PROSPECTS FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OF
THE DANCE

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Most philosophers who interest themselves in the theory of art agree that dance plays an unexpectedly small part in the literature of the subject. Actually, this may not be quite true; it may rather be that what once was written is now seldom cited, and that those who do cite it are themselves little read; but to say that is only to transfer the surprising neglect from the past to the present. And the neglect is surprising, because from most speculative standpoints it looks as if dance should figure among the fine arts at least as prominently as music, or poetry, or painting, which are arts that students of aesthetics read and write and talk about all the time. One therefore wonders how the neglect is to be explained.

Presumably a philosophy of dance is possible, if by the philosophy of an art or practice one means nothing more specific than any general theorizing about the nature or meaning of that art or practice that is neither preoccupied with its technique nor falls within the purview of any specific science. And it might be thought ill advised to use the word “philosophy” with any narrower meaning, for two reasons: first, that no such restrictions pass current anywhere except within the community of professional philosophers, where each such restriction reflects one particular philosophical viewpoint; and, second, it is widely agreed that philosophy should always be in question to itself, for otherwise philosophy is reduced to becoming one special study among others, and as such loses its distinctive value.

A possible rejoinder to that catholic view of what could count as the philosophy of a practice might be that although no limit can be set in advance to the diversity of philosophizing, philosophy must at least meet whatever standards of order and system are imposed by the requirement of seriousness; and that, even if there is no method of excluding undisciplined and disorganized speculation from philoso-
phy as such, still one would not speak of a philosophy, still less of the philosophy of a practice, and no serious philosopher would concern himself with it, unless the discourse in question satisfied implicit criteria of relevance, consistency, and organization. With something like this in mind, it has been suggested that there can be a philosophy of a practice if and only if that practice has a rational basis that philosophy can elucidate — that is, if it is rule-governed. The suggestion strikes one as extravagant. Surely practices of any sort complex and rich enough to attract general theories are neither constituted nor governed by anything very like a set of rules, and a practice is less likely to have a rational basis found in it than to have one imputed to it. But behind this metaphorical talk of rules and bases lurks the reasonable notion that it makes little sense to work at the "philosophy of" a practice unless one can identify that practice, and make some sense of the questions that those who engage in it are up to and why they are up to it. And that is to say precisely that a rational basis may be imputed to the practice without absurdity or arbitrariness.

One reason for not doing the philosophy of dance would be that dance is not a practice or an orderly set of practices in anything like the sense we have just considered. One might contend, for instance, that most of the things people do involve moving their bodies, and any body movement that is not strictly utilitarian is likely to be called "dance" by someone or other. If that is the case, it would of course be open to anyone to theorize for this or that purpose about this or that part of the field, but there is nothing to suggest that such theorizing could gain any coherence from, or impart any coherence to, a subject matter reasonably picked out by the word "dance".

That reason for not essaying a philosophy of dance is insufficient, for a reason that has been familiar since Aristotle. To give a reason for not philosophizing is already to philosophize, so that the only way to avoid philosophy in general, or the philosophy of any supposed practice in particular, is never to have considered the possibility. So, in the present case, to ask whether dance amounts to a practice in any relevant sense is already to have embarked on philosophy, and what would that philosophy be if not a philosophy of dance? And in attempting to give a satisfactory answer to the question whether dance is a practice one will not be able to avoid raising further questions about dance of an unmistakably philosophi-