

# Action and Agency in *The Red Shoes*

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## Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's ballet musical *The Red Shoes* (1948) is concerned with topics surrounding phenomenology, action, and embodied agency, and that it exploits resources that are uniquely cinematic in order to "do philosophy." I argue that the film does philosophy in two ways. First, it explicates a phenomenological model of action and agency. Second, it addresses itself to the philosophical question of whether an individual's non-reflective movements – those that are not the result of deliberation or practical reasoning – are properly understood to be actions attributable to her as her own.

**Keywords:** Film; Film-Philosophy; Action; Agency; Phenomenology; Powell and Pres

Of the philosophical topics that film might investigate, those surrounding phenomenology, action, and embodied agency seem to be among those for which the medium is particularly well equipped to make a genuine philosophical contribution. These topics, after all, require thinking about "what it's like" to act, to be an agent, or to have the experience of moving one's body, and the visual and auditory resources that film has at its disposal arguably render it better suited than the written word for explicating and exploring such things (Merleau-Ponty, 1963; Sobchack 1992, 2009). It's a bit surprising, then, that Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's ballet musical *The Red Shoes* (1948) – widely regarded as one of the greatest films ever made – hasn't received attention from those

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working on film-philosophy. The film, after all, concerns itself with all of these issues. Film-phenomenologists working in film studies proper have taken interest in films about sport (see Katharina Lindner (2014) on boxing) and have sometimes focused on dance specifically (see Kate Ince (2017)). But there's been no sustained discussion of *The Red Shoes* among film-phenomenologists, nor any discussion of the contributions that this film specifically might make to our understanding of action and agency.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will argue that *The Red Shoes* exploits resources that are uniquely cinematic in order to “do philosophy” – in the way that authors like Stephen Mulhall (2001) and Thomas Wartenberg (2007) famously argue is possible – in two distinct ways. First, it helps explicate a particular model of action and agency associated with the phenomenological tradition.<sup>2</sup> Second, it addresses itself to the philosophical question of whether an individual's non-reflective movements – those that are *not* the direct result of deliberation or practical reasoning – are properly understood to be actions attributable to her as her own. The film, I'll show, sides with the phenomenological view of action and agency, not only trying to persuade us that certain of an individual's non-reflective movements are attributable to her, but also trying to persuade us that the movements most deeply attributable to an individual are non-reflective.

### *The Red Shoes*

*The Red Shoes* is a film with an intricate plot and an array of puzzling characters who enter into interesting and psychologically complex relationships with one another. In the course of its 136-minute run time, the film addresses issues concerning not only agency and action, but also love, art, loyalty, and human nature. Here, for reasons of space, I'll limit myself to a relatively stripped-down recounting of the plot, focused on elements relevant to the particular line of argument that interests me.

The story is constructed around Victoria Page (Moirá Shearer), a young ballerina who views dance as her *raison d'être*. In the opening

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1. For conversation and comments, I would like to thank David Cumiskey, Byron Davies, David Davies, Christopher Grau, Ankrish Milne, Richard Moran, Josh Rubin, and India Woolmington. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for their excellent criticisms and suggestions.
  2. As I'll go on to clarify, I'm thinking here of contemporary philosophers working on action theory, such as Hubert Dreyfus (2005, n.d.) and Sean Dorrance Kelly (n.d.), who draw upon insights from Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. I'm *not* thinking of those who work specifically on film-phenomenology, though I will have a little bit to say about whether or not a film like *The Red Shoes* can “do” phenomenology.

scenes, we see Page's aunt arranging a meeting between her and the great Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook), impresario of the prestigious Ballet Lermontov. When the meeting occurs, Lermontov is at first skeptical and resistant, but eventually is won over by the dancer's determination. At this point Page is invited to join the company, though in a somewhat minor capacity alongside a number of other dancers.

After a period of training characterized by conflict, frustration, and setbacks, Page gives a magnificent performance in a production of *Swan Lake* at a minor venue, which happens to be attended by Lermontov himself. Based on what he observes, Lermontov deems her the future star of his company – the dancer he wishes to make into his prima ballerina. Lermontov soon decides to create for her a starring role in *The Red Shoes*, a new ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of the same name. He describes the ballet in this way: “It is the story of a young girl who is devoured with an ambition to attend a dance in a pair of red shoes. She gets the shoes and goes to the dance. For a time, all goes well and she is very happy. At the end of the evening she is tired and wants to go home, but the red shoes are not tired. In fact, the red shoes are never tired. They dance her out into the street, they dance her over the mountains and valleys, through fields and forests, through night and day.” To which he adds, “Oh, in the end, she dies.”

Page throws herself into the role. She practices gruelingly, subjecting herself to the relentless criticisms of the drill instructors and the impresario. Technically, she improves as a result of these exercises – her timing, in particular, is initially criticized and then is later lauded. But she also learns to allow the music to permeate her consciousness and guide her movements. On opening night, she is initially nervous, self-conscious, and apprehensive. But in an extended sequence that I take to be the film's centerpiece, she becomes fully absorbed in the show, delivering a transcendent performance – all while wearing the red shoes themselves. Page, now the company's star, falls in love with Julian Craster (Marius Goring), composer of the ballet. Lermontov disapproves of the relationship, insisting that it constitutes a kind of divided loyalty inconsistent with her role in the dance company. Page ultimately departs the company with her new lover, leaving behind an embittered Lermontov. After a period of depression and anger, however, Lermontov tracks down his former star and invites her to dance *The Red Shoes* again. She agrees, and returns to the company, but before the performance Craster arrives in her dressing room with the intention of taking her away. Lermontov, also in the dressing room, demands that she stay. Craster eventually senses that his cause is lost and he departs. Page – dressed in full costume, including the red shoes – is escorted toward the stage in a trance-like state.

Suddenly, her body stops, pivots, and flees from the theater onto an outdoor balcony. There, she hurls herself over the railing into the path of a train – or, perhaps, the shoes hurl her through some sort of spiritual possession or through exertion of supernatural powers. Craster, waiting for the train, witnesses Page’s collision with the locomotive. He removes the red shoes, and Page dies.

### **Phenomenology, Embodied Agency and Skill**

That film as a medium is well equipped to investigate issues pertaining to agency has not gone unnoticed by film theorists and film-phenomenologists. As Jenny Chamarette (2017) explains it, film-phenomenology is interested in the very notion of subjectivity and of what it’s like to be a subject at all (p. 313), and thus will concern itself with questions about what it is to be an agent with subjective experiences. Much of the most interesting and prominent work in film-phenomenology has considered the potential for film to represent and explore the subjective experiences of women and of queer individuals (Lindner, 2012; Ince, 2017; Chamarette, 2017). But what I wish to suggest here is that *The Red Shoes* uses the medium of film to take up a more general question about the nature of agency and action *as such*. Here’s what I mean. A traditional question in the philosophy of action – arguably *the* question around which the subfield is organized – is this: What is required for the movements of an individual’s body to be properly attributed to her? Put slightly differently: What is required for the movements of a person’s body to be understood as genuine expressions of her agency? So, for instance, when a person runs across the beach in order to greet her loved one, or gyrates her body in order to make a philosophical point, the movements of her body are hers in some special sense. They are, we think, constitutive of actions that she performs. However, if her body moves in precisely the same ways, but does so as a result of hurricane winds acting upon her or as a result of an epileptic seizure, we’re apt to deny that the movements are attributable to her in this way. In such cases, the movements are something the person undergoes, rather than something she does. The philosopher of action’s question is about how to understand the difference between these two sorts of cases.

In the hands of contemporary analytic philosophers, attempts to answer this question have generally involved trying to make sense of the causal relationship between the agent on the one hand and bodily movements that are attributable to her on the other (Davidson, 1980; Bratman, 1987; Searle, 1983; Velleman, 2000). So, for instance, these philosophers sometimes characterize an agent as a being with the

capacity to form certain mental states – like intentions, beliefs, commitments, and so on – through the process of practical reasoning, and then characterize as genuine actions those bodily movements that are causally connected in the right way to the relevant mental states. The picture that emerges, then, is one in which paradigmatic cases of full-blooded human actions are events in which a person deliberates about what to do through conscious reflection on her reasons, forms an intention or a commitment as a result, and then moves as a consequence of the causal force that her mental states exert over her body.

Some prominent philosophers – drawing upon the Continental phenomenological tradition associated with Husserl, Heidegger, and (especially) Merleau-Ponty – have attempted to challenge the terms under which this investigation has been carried out (Dreyfus, 2005; Kelly, n.d.). Their thought, roughly put, is that the analytic picture treats the agent as if she's an entity over and above her own body, in a way that ultimately alienates her from the action she's purported to take. An agent, according to these authors, shouldn't be understood as a thing that's separate and distinct from the body that moves, nor should exercises of one's agency be thought of as something that takes place in the mind in a way that's walled off from the body. To be an agent, according to the view, is to be deeply dependent on one's body – agency is, we might say, essentially embodied – and the paradigmatic cases of full-blooded action are not bodily movements related in the right way to a person's mental deliberation, but rather are movements that result from her skillful dispositions or ability to cope with her environment. To quote Hubert Dreyfus (n.d.), the expert actor doesn't need to "decide" what to do, but "thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations he sees immediately what to do" (p. 6). Thus, he does not deliberate about what needs to happen or about which bodily movements are necessary in order to make it happen. Nor does he represent to himself the goal toward which he must work, or the means necessary in order to reach it. Instead, "acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one's sense of the situation" (p. 12). Contemporary phenomenologists of action often illustrate this view by discussing expert drivers, chess players, and language-users. So it makes perfect sense, I think, that a film focused on an expert dancer would be able to teach us something about these issues.<sup>3</sup>

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3. That phenomenologists would be interested in dance is, of course, not surprising. For a classic treatment of the topic, see Sheets-Johnstone (1966).

## Action and Agency in *The Red Shoes*

Now, contemporary authors writing on the phenomenology of action typically employ metaphorical language to explain their view as well as to differentiate their position from the standard analytic model to which it is opposed. Expert agents are said to experience the “flow” of activity, or to have firm “grip” or “grasp” of their situation, for instance. While such language gets us part of the way to understanding what the phenomenologist is up to, it’s nevertheless frustratingly imprecise and vague, especially in a context where we’re trying to get clear on the sense in which the view constitutes a genuine alternative to the dominant ways of thinking about action and agency. Furthermore, the original Continental phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) are notoriously difficult writers, whose ideas often seem obscure even to those who are deeply immersed in them, and whose writings are littered with specialized language and technical terms of art. So one philosophical task that *The Red Shoes* might take up would involve giving us a better understanding of what the phenomenological theory of action is – that is, it might take up the genuinely philosophical task of explicating or illustrating a difficult theory or view (Wartenberg, 2007, pp. 32–54). Indeed, we might even suspect that film as a medium has resources at its disposal that render it particularly well suited to explicate a philosophical theory that is phenomenological in character. As Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich (2016) have argued, film can “serve as an audiovisual, and often narrative, means to shed light on what already exists in phenomenological writing but which film ... is able to demonstrate in its own and potentially more accessible way” (p. 19). Phenomenologist action theorists are, after all, making use of experiential concepts when talking about things like “flow” and “grasp,” and so it seems reasonable to hope that in the hands of skillful filmmakers, such concepts could be explored through the use of camera movement, special effects, music, and editing.<sup>4</sup>

Consider, as an obvious example, an early moment in which Page seems for the first time to come into her own as a dancer. In the scene, she is dancing in a performance of *Swan Lake*. We initially see things from the point of view of the audience, observing the stage and all of the dancers

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4. Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich make this remark in the context of fleshing out the various meanings of the term “film-phenomenology.” Here they are explaining what they call “exemplification,” wherein a film helps to illuminate ideas and concepts deployed by phenomenologists and thus actually “does phenomenology.” In the article, they cite as an example of “exemplification” Dylan Trigg’s (2011, 2012) readings of Cronenberg and Herzog. To this I would add David Davies’ (2008) reading of Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*.

third-personally. However, as Page's performance ascends to new heights, the film shifts perspectives – at least for a few crucial seconds. We, the viewers, now occupy Page's point of view as she performs pirouettes and the camera spins us exuberantly, in time to the music. This moment, brief though it is, telegraphs the film's interest in the contrast between the experience of observing a virtuoso performance third-personally and the first-personal experience of the activity's "flow."<sup>5</sup>

The film's most important and elaborate exploration of the experience of flow, however, comes two-thirds of the way through, in a seventeen-minute long sequence in which Page dances in *The Red Shoes* ballet for the first time. As a prelude, we are shown a self-conscious and nervous Page backstage, fretting that she'll be unable to recall the beat on which she is to enter. She seems to find the gravity of the moment distracting and oppressive, and also seems vaguely uncomfortable and awkward in her environment, requiring reassurance and comfort from others. Lermontov, in an attempt to settle her, gives her a few notes, and then rather than encouraging her to rehearse in her mind the steps she needs to take, he tells her to let the music guide her. "The music is all that matters," he says. "Nothing but the music." At this point, she's immediately able to recall her cue to enter – she sees immediately what to do – and the performance that she proceeds to deliver is a transcendent one, which we're later informed mesmerizes the audience and critics alike. But the interesting thing about the scene is *not* the way it conveys what it's like to witness, from the point of view of the audience, a performance like this one. Indeed, the film ignores this almost entirely. As Adrienne McLean (1988) points out in her retrospective study of the film, "The ballet [scene] was not only *not* to be a filmed theatre piece but had become as well a look into the mind of the dancer Victoria Page and a revelation of her thoughts and emotions as she is dancing" (p. 50). In other words, we're given a window into what it's like to move oneself expertly and skillfully in the way she does and to experience the flow of expert activity.

The film does not, it should be emphasized, grant us access to Page's subjective experience exclusively (or even primarily) through point-of-view shots. To put it as Karen Backstein (1994) does, the "strategy of seeing as [Page] permeates the film." And this is true "[e]ven when the film does not literalize her point of view cinematically" (p. 43). So in the crucial 17-minute ballet scene, we're taken out of the audience and placed onto the stage as participants in the performance. At this point, we are

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5. The term "flow," used in this way, was introduced and popularized by Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1990).

## *Action and Agency in The Red Shoes*

invited into the world that Page occupies as she dances, even if we're not literally seeing things from her point of view. Page conjures up a number of emotionally-charged images to which we, the audience, are privy. She imagines, for instance, that Craster – with whom we suspect she's begun to fall in love – is onstage, conducting her movements. She imagines Lermontov doing the same. And then she imagines she's dancing with, and is being carried around the stage majestically by, her fiery and eccentric instructor, Ljubov (Léonide Massine). At one point, we see her floating freely through the sky, and later we see the dancers onstage transformed into flowers, birds, and clouds. Soon, a piece of newspaper comes to life and joins in the performance. Perhaps most significantly, the audience eventually disappears, replaced in the shot by ocean waves crashing onto the beach. The idea, I take it, is that Page has more or less transported herself into the world of the ballet, and also a world of emotions and wonder. She is no longer aware of herself as an object being observed, nor is she thinking about or representing to herself which steps she needs to take next. She's just doing what needs to be done, absorbed in the moment, experiencing the flow of the activity. And we, the viewers of the film, are transported as well, absorbed into the performance in the way that an expert dancer like Page would be.

Phenomenologists working in action theory try to get us to understand what all of this means through use of metaphor and specialized language. What I'm suggesting is that *The Red Shoes* is up to something similar, but that it uses resources specific to its medium to carry out a philosophical task for which the written word alone might seem inadequate.

To conclude this section, I want to cite one more bit of evidence that, I believe, indicates that *The Red Shoes* really is interested in these notions of embodied agency, expertise, and flow, and is using them to help us think about which bodily movements are attributable to an agent. In the time leading up to her first performance in *The Red Shoes* ballet, Page receives advice and instruction from both her dance coach, Ljubov, and the conductor/composer, Craster. The former tends to offer Page very explicit directives about precise ways to move her body. The latter, on the other hand, talks more vaguely about what she should be imagining when she's on the stage (he recommends the flower, bird, and cloud images that appear in the extended ballet sequence, for instance). He also enjoins her to attune herself to the music. These two different sorts of advice and instruction map nicely onto the distinction between movements that are the result of representing to oneself the way one will move and the reasons for doing so, and movements resulting from something like “flow.” And while neither the film nor phenomenologists of action would deny that the sorts of deliberate drills that Ljubov puts Page through are necessary



for skill acquisition, there really can't be any doubt that Craster's words are the ones most relevant to the moments when Page finally comes into her own and is absorbed into the dance. So by the time the ballet sequence arrives, we as the audience are already primed to draw a distinction between two ways of moving one's body that mirrors the one we find in the philosophical literature.

### The Nature of Action

Above, I've argued that *The Red Shoes* uses cinematic resources to help us better understand an alternative to the standard analytic model of action. But now I wish to argue that the film not only helps us to better understand the alternative, but also tries to persuade us that that model is the correct one. That is, I wish to suggest that *The Red Shoes*, if it succeeds in what it's trying to do, will convince us to reject the standard way of thinking about action and agency employed by analytic philosophers in favor of one embraced by phenomenologists like Dreyfus.

But how does the film attempt to convince us? How does it make its case? It does so, I think, by drawing upon the grasp of the concepts "agency" and "action" that we, the audience, bring with us into the theater. After all, the concept of an agent, and the idea that certain doings are attributable to an agent in a special sense, are parts of our everyday pre-theoretical thought and talk. And so it's natural for us, as we view the film, to make implicit judgments about which movements are attributable to Page, which are most deeply hers, which are full-blooded expressions of her agency, and so on. The film then seeks to elicit the judgment that Page's movements are most deeply hers, in the sense dictated by the agency concepts we already possess, when she's absorbed in the dance or is experiencing the flow of the activity. For in the moments in which she quits deliberating and trying to represent to herself what she's about to do and how she's going to go about doing it – in those moments in which she's finally on the stage dancing – we're not inclined to think that we've lost Victoria Page, as if she's been occupied by some foreign spirit or force. On the contrary, we're inclined to think she's more present than ever, or that she's fully come into her own.

I'd like now to consider this reading of the film in light of the climactic scene in which Page meets her demise, which I think bears on the issues I've been discussing. In the closing minutes of the film, Page finds herself facing what appears to be an irresolvable conflict between her lover and her craft – between Craster the conductor on the one hand, and ballet on the other. Before she is about to go onstage for the first time after having left the company, she is confronted by Craster, who insists that she quit the show and leave with him, and by Lermontov, who demands that she

## *Action and Agency in The Red Shoes*

leave Craster and commit herself exclusively to dance. Sensing that she's going to side with Lermontov, Craster departs to catch his train. Being led to the stage while wearing the red shoes, Page turns, runs from the theater onto an outdoor balcony, and flings her body in front of the train that Craster is waiting for.

Viewers of the film seem to differ on how exactly to interpret what happens here. Scholars have tended to read this straightforwardly as a case of self-termination. Peter Fraser (1987), for instance, writes that "faced with the choice between Lermontov and [Craster], great art and compromise, she is immobilized and, ultimately, brought to suicide" (p. 49). Similarly, McLean (1988) writes that "before the overture is finished, the ballerina has run from the theatre and thrown herself in front of the Riviera Express" (p. 41). On the other hand, it's often suggested in reviews and popular writing on the film that what we're seeing in the film's final moments is a case of possession. Roger Ebert (2005), for instance, ends his "Great Movies" review of the film by considering this scene and concluding that "[Page] is powerless, once she puts on the red shoes." This reading is supported by the fact that the shoes do seem, at times, to possess supernatural powers – as in an earlier scene where Page appears to magically jump into them. A third intriguing possibility is suggested by Martin Scorsese (1994), in his forward to Ian Christie's famous study of the works of Powell and Pressburger. The possibility is that the film is ambiguous here, and intends simply to raise the question whether it was the shoes or whether it was instead Page who ultimately carried out the deed (p. xvi). In support of this, it can be noted that just before she throws herself, or is thrown, in front of the train, we get a series of alternating shots of Page's face and then of the shoes. On such a reading, the editing is less intent upon telling us whether it is Page who makes the choice, or whether she's been overtaken, than on posing the question.<sup>6</sup>

The scene is particularly important for our purposes, as it raises questions about who or what, exactly, is responsible for the movements of Page's body. And interpreting it correctly might seem to be the key to determining what the film is saying about agency, as the central question seems to be whether or not she's exercising agency in this scene. The thing to notice, though, is that all three of the readings discussed above accept implicitly the way of thinking about action and agency embraced by those working with the standard analytic model. The guiding

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6. In the commentary track for the Criterion Blu-ray release of this film, Scorsese (2010) talks through the scene, citing this evidence for this particular reading of the ending.

philosophical question for such philosophers, recall, is: How must an agent relate to the movements of her body in order for those movements to be her own and for them to constitute full-blooded action? The three readings treat the film either as suggesting that Page is related to her movements in the right way, or as suggesting that she is instead overpowered by some force that is itself responsible for the movements, or as simply asking the viewer to consider which of these two ways of understanding what happened is correct. But I wish to propose an alternative reading of what's going on here – one that I think to be more in line with the attitude that the film as a whole seems to take toward action and agency.

My suggestion is that in the final scene, when the shots alternate between Page's face and the red shoes, we're being invited to think of the two as constituting a unity. So the moment is not best understood as one in which we're to discern whether Page acts or the red shoes do, but as one in which we're to acknowledge that dancing is part of Page's essence and so isn't the kind of thing that can be set in opposition to her. The ending, on this reading, can be thought of as a kind of test to determine whether the audience has come to realize that the question "Is it *her* or is it *the shoes* that is acting?" – or alternatively "Is it *her* or is it *the urge to dance* that determines what she does?" – is one that ought to be rejected. Having come this far in the film, we're supposed to have acquired the belief that the movements that are the truest expression of, or that are most reflective of, her true self are those undertaken by her urge to dance, as symbolized by the red shoes. Indeed, after Page is hit by the train, as she lays dying on the track, Craster removes the red shoes from her feet – suggesting, I think, an identity relation between her shoes being removed and her ceasing to exist. In other words, there is simply no question of there being an opposition between her on the one hand and her motivation or inclination to dance on the other, because for her to exist at all is for her to have that motivation or inclination. Of course, all of this leaves unanswered the question of why her motives qua dancer demand self-termination – a question I'll not take up here. But this question, to me, seems like the one the film really is raising in its final moments, as opposed to the question about whether it is Page or the shoes that are responsible for the tragic events that end the film.

I expect this interpretation will be met with resistance in the face of some significant counter-evidence, so I'll pause to consider that evidence. In the climactic scene, we see Page facing the camera, walking toward us. Her face registers dismay. Then her feet begin moving, as if by force, in the opposite direction. Doesn't this sequence settle the interpretive matter in favor of this being a classic case of possession? Doesn't this show that she

## Action and Agency in *The Red Shoes*

really is overcome by a foreign force? One reason for thinking that the answer here is “no” is that when the red shoes are eventually removed by Craster, we get no indication that they possess any sort of agential power independent of Page. This is a departure from the fairy tale, in which the shoes continue to dance once they’re cut off. But I think there is a deeper reason for resisting the claim that this scene is suggesting that the shoes have overtaken Page as a kind of foreign force. To identify the essence of a person’s agency with a particular capacity or drive isn’t to assume wholeheartedness or lack of ambivalence when one does move as a result of that capacity or drive. Kant, for instance, thinks that genuine actions are those that a person wills through rational choice. But this doesn’t imply that a person could not be deeply apprehensive when performing the action she chooses, as when other parts of her soul weaken her will. And so when we see Page register dismay as she begins to move toward the balcony, there’s no reason that we must conclude that the force moving her is an external one. Rather, we might conclude that other inclinations are impeding the element of her nature that is indeed the most essential element.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the fact that she appears torn cannot settle matters one way or the other as we attempt to discern whether Page is acting or is instead being acted upon.

I wish now to consider an earlier scene in the film in order to add to, and complicate a bit, my case that the *The Red Shoes* is mounting a challenge to the standard analytic model of action. This additional way in which it challenges the standard model is distinct from the first way, and might not be acceptable to everyone who endorsed it. But I take the two to be related, in that they both involve a rejection of the idea that action must be the result of deliberation. At the party where Page meets Lermontov for the first time, the impresario challenges the ballerina to justify her desire to be a dancer.

BORIS LERMONTOV: Why do you want to dance?

VICTORIA PAGE: [Pauses briefly] Why do you want to live?

BORIS LERMONTOV: [Taken aback] Well I don’t know exactly why, er, but I must.

VICTORIA PAGE: That’s my answer too.

Let’s examine this exchange, now, in light of what we’ve been saying about the attribution of bodily movements to agents. As we’ve said, on the

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7. Now, if the urge to dance really is essential to her nature, this does raise the question of why Page isn’t content to dance in smaller venues and is instead drawn to Lermontov’s company – though perhaps the answer is that it’s part of the nature of the activity to strive to be part of the very best performances.

standard analytic model movements constitute full-blooded actions that are expressions of one's agency when they're deliberate. That is to say, paradigm instances of action are the result of mental states, desires, or intentions formed on the basis of reasons that the agent herself has endorsed. To put it as Elizabeth Anscombe (2000) famously does, "Intentional actions are ones to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' has application" (p. 11). So, typically, we think something is an action when a question like "Why did you take the cookie?" or "Why are you knitting that scarf?" is met by the agent with reasons intended to justify carrying out the deed in question, rather than with a response like, "I didn't realize I did that" or "What are you talking about?" Now Lermontov, in this exchange, is making a request for reasons in a sense similar to the one Anscombe has in mind. (He phrases it as a request for reasons for her desire, but clearly he's querying her reasons for pursuing dance as a vocation, which is a sort of ongoing activity). But Page neither rejects the request, nor responds to it in the usual way. She doesn't, for instance, say that she didn't realize she was pursuing dance as a vocation, or that she dances because she finds it rewarding, or that she dances because the categorical imperative instructs her to develop her talents. Rather, perhaps sensing that it cannot be properly answered in the usual way, she invites Lermontov to reframe his question. She invites him to think of it more like the question "Why do you want to live?" than like the questions "Why did you take that cookie?" or "Why are you knitting that scarf?"

Now, living is something we persons do, in the sense of its being an ongoing activity of ours – this is true especially if we're talking about living out one's life, rather than simply being kept biologically alive. Such an activity is constituted by bodily movements taken over a very long period of time, of course, but it seems to be an activity nevertheless. However, living a life isn't something a person chooses to do on the basis of reasons. We wouldn't ask someone why she's living out her life and expect a response along the lines of, "Well, it seemed like a pleasant enough thing to do for the time being" or "I'm hoping to be paid for it." Rather, living one's life seems to be an activity or project that is "given" to us by virtue of our being the kinds of creatures that we are. To put it somewhat over-dramatically, living is our plight. Lermontov thus gives the proper answer when asked why he wants to live: "I must." Living isn't something that a person may opt out of for the sake of engaging in some other activity instead. It's something that she's more or less condemned to do by virtue of her essence.

And this seems to be what the film wants us to think about Page and her dancing. For her, dancing is like living. It is an activity tied to her essence

as an individual in such a way that she cannot opt out without ceasing to *be*. It is her plight, and so asking her why she dances with the expectation of being given a reason is to misunderstand her relationship to dance. But to say this is to reject, in a significant way, the standard analytic model of action. It is to take the position that the actions that are most truly her own are those that are not reasoned about, chosen on the basis of reasons, deliberated over, and selected from her point of view as a detached agent. They're ones that simply flow from her individual essence.

Of course, those who we label Continental phenomenologists have a variety of views about human choice and freedom, many of which wouldn't fit well with this particular thought we've just explored.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, what I'm hoping to highlight is that the film does seem to be championing a view of agency that departs significantly from the standard analytic model into two ways. First, there is the idea that full-blooded action involves non-deliberative movement of one's body through the use of expert-level skill. Second, there is the idea that activity that is most deeply a person's own is not activity that she chooses, but rather activity that is given to her, or that is her plight, on account of her particular nature. The connection between these two ideas is that someone whose plight it is to engage in the activity of dance has a standard of success set for her by the nature of that activity. To be engaged in any activity, after all, is to be at risk of failing, or to be at risk of doing poorly, relative to the standards that define the activity. Thus, Page will succeed insofar as what she does leads to her dancing expertly. And so when Page finally dances in the ballet, she's reached the pinnacle, succeeding in doing what her nature demands.

### **A Complication**

Before concluding, I'd like to consider one complication to the reading I have just offered. If what I've been saying throughout the paper is correct, Page is the character that the film proposes as an exemplar of true agency. But this reading, it might seem, is undermined by the fact that Page finds herself constantly manipulated and controlled by other parties. The most glaring example of this is, of course, her ongoing relationship with Lermontov, which consists of her doing the dancing and Lermontov making all decisions for her. The phenomenon is also seen in the film's conclusion, where Craster and Lermontov butt heads over what path Page's life will take next without giving consideration to the possibility

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8. I'm thinking of existentialist strains in Heidegger's work and of Sartre's writing.

that she might wish to have a say in the matter. How, then, is it possible for the film to be offering Page up as an exemplar of true agency when what she does is so clearly being determined by others?

The first thing I wish to note here is that the ways in which Page is manipulated seem designed to inspire exactly the sort of worry that one is likely to have about the Continental phenomenological model of agency and action. Insofar as a person is no longer deliberating or even thinking about what she's doing, and is instead simply acting straightaway, it seems like she's made immediately vulnerable to being used for others' purposes. And so we might think that giving oneself over to thoughtless "flow" is to more or less make oneself into an instrument for other agents to use – it's a way of giving up one's agency, rather than a way of claiming it. So if Powell and Pressburger really are advocating for the view I've imputed to them, we might think of their including this relationship in the film as a way of them making things difficult for themselves – something like what philosophers do when they raise counterarguments to their own views.

But the key to understanding the film's position on this matter is, I think, to notice the way in which true satisfaction seems ultimately to elude Lermontov. He structures Page's life for her, and makes decisions for her, but he's left mostly frustrated and bitter. He isn't, in the end, able to determine whether she stays at or leaves the company, and this leads to his becoming withdrawn and depressed, sitting in dark rooms alone and smashing mirrors with his fist. More significant still, Lermontov seems often to look longingly at Page, even when he seems to be exercising influence over her. It's as if no matter how much control he has and no matter how much manipulation he engages in, the things she does that are most deeply and importantly hers are things that could never truly be attributable to him. And there certainly seems to be something right about this thought. Attempts to coopt another's agency are bound to be frustrated, as the things we do that are most intimately connected to our agency – like moving our bodies directly – are not the sorts of things that others can author through manipulation. The point, then, is just that there's a level of control that Lermontov cannot and indeed *could* not gain over Page because it is *she* who has the capacity to move her body, and thus his manipulations do not prevent her from exhibiting full-blooded agency (at least as the film understands the notion of full-blooded agency).

To build on this a little, consider a plot point earlier on in the film. Craster, attending a ballet, discovers that his own composition has been plagiarized by his teacher. He writes a letter of complaint to Lermontov, who instructs him that, "It is worth remembering that it is much more

## Action and Agency in The Red Shoes

disheartening to have to steal than to be stolen from.” While Lermontov doesn’t elaborate, the point seems to be that any attempt at plagiarism is bound to disappoint as the true author remains the true author. So too, we might think, with Lermontov’s attempts to claim Page’s movements as his own. However it is that he attempts to exercise control over her, Page remains the true author of her own action.

### Where Are We Left?

I very much doubt that Powell and Pressburger had in mind debates in the philosophy of action literature when making the film – they weren’t philosophers and they didn’t have philosophical training, after all. Rather, I think what they are doing is responding to, and thinking through, some of the same issues that have typically preoccupied action theorists and phenomenologists of action and agency. As I hope I’ve made clear, regardless of whether my precise reading of the film is correct, these filmmakers are most certainly interested in such issues. And insofar as this is what they’re interested in, it’s not really surprising at all that they would end up producing a film that engages with philosophical ideas and that, in some sense, does philosophy. As Stephen Mulhall (2001) says, “[W]hy couldn’t [particular films’] ways of presenting their narrative worlds embody sustained reflection on the part of those who fashioned them upon the kinds of questions that interest philosophers?” (p. 131). The way in which this particular film does philosophy is, I’ve suggested, twofold. First, it helps clarify a position or a view about the nature of agency that is difficult to grasp. Second, it gets us to see what is attractive about the position that it helps to illustrate and explicate. By engaging our commonsense understanding of agency and action, it attempts to persuade us that the phenomenologist’s position is more plausible than the alternative.

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