in, and by movement, instead of merely talking and referring to the body as an object (as any other object) and its general properties. My thesis is that a thinking body is a body in motion, so if we want to do philosophy as a way of rejecting dualism and arbitrary privilege, if we want to philosophize from our own plural and situated lives, dance is a very interesting way to do it.

What makes it possible for dance to allow philosophizing with the body, and thus defying mind-body, feminine-masculine hierarchies? In dance studies and dance practices, feminist scholars have highlighted the need for questioning and transforming exclusionary paradigms that permeate theoretical discussions and the practice of dance itself (Cooper Albright, 1997). In this context, the 'somatic turn' has opened questions about the different relational dimensions of the soma, or body, its relation to consciousness or the mind, to other bodies, beings and objects in movement, as well as to changes and social processes (Kapadocha, 2021; Leight Foster, 1996).

Among these perspectives, the Feldenkrais method and contact improvisation expand the awareness of the diversity and multiplicity of bodies through shared movement. In these practices, there are no dancing abstracts. There are no neutral bodies dancing. There is no dancing without a particular dancer. Dancing is always the movement of a unique body, in its radical particularity: a gendered body, a body of a certain age, a body with a particular configuration of abilities, capacities, propensities, and habits. The body of one person: an individual way of moving in the world.

The dancing body, the dancer, is not precluded from thinking, from conceptualizing, from reflecting: dancing does not suppose shutting off the mind, or a distance from thought, but rather, a different path of thought, a kinetic or dynamic way of thinking.<sup>1</sup> The active nature of dance is similar to the active nature of thought, and renouncing dualism poses the question about whether or not philosophy as a paradigmatic way of thought (as it deems it self to be) can be done by dancing. In other words, if our bodies in movement are a way of thought, dance practice is a way of setting into motion bodily thought.

My central claim in this paper is that it is possible to do philosophy in movement. I am particularly interested in highlighting how this kinetic approach to thought makes possible to question and transform biases and paradigms of a patriarchal and colonial nature in the history of thought. I will make use of my own experience in a dance seminar with philosopher Marie Bardet in 2015 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in order to show how dancing Simondon's critique to Aristotelian hylomorphism can be a way of opening up the subversive powers of the body, in relation to the aforementioned established power structures<sup>2</sup>. To situate myself in my experience of the workshop, as a lesbian and whitened woman, allowed me to understand the decolonial and depatriarchalizing potencies of the practice that Bardet facilitated at that time. In that sense, what I present here is a sort of diffraction, to use Donna Haraway's term (1992), of a shared experience in the dance studio, this is, a device designed to produce effects of connectivity, personification, and responsibility, instead of distance, in order to imagine *other* places from which to build and learn (Haraway, 1992).

The seminar's purpose was to experience and construct an intersection between dance and philosophy, in order to bring them somehow together. Throughout the seminar, we danced, read fragments of philosophical texts, discussed them, talked about them, and danced. This coming and going between

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1 A very similar approach is found in the philosophy of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011). In her book *The Primacy of Movement* she explores what she calls *thinking in movement* from a phenomenological perspective.

2 It must be noted that Bardet's proposal was not initially oriented towards establishing a feminist decolonial practice of philosophy, though some of her most recent works are. See, for example, Bardet, 2020.

dance and philosophy was repeated day after day. The methodology was a kind of oscillation, as if we were a pendulum: we swayed, at times dancing, at times reading, at times talking. One of the fragments we read was extracted from Gilbert Simondon's (2020) *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. The chapter on the individuation of living beings caused a lasting impression on me. Being an Aristotelian of sorts, particularly interested in his physical treatises, what Simondon refers to as the 'hylomorphic schema,' as well as his critique to it, aroused a series of questions. He critiques the Aristotelian concepts of form and matter understood from a compositional perspective in order to give the theory a turn towards the explanation of life. His idea is to replace such traditional concepts with notions of place and time. For Simondon, an adequate definition of life does not answer the question "What is life made of?", but rather "What does life produce?". His answer is that life is defined by the kind of place and time it produces, in terms of its proper activity. Such an idea, put into movements, gave a new sense to what in Aristotelian terms is being a self-mover.

In her book, *Pensar con mover*, Bardet (2010) clarifies that she is not interested in approaching dance as an application of philosophical theories, because in such case, it would suppose a hierarchical status of one over another. Instead, she is interested in creating conditions for an encounter of both dance and philosophy, where we can create holes in the ordinary relations between practice and theory, or where we can resonate with both, or create echoes reciprocally. In other words, she is not interested in a philosophy *about* dance, as if dance were an *object* of philosophical inquiry, but in a philosophy *with* dance, what I would call a dancing philosophy. That means that philosophy is something we can do dancing, or we can do in movement. When we dance a philosophical concept, we introduce our own particularity in the thinking process, and, as a consequence, we realize that thinking is an activity we perform as concrete physical beings. In what follows, I will first introduce the concept of life, to then consider the particular dance exercises that have allowed me to think them in movement.

## 2. The concept of life

AS I STATED ABOVE, Gilbert Simondon criticizes the Aristotelian approach to life because according to him it fails to explain the process of formation, that is,

the operation of taking form of living beings.<sup>3</sup> For him, in order to explain life, we must comprehend the particular topological and chronological conditions life produces. His philosophy is concerned most of all with the concept of the individual, which he defines in terms of a structure or a process (Bardin, 2015, p. 4).<sup>4</sup> Individuation as a process is relevant here inasmuch as it concerns an approach to the concept of life. The problem, then, is to determine what kinds of topology and chronology life produces and, in turn, define it.

In the explanation of life, an ontological statement or presupposition usually prevails: the individual already constituted is the primary object or unit of inquiry; that means that we are “taking the constituted individual as a given” (Simondon, 1992, p. 297). In this sense, individuals are thought of as the product of a teleological actualization or realization of determined conditions, as something they are by nature, or meant to be. One could say that this accounts for answering a sense of *why* individuals exist, while leaving out the question of *how* they come to be. The metaphysical assumption that individuals are the necessary result of the combinations between form and matter leaves out a key feature of the living: the fact that life is an activity, a process, a *dýnamis*. In this sense, Simondon’s proposal to focus on the process of individuation, rather than on the individual, supposes a radical shift of the metaphysical understanding of life, and the epistemological commitments it carries with it: we must now think in terms of processes and activities within a system of being, a system of life.

Simondon points out that the priority must be put on the process of individuation, inasmuch as it allows us to understand the individual, and not the other

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3 Aristotelian tradition understands living beings in terms of the shaping of a formless matter, so that both matter and form are ontologically prior to individuals or compounds, and are necessary elements in explaining beings. In the case of life, the soul (*psýchê*) is the form that organizes matter into a living body, as it is a principle (*archê*) of movement. This means it is also the cause (*aitía*) of the proper activity of a living being. The relation between matter and form is usually clarified through an analogy with art (*téchne*): a carpenter shapes the wood when producing a chair; the composition of matter and form is determined by the end (*télos*) or function of a chair, which is stated in the definition (*génus*) of the chair: an object on which to seat. In the case of living beings, the soul organizes matter in order to fulfill its function as a living being: self-movement.

4 The general ontological framework of this idea, as much as the philosophy of science derived from it and its political consequences are not relevant for the line of thought I suggest here.

way around; the individual is in fact a relative reality or a phase of a process and belongs to a larger system than itself (Simondon, 1992, p. 300). He calls such process and system “ontogenesis”. This concept refers to the becoming or the emergence of the individual as a kind of unfolding of an ongoing and systemic (general or total) process. Being part of such a process, the individual is preserved at equilibrium through time. That equilibrium is not stable, for the system is active and there is always energy able to transform it, to modify the conditions and relations among individuals. Instead, we should think of it as metastable: “The term ‘metastability’, derived from thermodynamics, defines a system not on the basis of its stable ‘form’, but in relation to the potential energy involved in its precarious but still lasting equilibrium” (Bardin, 2015, p. 5). Metastability is the way self-preservation occurs in a system, it is not an action of the individual, but a phase of a process. In this sense, the process of individuation is never complete or finished.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is no proper opposition between movement and rest, for individual beings are always becoming individuated within a system; they are never isolated and the process never ceases.

The individual would then be grasped as a relative reality, a certain phase of being that supposes a preindividual reality, and that, even after individuation, does not exist on its own, because individuation does not exhaust with one stroke the potentials of preindividual reality. Moreover, that which the individuation makes appear is not only the individual, but also the pair individual-environment (Simondon, 2009, p. 5).

We cannot understand life if we take the individual living beings in isolation from the surrounding environment where they live, because living is creating a ‘where’. When I referred above to the constitution of a certain topology and temporality of the living, I was pointing to this Simondonian idea: ontogenesis is the process by which a distinction between inside and outside is made. Both terms refer to an understanding of space rather than to particular material compositions: what is outside is different from what is inside, not in virtue of what it is made of, but rather of where it is. Place is not a container of life, it is a part of

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5 By contrast, according to the hylomorphic scheme, the living being can accomplish its end (*télos*) and therefore can be complete at some point in time.

it.<sup>6</sup> However, the separation is not definitive, because the barrier between both places, the membrane, is permeable: in order to sustain life, something must be let in and something must be kept out. That is why life is a system, we cannot separate living beings from their surroundings because being individuated requires communication and exchange: a system of resonance between the inside and the outside of the individual. The relation of the living being with the environment will change if the conditions demand it, as their interaction is plastic and mobile.

The membrane is the changing and permeable limit or border between the inside and the outside of the individual; it is what first constitutes the relational place or *topos* life produces: an asymmetric inside and outside that communicate each other and strive for self-sustainability in a metastable system. In terms of the special temporal condition of the living, it must be said that the past is preserved in the present. The multiple exchanges are recorded or condensed in what the living individual is becoming; life does not start anew with every interaction. Living beings introduce memory to the system, for the past is accumulated, active and present, through the individuation process.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Some dance exercises: thinking in movement

I WILL DESCRIBE TWO EXERCISES related in some way to the ideas expressed above. The first is connected to tactile experience, and consists of moving *from*

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6 In the philosophical tradition an important difference between space and place is made: space is an abstract concept which is at least conceptually possible to separate from the things in it. On the other hand, place necessarily refers to where something is, or was, or will be, so that place is inseparable from what occupies it.

7 To explain the difference between living individuation and other types, one could cite crystals as an example: in their formation, they grow from the borders, and produce layers of themselves through the interaction of certain substances. So far, the explanations seem equivalent. However, the inside of a crystal does not interact with or support the individuation, because individuation occurs only in its border. We can realize now that there is no sharp line between living matter and nonliving one; there is no dramatic change of nature, but differences relating the same kind of process, *i.e.*, individuation. In a strict sense, crystals do not create an inside for themselves, for one could take out what is on 'this' side of the growing border and the crystal would continue to grow. For living beings, the membrane is not merely the outer layer of what they are, but, as I've stated, the place where they live.

the touch of our skin in contact with what surrounds us. The second is an intensification of the first exercise, and it is an invitation to expand the membrane and to make the skin dense in the moving experience.

The first exercise begins with the image of our skin as a system of supports, where gravity and weight emerge in the production of contact. We pay attention first to the balls of the feet, where we make contact with the floor and the air, as we walk or merely stand. The skin of the foot's sole allows us to exchange forces, weight and heat with the surrounding floor and the air in the dance studio. We move then toward the image of our entire body as a big foot's sole. Let's not represent the ball of the foot, let's be the feet and the skin, as if all of our skin is in contact with everything that surrounds it; let's perform with all the body what we have experienced and discovered through the soles of our feet. The point here is to resonate with all the bodies in the room, with the floor and the air, their temperature, their density, and all the information we exchange in movement through our skin.

One of the purposes of this exercise is to dance *from* the skin as a membrane and as a place for interaction with the environment. Bardet suggests that this creates a paradox: touch is at the same time what produces contact and what is produced by contact. In this way, the philosophical work we were interested in led us to inhabit that paradox, instead of solving it; we were looking for multiple experiences of it, in order to make sense of it by experience, by touch, by movement. Philosophy usually intends to solve paradoxes and apply the non-contradiction principle to this kind of problems. What produces cannot be the same thing that is produced. However, when we dance, we experience the paradox, we live in and through the paradox, so we were not bypassing it, or avoiding it, or getting rid of it. Perhaps one could understand the Aristotelian maxim *diaporéin kalós* (to go beautifully through the *aporía* or paradox) in this way.

In the second exercise we intensify the relation between inside and outside that we had discovered when dancing from the skin. Let us complement the images to make the same experience more intense and create new densities. Pay attention to the skin of the neck, to what that skin knows about the air, and what the skin of the balls of the feet knows about the floor; experience the skin as a heterogeneous continuum. Let us invert these relations by turning the skin of the feet to the air, and the skin of the neck to the ground. The small shifts of attention

and modalities of movement that produce great differences in the experience of dance become interesting.

In both exercises, our dancing philosophy met a challenge to avoid some binary oppositions: surface (or superficiality) against depth, density against flatness, container against contained. Bardet invited us to make a surface dense, to gain in density by folding, not merely by transposition of another level or dimension, but to experience folding as a way of creating an inside that was dense, rather than deep. We danced with the image of the Möebius strip, but especially thinking of our skin as an organic fold that creates density in our body. Bardet was addressing the skin as a membrane that produces relative insides and outsides in our living body, not in the sense that the skin creates different dimensions, but in the sense that it can fold the very same dimension to create density. It is important to emphasize that it is the same dimension because what is at stake here is the continuity of the living body and the environment, or what is in contact with it. Our dance was, thus, meant to widen the border and experience our skin as a limit where the conditions for contact and the product of contact were one and the same. Dance allowed us to experience our body in movement as a part of a system of contacts and interactions. Chronologically, the paradox issues a challenge, because simultaneously one and the same thing produces and is produced, there is no succession here; the traditional adherence to the idea the cause and effect must be chronologically distinct, however small the interval, should be abandoned. Consequently, our task was also to thicken time in order to experience it not as a succession of instants, but as a heterogeneous accumulative flow, full of density or intensity.

Topologically, we dance with the space (and not merely in space) as a place or *topos*; as a system of exchanges and communication between the inside and outside of our bodies in movement through our skin. No matter how abstract this sounds conceptually, on the dance floor this thesis was incredibly clear and concrete in my body in movement.

#### 4. The experience of dancing a philosophical concept

AFTER THE EXERCISES we shared our experiences, we talked about how we felt, what we found. I realized that diversity emerges in the dancing floor when

we were connected through movement, through the same images and the same explorations proposed by Marie, by experiencing these in many different ways. I knew that my philosophical background allowed me to experience those exercises *philosophically*, inasmuch as I felt I understood those concepts we talked about and read about through moving. Moreover, I could see that the unsolvable oppositions that traditional philosophical conceptualization poses are somehow resolved, or reframed through dance.

Thanks to the dance experience described before, I realize we can dance philosophical concepts and enrich philosophical inquiry through dance practice. First, I believe that on the dance floor we can experience ourselves not as isolated individuals, but as relational beings constantly shifting; in fact, constantly *becoming* in relation to our surroundings. Second, I find multiple possibilities of movement from my skin as a limit or a border. Throughout the dance experience, skin became a place for exchange and interactions through movement: breathing, negotiating with gravity to avoid falling, applying pressure, varying temperature. Dance helps me understand certain topological and chronological conditions that are inherent to my experience of the world as a living being. My skin configures the place (*topos*) I inhabit, and that place is changing due to the interactions with my surroundings; my skin allows me to perform; my skin also configures a particular time I inhabit, because it preserves all the interactions I perform and makes them constantly actual and present for my movements. Skin has a role in the conservation or accumulation of the past in the continuous flow of time. When we dance sharpening the physical awareness of the skin and touch as a condition for contact, as well as a product of it, and when we elaborate that experience philosophically (regarding in this case the Simondonian concept of life), not only does our conceptual of understanding change, but also our dance changes and becomes a philosophical dance.

This experience of dancing concepts philosophically allowed me to come back to my place of enunciation as a lesbian woman, a whitened woman, from the Political South. What makes inequalities cohesive, and produces exclusionary paradigms and biases at the level of ideas and theories in philosophy, dissolves when the lived body in movement thinks, because this gesture can amplify the consciousness of particularity, of the history of live itself, which emerges in the way we move. When the temporality and topology of the living become clear in

experience, it is possible to confirm the potencies of thought of multiple bodies; an abstract body is no longer in question, but rather a lived body, one that is feminized and marked by singular histories. Everyone who participated in the seminar moved in very different manners, our trajectories crisscrossed to generate a contact zone, and created places to move and think together, though not necessarily in the same way or about the same things. What can emerge when we think in movement is precisely the complexity of intertwining differences and putting the homogeneity of concepts to the test.

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