
Watching the White Swan Bleed:

What is wrong with ballet?

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Ballet

➤ The question:

- Is the practice of ballet morally permissible?
 - From the perspective of:
 - the dancer
 - the parents / teachers
 - the institution
 - the spectator
 - the policy makers

➤ Main issues:

- physical and mental harm
 - consent
 - perception / objectification
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Argument

- Current professional ballet is morally wrong because it necessarily involves agents (children) engaging in risky activities without their consent.

 - Can we regulate ballet such that the risky activity occurs during adulthood?
 - If we *cannot*, should ballet be prohibited?
 - Maybe, yes.
 - If we *can*, does this solve the problem?
 - Not necessarily. Ballet inherently has morally questionable aspects.
 - Objectification?
 - Gender roles (more in classical choreographers)
 - Competitive nature, where sacrifice is seen as an accomplishment
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How did it all begin?

- 15th – 17th Century (Italy, France):
Court dance, participation
- First ballet school: Louis XIV (only for men)
- 18th Century: Change from court entertainment to performance art



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- 15th – 17th Century (Italy, France):
Court dance, participation
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- 18th Century: Change from court
entertainment to performance art
- 19th Century: Female dancers
Romantic era (storyline)
Marie Taglioni
- 20th Century: pointe shoes



Recreational ballet

➤ Benefits

- better posture
- toned muscles
- awareness of body
- flexibility
- discipline
- relieves stress

➤ But recreational ballet differs significantly from professional ballet.

Professional training

- Dancers typically start at the age of 5 with some training
 - Age 6 to 9: everyday 1 hour
 - Age 10 or 11 onwards:
 - selections and eliminations start
 - full-time training / boarding schools (Royal Ballet School)
 - summer camps (4-7 weeks)
 - pointe introduced
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Physical & psychological effects of professional training

➤ Physical effects:

- negative effects in body development and bone density
- injuries in ankles, feet, knees, and hips
- use of painkillers

➤ 2011 Study on 22 professional ballerinas*:

- 32% had disordered eating habits
- 77% were in a calorie deficit
- 36% had menstrual dysfunction
- 23% had low bone mass density
- 64% had abnormal artery dilation in response to blood flow

*Hoch et. al., 2011, "Association Between the Female Athlete Triad and Endothelial Dysfunction in Dancers", *Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine*

Physical & psychological effects of professional training

- Long-term physical effects and ageing
 - In retired ballet dancers (Finnish study*):
 - significant increase in hip and knee pain, difficulty in walking
 - indication of increased hip dysplasia
 - artheritis
- Psychological effects:
 - negative body image
 - negative personality traits & psychological distress (especially in male dancers)
 - eating disorders
 - 40% smokers (normal population 24%)
 - competition, inclination for self-sacrifice, harm

*Rönkkö et. al., 2007 “Musculoskeletal Pain, Disability and Quality of Life Among Retired Dancers”, *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science*

Comparison #1: Foot binding & Ballet



Comparison #1: Foot binding & Ballet

- It has to start in early ages in order to achieve the desired aesthetics.
 - It is said that the practice started because it made dancers look more delicate, feminine, like a heavenly creature.
 - It requires physical and mental discipline, as well as endurance for pain and long-term achievement.
 - Those who reached the desired aesthetic look are praised and admired by the society.
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Argument against Ballet #1: Harm

➤ Similar to foot-binding

- it presents significant harm to physical and psychological well-being
- it is required that the pain is well-concealed
- it's effects remain until old age

➤ Unlike foot-binding

- it also has positive health effects
 - it does not disable the person
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Argument against Ballet #2: Consent

- Do children “consent” to train for professional ballet?
 - consent for ballet vs. professional ballet
 - allowing the child to consent for a practice that poses significant harm
 - not allowing also poses harm?
 - it is not a purely negative practice
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Justification #1: Personal value

- What drives the professional dancer (or athlete)?
 - Desire for the art and aesthetic
 - Ballet dancers are reported to be inclined to push their boundaries at the expense of their well-being.
 - 19th century – tutus catching fire (Emma Livry)
 - similar mindset in athletes: Goldman’s dilemma (also criticized), helmet study
 - ballet dancers refuse to take time for recovery
 - Competition to be the “best”
 - downward spiral
 - in itself does not require harm
 - The desire does not entail the harm involved with the current practice
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Comparison #2: Gladiator games & Ballet



Comparison #2: Gladiator games & Ballet

- It plays an important role in the society for interaction and gathering
 - It brings out emotional aspects in its full reality. Shows the human experience.
 - It encourages emotional identification
 - It allows an outlet for personal desires, social fights
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Justification #2: Social value

- Value of art and/or value of sports
 - Brings people together
 - New perspectives of lived / human experience
 - Emotional identification / awakening
 - None of these social goals entail the harm involved with the current practice
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Argument against ballet #3: Social

- Short and intense career which forces the dancer to choose between excelling in her art and investing for her retirement (age of 30+).
 - The culture of competition and sacrifice being seen as success
 - no time for proper recovery
 - Insistence on arcane gender roles: ethereal women and strong men
 - Objectification (moral role of the spectator):
 - instrumental, no autonomy, fungibility
 - reduction to body, reduction to appearance, silencing
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Justification #3: Aesthetic value

- Art evolves in a certain way. It interacts with the society, culture, and technology, giving way to new developments. It is neither an arbitrary development nor fully determined.
 - the idea of artistic genius

- Development of art*
 - 1. Any technical innovation is partly the result of earlier techniques.
 - 2. Any technical innovation is partly the result also of dissatisfaction with prevailing practices.
 - 3. Dissatisfaction with prevailing practices, however, is partly the result of technical innovation.
 - 4. Dissatisfaction results also from a range of non-technical factors.

*Hammond & Hammond, 1989 "Technique and Autonomy in the Development of Art:

A Case Study in Ballet", *Dance Research Journal*

Comparison #3: Castrati & Ballet



Comparison #3: Castrati & Ballet

- Development of an art form sometimes require sacrifice.
 - Certain developments cannot be achieved without allowing a level of harm and pain to be endured.
 - Limiting and regulating art takes away from the aesthetic value and is a loss for aesthetic development.
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Regulation: Drastic change in the art form

- Harm results not only from bad practice but also inherent to the current art form.
- Reducing harm would require significant change in the art form itself
 - starting age
 - postponing intense physical training (and risk for harm)
 - what about psychological pressure?
- Certain aesthetic of existing ballet choreographs disappear
 - moving from depicting the social values in “Romantic” era to modern era
 - existing practice in various contemporary dance companies; but the classical ballet dances remain prestigious
- But, ballet already went through drastic changes in its 600 years, now in a recognizably similar era for the last 100 years.

Further questions: Scientific aspects

- When does it goes too far?
 - surgery for performance enhancement is already performed
 - painkillers are already routinely used
 - Bionic dancers?
 - Can dancers implement bionic limbs?
 - Should or can this be controlled?
 - What does it entail for the spectators' moral stance?
 - Pain or harm does not make a good argument because it is already justified in the name of art.
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THANK YOU!