Effortless Bodies and Beyond

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Effortless bodily movements, effortless speech or writing, even effortless objects affect us in a way that one naturally thinks of as aesthetic. But just what is effortlessness? What are we appreciating when we admire a dancer’s effortless technique, precision or presence? Why is it, for example, that when the renown Alicia Markova “finished her effortless variation, with the turn of its final phrase rounded off meticulously to the fraction of a beat, it is no wonder that the house bursts into applause almost as a automatic reaction”?1 What makes effortlessness aesthetically valuable?

The concept of aesthetic effortlessness is rarely discussed in academic circles today, particularly in analytic philosophy. Moreover, in the art world, effortlessness, though still highly valued by some, has generally gone the way of the two related qualities of beauty and grace, with many contemporary artists more interested in creating works that are provocative, powerful, beleaguered or shocking, than in creating works that are effortless. The choreography of Pina Bausch, for example, is certainly aesthetically valuable; but it is valuable because it expresses frustration, alienation, brutality and pain, not because it expresses effortlessness.

Though perhaps unpopular in academic circles today, it cannot be denied that effortlessness captures us, and its aesthetic appeal seems to be more immediate, more bodily and less cerebral than our interest in the conceptually charged work of artists such as Pina Bausch. Moreover, the idea of effortlessness has drawn the attention of many great thinkers in the past. To look at just a few examples, the ancient Chinese Daoist thinkers Laozi and Zhuangzi exalted effortless action, or wu-wei (literally translated as “no trying”), in both the artisan and the political leader. The Italian Renaissance theorist, Baldassare Castiglione’s (1975/1528), Book of the Courtier, inspired the artists of his day to, as he puts it, “practice[s] in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.” And, arguably, one aspect of what Kant meant when he said that “the fine arts must not seem purposeful, although they are purposeful,” or, as he explains, that “fine art must be able to be considered as nature,” is, in part, that fine art

1 See John Martin (1941).
must appear to be merely a product of nature, that is, it must appear to be effortless.²

To mention one more historical period during which the concept of effortlessness garnered the attention of theorists (a period I shall return to) we find effortlessness and the closely related concept of grace, discussed, analyzed and greatly admired by the late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century thinkers, Henri Bergson and Herbert Spencer, with Bergson describing the perception of grace as “the perception of a certain ease, a certain facility in the outward movements,” and Spencer claiming that “truly graceful movements . . . are those preformed with comparatively little effort . . . [and that] a good dancer makes us feel that . . . an economy of effort has been achieved.”

Today, though the concept is largely passed over by tough-minded academicians, the allure of effortlessness is apparent in the media where one frequently finds various athletes, artists, and artworks praised for their effortlessness: the ballerina Natalia Osipova’s grand jetés, for example, are extolled in for their effortless elevation, soaring “through the air with so little effort that the sight of her lithe form hanging high above the stage is a shock every time,” the opera singer Beverly Sills is described as being able to “dispatch coloratura roulades and embellishments, capped with radiant high D’s and E-flats, with seemingly effortless agility,” and of Yo-Yo Ma, the novelist Mark Saltzman says, “his playing was so beautiful, so original, so intelligent, so effortless that by the end of the first movement I knew my cello career was over.” And in the world of politics, one finds individuals chastised for their lack of effortlessness and for displaying “what appear to be laboriously studied moves rather than anything that comes naturally.”³

Effortlessness, it seems, can be ascribed to bodily movements, to intellectual insights, to poetry, prose and paintings. Even the Golden Gate bridge has been extolled for its “seeming effortlessness,” being described as, “Grace Kelly in Rear Window.”⁴ Indeed, perhaps one reason the topic of effortlessness does not have foothold in analytic aesthetics is this multifariousness. There is something to be said in favor of this stance: trying to figure out what it means for

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² See Hammermeister (2002), for discussion.
⁴ As stated by urban design critic, John King and California Historical Society, executive director, Anthea Hartig, respectively in their interview with Christensen (2012).