

Christine Leroy, *Kinaesthetic Empathy, Ethics and Care: A Phenomenology of Dance*, Routledge, London and New York 2025, pp. 134, € 46.99, ISBN 9781032878560

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Christine Leroy's *Kinaesthetic Empathy, Ethics and Care: A Phenomenology of Dance* – originally published in French as *Phénoménologie de la danse: De la chair à l'éthique* (2021) – offers a profound investigation into the intersection of movement, intersubjectivity, and moral philosophy. By bridging the gap between the spectator's aesthetic experience and the performer's ethical responsibility, Leroy provides a fresh phenomenological framework for understanding dance as more than a mere visual spectacle.

At the core of Leroy's project lies the concept of kinaesthetic empathy. Rather than conceiving empathy as an affective projection or cognitive inference, she defines it as the dynamic result of an interaction between a choreographic performance and its spectator. This interaction is experienced as the "transmission of an internal sensation of movement" that occurs even in the absence of direct physical contact (p. 22). The spectator does not merely observe movement but participates in it through a corporeal resonance that unfolds within their own lived body.

A particularly compelling dimension of Leroy's argument is her rehabilitation of the "contagious" nature of dance. Historically, the capacity of dance to affect the spectator's body beyond rational mediation has often been the source of moral suspicion. Leroy reverses this perspective by asking whether morality itself might be grounded in sensuality. She argues that the ethical force of dance derives precisely from its kinaesthetic contagiousness: because dance privileges modes of being anchored in movement and sensation, it operates as a "kinaesthetic introduction" to care for the other.

The book is structured into three parts, each corresponding to a progressive deepening of this argument.

Part I, consisting of five chapters, establishes the theoretical foundations of this framework. Leroy begins in Chapter 1 by analyzing Wim Vandekeybus's dance film *Blush*, demonstrating how a choreographic staging of physical impact and risk affects viewers bodily. Highlighting symbolic dimensions that refer to animal drives and the dreamlike atmosphere of the collective unconscious (p. 9), she raises a crucial introductory question: how should we describe the spectator's lived corporeal experience when confronted with an aesthetic object marked by heightened physicality, violence, and extremity?

To answer this, Chapter 2 historicizes and theorizes the concept of *Einführung*. Drawing on Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, Leroy highlights the relation between empathy and aesthesis, defining it as a shared muscular and kinaesthetic mode of consciousness rather than a purely psychological process. She then traces related accounts of affective transmission through David Hume's theory of sympathy, Edith Stein's ethical anthropology, and Max Scheler's conception of emotional contagion (*Sympathie*). Against contemporary tendencies to reduce empathy to emotional kindness, Leroy reasserts its kinaesthetic foundations, arguing that kinaesthesia constitutes the primary locus where sympathy, *Einführung*, and empathy converge (p. 20). Finally, by following the concept into dance theory through Henry Charlton Bastian and John Martin's notion of "kinaesthetic sympathy," she arrives at the central question of the chapter: how can contagion occur without contact?

In Chapter 3, Leroy addresses this paradox by proposing that the dancing body projects psychological, affective, and physical experience into its environment, transforming centripetal emotion into centrifugal movement (p. 25). The spectator consequently encounters not a merely physical body but the performer's lived body, establishing a reciprocal relation between stage and audience. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of flesh, Leroy explains how the body, as both object and subject, intertwines with the world to enable the transmission of emotions and movement between bodies (p. 27). This process gives rise to a form of kinaesthetic intersubjectivity informed by Paul Schilder's concept of body image, in which the body is understood as a continually transforming configuration of sensation, intentionality, and

affect, allowing the spectator to embody the movement of the other (p. 28-30).

Chapters 4 and 5 extend this account by exploring the transitional space opened through kinaesthetic empathy. Drawing on Donald Woods Winnicott's concept of transitional space, Leroy argues that the theatrical relation between stage and auditorium creates a zone in which objective reality and imaginative projection intersect. In this space, spectators are kinaesthetically transported beyond the limits of their own bodies, while performers and spectators mutually reinforce one another through a reversible process of embodied transformation. Through analyses of works by Angelin Preljocaj, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, and James Thierrée, Leroy further develops the role of gravity and weight in this process. Dance emerges as a practice that reorganizes the flesh through its negotiation with gravity, allowing both dancers and spectators to experience a temporary release from bodily and psychic constraints. Drawing on Hubert Godard's account of weight as the motor foundation of kinaesthetic empathy, Leroy ultimately argues that the experience of gravity gives rise to a corporeally grounded concern for the other, thereby preparing the book's transition from aesthetics to ethics.

Part II, comprising Chapters 6 to 11, shifts from aesthetics to the ethical implications of kinaesthetic empathy.

In Chapter 6, Leroy argues that the spectator's gaze directed toward the performer provides a form of existential support (p. 49). Reciprocally, the performer's body sustains the spectator's gaze, thereby grounding the spectator's own experience of gravity. Through this mutual exchange, kinaesthetic empathy generates a form of care that operates simultaneously on both performer and spectator. Expanding on her earlier Winnicottian framework, Leroy interprets this relation through the concept of holding. Just as holding an infant enables the integration of drives and sensations into a unified self, the relation between spectator and performer renews and extends this primordial experience. Kinaesthetic empathy thus becomes a form of holding that compensates for lacunae in being, enabling a mode of ethical care distinct from therapeutic cure. However, Leroy's conceptual move to equate gaze with touch remains debatable: while it may hold at a structural or symbolic level, the gaze does not provide the same

gravitational and tactile grounding through which bodily boundaries are physically constituted.

Building upon this concept of holding, Chapters 7 and 8 further distinguish between cure and care. Care is understood as an ethical attitude grounded in attention to the other, rather than a therapeutic intervention. Extending this framework to dance, she argues that kinaesthetic empathy and gravitational contagion function as vehicles of care within performance. Drawing on Emmanuel de Saint Aubert's notion of up-holding (*portance*), Leroy articulates how dance activates a disposition toward mutual support, or *co-portance*, grounding ethical concern in shared corporeal experience.

Chapter 9 addresses the longstanding philosophical exclusion of the non-rational from ethics. Traditional ethical theories privilege reason over passions, impulses, and bodily drives, thereby relegating dance to a pre-ethical domain. Leroy challenges this assumption. While acknowledging Lucian of Samosata's view that only controlled, virtuosic movement can be moral, she rejects the idea that moral value depends on the subordination of the body to the will. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, she argues for the primacy of ethical sensibility as a mode of appearing. In this framework, dance becomes an ethical vehicle precisely through its kinaesthetic contagiousness (p. 62). Its sensuality does not undermine ethics but rather awakens an ethical disposition in the spectator.

Leroy then proposes a "middle way" through care ethics. Drawing on care studies in sociology, she emphasizes that care is not merely a set of actions but also a political and ethical imperative. Synthesizing Winnicott's psychological insights with the care ethics of Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, she argues that ethical concern arises from a fundamental, non-gendered disposition to support and sustain the other (p. 64). Dance, through the spectator's corporeal apprehension of the other, exemplifies both the embodied basis of empathy and the necessity of de-gendering care. Through examples such as Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring*, Leroy demonstrates that kinaesthetic empathy precedes and exceeds gendered distinctions.

In Chapter 10, Leroy engages Maurice Hamington's concept of an embodied epistemology of care. Care can only be fully understood when its corporeal dimension is acknowledged. Rooted in the lived body, care emerges as a universal disposition grounded in shared embodiment, prior to both

social construction and biological differentiation. Hamington and Tronto explicitly reject the association of care with femininity. Care must be actualized through practices and habits, yet it remains dynamic and continually reshaped through action, thus taking on a performative character.

Chapter 11 examines how artistic practices mobilize the body to actualize ethical dynamics that affect both spectators and performers. Leroy analyzes the work of David Toole in DV8's *The Cost of Living*, demonstrating how kinaesthetic empathy can generate care for the other. Drawing on Carolien Hermans, she emphasizes that the disabled body in dance is experienced not as an object (*Körper*) but as a lived body (*Leib*). Kinaesthetic empathy is therefore not reducible to compassion or normative ethical feeling (p. 80). Rather, it reveals a shared aspiration toward lightness and liberation from the weight of material existence. The ethical force of dance lies in this dynamic interplay between weight and its transcendence.

Part III turns to the relation between dance, subjectivation, and self-care.

Leroy begins by discussing Sasha Waltz's *Körper/S/noBody*, arguing that kinaesthetic empathy encapsulates both an existential aspiration toward flight and an ethical concern for the other.

In Chapter 12, she develops the theme of dance as care of the self. Dance “repairs” the body insofar as it mobilizes the corporeal unconscious alongside motor processes, thereby mending gaps in the psychological design (*dessin*) of the body (p. 86). Kinaesthetic empathy mediates between unconscious bodily configurations and both intentional and unconscious desire. Through this process, dance enacts a re-subjectivation of the individual by reorganizing and redrawing the body's unconscious structure.

Leroy argues that all dance expresses a fundamental human effort to rise against inertia. By retracing unconscious desire, dance performs a subjectivating function that exceeds mere tactile interaction. The specific form of care enacted in dance is grounded in the sensorimotor experience of weight. She further explores the notion of the “weight of the flesh” from etymological, physical, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological perspectives. To dance is, in this sense, to leap or to break free from weight, revealing a quasi-spiritual dimension. Desire is

immanent in movement itself, both expressed and enacted through it.

Drawing on Jan Patočka's concept of the three movements of existence, Leroy interprets dance as corresponding to a third, transcendental movement. While the first movement anchors the body in the world and the second instrumentalizes it through technicity, the third movement—dance—generates kinaesthetic empathy through its transcendental character. Dance thus becomes a privileged site in which kinaesthetic empathy, self-transformation, and ethical openness converge (p. 93). Through analyses of works such as Mats Ek's *Smoke* and Crystal Pite's *The Season's Canon*, Leroy demonstrates how dance creates a transitional space in which care operates. This space enables a reweaving of the spectator's lived body and a reshaping of the unconscious body image.

Leroy concludes by conceptualizing movement as a form of ethical restoration in Chapter 13. Movement becomes a way of inscribing a constantly evolving body image in space (p. 103), a process she terms somatography. Through tracing movement, dancers engage in self-care while simultaneously transforming the spectator's embodied experience. Movement notation, therefore, acquires both ethical and therapeutic significance. Ultimately, the experience of weight in dance enables bodies to become subjects and awakens their capacity for ethical action.

However, a lingering tension infuses this ethical pivot. While Leroy successfully illuminates the micro-ethical care generated within the theater, she leaves the macro-political bridge somewhat suspended. One wonders how this fleeting, virtual empathy experienced by a privileged spectator translates into concrete, systemic socio-political care in the outer world, or whether the phenomenology of dance hazards romanticizing empathy at the expense of structural critique.

Leroy's monograph is a concise yet densely argued contribution to phenomenology, dance studies, and ethics. By tracing a trajectory from flesh to ethics, she challenges us to reconsider the stage not as a space of representation but as a site of ethical encounter, where the movement of one body becomes the condition for caring for another. Despite certain conceptual tensions, particularly concerning the relation between sensory modalities, the work succeeds in articulating a powerful and original account of empathy as fundamentally embodied, kinaesthetic, and intersubjective. For scholars of

phenomenology, performance studies, and moral philosophy, this English translation provides an indispensable corrective to the ocularcentrism of traditional performance criticism, successfully injecting a tangible, fleshy dimension into the contemporary ethics of care.