

On the Cost of Becoming

[INTROSPECTIVE EXCAVATION]

“Why do we dance?”

Since the times when I first noticed the phenomena that influenced what I now call ‘The Dance’, I’ve felt a compulsion to dissect, distil and demonstrate the cause. I will not feign receiving some sort of noetic knowledge; it did not require Einstein level intellect to at least uncover the more fundamental vectors driving the resultant ‘dance’. Therefore, I would like to explore the autonomy involved in refusing the dance and the associated costs illustrated by exhuming examples from my formative years when I was certainly no Einstein.

In order to fairly assess the cost to personal autonomy, as well as other prices of ontological freedom, it would be a good idea to first look at apparent causation. That is to say we should look at the causes and effects of participation and full surrender to the Great Dance. Let us take note of the fundamental vectors (as I put it) that influence the behavioural tendencies that eventually end up producing the choreography of the dance.

In accordance with the introspective approach to this excavation, I should call upon my own memories and observations on the incentives to dance as I mentioned earlier but also the sacrifices necessary for refusal. Understand that this is neither meant as lamentation nor glorification, but an attempt at an empirical ledger of social transactions, developmental influences and vicarious observations.

I think that most of us can attest to witnessing or participating in social hierarchies and the ‘contest of wills’ at some point in our lives. This could be amongst colleagues, friends, family or other structures that gather people. For my first observations, let us focus in on an arena that combines the clashing of consciences with immaturity, hormones and a closed system...

Secondary school; the first true crucible of character.

“How do we dance?”

Have you heard of The Game? If you have, you just lost. If you haven’t, allow me to elucidate you. The Game is a cheeky, paradoxical memetic trap that is simply a challenge to forget something for as long as possible. What exactly is it that you must forget? The very game itself! The Game is a trivial and benign infohazard and yet it can be likened to the wider game of life: once you start playing, you are always playing. However, it can also have parallels to the resultant Dance since acknowledging the game/dance, is a losing move. Analogies aside, what I would like to first show is the notion that ascending in the dance overtly and

inorganically is also punished. The capacity for violence is often lauded as a virtue of masculinity (as I will later discuss). Nonetheless, nobody respects the guy who clearly performed a piledriver on his own friend into the beer pong table like an orbital kinetic weapon just to show off. Through this realisation we shine light on the first way that we normally dance....

Via subtle subversions of social superiors.

Through clandestine clashes of competing consciences.

“What if we don’t dance?”

A second way and reason that we dance is found in fearing the costs of refusal. When most of first confronted the Dance, whether in conformity or rebellion, it was generally inadvertently and as young people under environmental pressure. Following on from this observation, it stands to reason that most of us did not make the choices we did out of obligation to philosophical axioms. Certainly not ones we contemplated whilst abusing a PlayStation controller with cheese and onion flavoured fingers. I postulate that while there were of course those who revelled in the dance, the avoidance of incurring costs was the main influence. Costs that we ought to categorise and confront. I will do so using my own memories because if I cannot endure the Cost of Becoming, why should I expect anyone else to?

Let us rightfully start with the first price to paid; the cost to trust and innocence. For me, this manifested as the permanent realisation that reciprocity was not universal and unassailable. There were times when I was in my very early teens where I would use my Christmas gift allowance to get gifts for both me and my friends, ranging from cheap but custom gold-plated chains to steel dog tags (a fitting lack of sophistication for my age). The idea was that kindness begat kindness, effort begat effort and loyalty begat loyalty. I soon learned that this was not the case, especially when many of my social tribulations were faced alone in the presence of people I would’ve stood by in their own. In our formative years we learn empathetic loyalty as the reciprocation of hypothetical or historical consideration. When our genuine efforts are not returned or taken for granted, when our enthusiastic authenticity is returned with condescension and dismissal, we retreat into the ego, realising that engagement inequality inherently forms a status hierarchy. I used to witness this amongst we young, urban Londoners where the ultimate sin was to appear to care too much about anything or anyone. From this example we can start to see how each interpersonal interaction can often be perceived not as genuine connection but as a duel and so we suffer the first cost of refusing the allure of transactional interactions by default. That being the cost to innocence and trust, born from misalignment with the Dance vector of ego and beneficial asymmetry.

It is not just interactions with individuals that refusing to dance influences, there is also a cost to belonging. The cost of belonging manifests as friction, instability of status, and reduced synchronicity of demeanour within a group as a result of divergence from said group’s declared or emergent ethics/modus operandi. Kira J. Harris in her 2015 thesis “*Leaving ideological social groups behind: A Grounded theory of psychological disengagement*”, explored how current research suggests that “the discrepancy between group membership and the self-

concept was identified as the core theme in the disengagement experience". This is to say that a rift emerged between what it meant to be a member of the group and what it meant to be them which in most cases was the prime motive behind disavowment. I don't think this sort of moral quandary is uncommon at all amongst young people especially early on since prior to secondary school, the main agents of socialisation most children had were their parents. However, once introduced to the closed system of school, with its own selection pressures and societal success criteria, one must then balance an unspoken equilibrium between selfhood and membership. Between assimilation and authenticity. A microcosm of the wider tension between the vectors of the Dance and the other direction. When I was running with my rowdy Harlesden bunch bumping stations barriers, lighting fireworks on the Bakerloo line and generally being nuisance incarnate, I noticed that as time went on together, the spectrum of aversion to certain activities (like the aforementioned) started to homogenise into unanimity. This illustrated to me how reorienting into a different direction to the Dance vectors of mimicry and tribalism expended energy and social capital which many were not willing to spend. When you are repeatedly an outlier in this fashion, ostracization is the common outcome because brazen refusal reminds all participants that their iniquities are voluntary. They can no longer affirm their own choice to dance with yours since you have refused.

But what about more tangible costs? Idealogues of the 'contest of wills' would suggest that force is the one, true decider and that resisters of the Dance are destined for subjugation. In fact, Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden would have us believe that even those who are merely opportunistically compliant are 'false dancers'. I will not shy away from this challenge for verily, verily there are costs both physical and mental for the sovereignty earned by leaving the dance. However, these costs are not only not negated by participation in the dance, but often worsened and can be made more likely to occur depending on the individuals. This cost, unlike the others, is incurred just by virtue of being a physical and mortal organism. There is no free transcendence for even submission is not free. In my experience of urban adolescent masculine culture, every butting of heads had the background risk of escalation. Resisting the urge to be goaded into futile ritualistic sabre-rattling only fuelled the recurrence of physical provocation. I can certainly testify to this since I got into far more physical confrontations than would be expected from an eloquent Set 1 Cambridge-aspirant. These were the times when the line between active refusal of and submission to the dance, was blurred. Was I standing up for the way of defensive competence or was I trying to prove my martial prowess? The Dance demands regular sacrifices to its lust for competition in order to uphold your domain within it. This innate compulsion is the signature of the Dance vectors of domination and control.

I would like to point out that there is a multidimensionality to these vectors across explicit costs. Whilst the impetus to control (in conjunction with domination) is the genesis of costs to corporeality, control as a component of the ignorant vector can generate costs to identity and social roles. Many have tried to contain me within the boundaries of what I was perceived to be. Whether it was Quincy the Goody Two-Shoes, Quincy the Docile, Quincy the Nerd, Quincy the Naïve or Quincy the Obedient. Obeying the dance along this vector looks like inflating or diminishing who you are to match perception. Whilst this is often the perception of your peers, make no mistake, even the significant others that we perceive to be mature and above the Dance, are not and perform it amongst themselves.

This was one of the earliest epiphanies that forced me to perceive the Great Dance of life; the fact that even adults were playing and hiding their hands, showed what was at stake.

I stopped doing things that were associated with the archetype I was perceived as. I didn't run for Head Boy in sixth form even when asked to by staff. I stopped staying late after school on event days to help with set up. I stopped viewing school rules as school suggestions. I stopped coming back home when I was meant to.

Anything to show I was more than just smart and agreeable.

Anything to force a reassessment and make the world understand that I was beyond that Dance.

Anything to show that the prerogative to decide my identity was mine alone.

Whilst the direction I went in was not inherently good, it was the bespoke remedial direction I had to go in, that led to emancipation from the self-proliferating pressures of the Dance. Becoming the true author of your narrative will take a toll on your relationships and perception. Ironically, the ability to perceive that leaving the Dance bestows can also have a cost to your self-narrative as we will discuss next.

The cost to selfhood or self-narrative is one of the more insidious fees to exit the dancehall into the wider town. It is the divergence of one's inner chronology from the low-resolution collective story of the Dance. It is the cost, expressed in many ways, that both epistemically isolates you from yourself and pushes you beyond yourself.

Heightened meta-awareness is a prerequisite to escaping the Dance. Why? This is because in order to leave the Dance, you must first realise that there IS a dance and that you are dancing. Furthermore, once that frame of reference is occupied, you then need to notice the little arenas where the 'contest of wills' appears and take note of your default responses to said arenas. Logically, enhancing the depth with which you can perceive yourself reflexively enhances the depth with which you can see the structure of the world compared to when you danced.

I postulate that this leads to viewing the interconnected web of existence with higher resolution which results in the ability to react to and act on usually imperceptible stimuli. Stimuli that only become visible when you can see the wider game that they originate from. Thus, the observing self and the participating self, risk decoupling. Existing with those who only know the dance can become exhausting, especially when one's support network resembles the following...

"You can't be depressed; you have food, water and a family"

"It's those stupid friends dragging you back"

"You changed after you started listening to your friends"

"You're just in a low mood today"

They practically vibrate with zeal to protect the ego and offload moral or social discomfort.

How can anyone really connect when you can both see in each other's eyes that this is a game?

How can one really communicate in earnest seeing your lips itching to bark an unfalsifiable retort?

In this way we can observe how the bird's eye view needed to escape the choreography of holistic competitive optimisation can isolate you via miscommunication and misunderstanding. It is like trying to play a 4K you downloaded, on a CRT television.

There is another way that refusal invites a cost to internal chronology. The Dance is infatuated with image and vanity since it is materially and socially optimal to have a certain image or reputation according to the context. It naturally follows that dancers are incentivised to maintain said image out of pride. This is often done through narrative control and indignation such that when two incompatible image-affirming narratives collide, a contest of candour occurs. A person who rebukes the Dance refuses to engage in the desperate practice of maintaining pride in favour of dignity and truth. Unfortunately, since the contest of candour can occur even if only one side is viewing the exchange as self-litigation, the reliable narrator is often left undefended in subjective matters as they occupy an objective arbiter role. In the culture that my parents were raised in, pride, social hierarchy ascension, and image protection were indispensable, hence the allergy to accountability and social disapproval. In their head, their narrative of my past (and admittedly present) tribulations is infallible and thus overrides even my own embodied experience. Why? Because the alternative is to accept that I was/am suffering alone and thus take a hit to their self-concept as parents.

To conclude, through the thorough exploration of five types of costs to becoming and the supporting excavations of my memories, we seemingly come to a bleak conclusion: escaping the Dance is not free. Escaping the Dance is uncomfortable. Escaping the Dance is seldom rewarded within its success framework. But we knew that all along didn't we? Nothing worth doing or having in this world comes without challenge, even within the Dance.

If this is so, how much harder should one expect the way (or Ways) to transcend the entire paradigm, to be?

If certain behavioural vectors compel us towards the selfishness, tribalism, materialism and the lowest urges and purposes in life, surely there must be some counter-vectors that orient use towards the highest. True self-sovereignty has a steep and evolving cost, so, heavy indeed is the head that wears the crown. Even if the crown be made of thorns, let us put it on firmly.

For authenticity is not a crown bestowed – it is a crown endured.

D. E. Meyer

