

CALCULUS OF VARIATIONS

“For Richard Powers, the point of Social 1 is not to teach people how to dance. He wants to change the way people see the world.”

The quote above is of a friend of mine, who said it to me a little over a quarter ago, when we were both in Social 1. I didn't agree with it — to me it was clear that the point of Social 1 was to begin to learn how to dance. He cited as evidence the halftime talks in the middle of each class: they weren't really about dance, usually, but about being open to different perspectives or ways of thinking, or about embracing mess-ups as learning experiences, or so on. It was an interesting viewpoint; I had thought of these as useful life lessons, certainly, but taught for the purpose of becoming a better dancer. My friend thought conversely that dance class was the setting or motivation for these life lessons. (The true answer, as far as I can discern, is probably somewhere in between: there are many reasons to take Social 1, and lots of different things one could get out of it.)

Winter break came, and I thought of other things; but in Social 3, I was reminded again of his quote. Here, there are fewer grand connections between dance and other facets of life: instead, we are given advice about more directly about dance. There are probably many different reasons for this; for example, in a more advanced class, we are trusted to figure out the connections to the real world ourselves, or because people who elect to continue probably care the most about dancing, or maybe because upper-level classes in general are less motivated with real-world applications (as with introductory math or physics classes which repeatedly stress that they are useful in many fields, while upper-division courses can assume that their students are interested in the concepts on their own). In any case (or more likely, several of these cases at once), the difference between the philosophies of Social 1 and Social 3 became more apparent, and I remembered my friend's quote again. In Social 1, you are taught another way to see the world. . . and perhaps it's Social 3 (or 2) in which you actually are taught the intricacies and techniques needed to be good at dance. Seeing the contrast, I have to agree more with my friend: many people in Social 1 don't continue with dance or don't get more than lightly involved, but most of them remember it fondly. They take something useful from the class, but not dance. And I certainly felt that I wasn't good at any kind of social dance until it was reinforced in a second class (though this could just be an example of the general notion that one doesn't truly understand a class until you take the class after it). So what did I get out of Social 1, and why did I take it?

The second question is an interesting one, for I have no clear answer. The proximate cause is, of course, a friend of mine insisting I would enjoy it, and forwarding me the email announcing the second section with the subject “Sign up NOW,” but why did he think I was interested? He was right; but why was I interested? It's slightly disquieting that I don't actually have any idea; had I known what it was like I would have signed up in a heartbeat, but the whole social dance scene (or even its existence) was nebulous to me. I knew only that I hated dancing in high school, and that I liked swing and waltz music. So it seems as if the lesson I would learn from Social 1 is how to approach the world with a more open mind and a willingness to adapt to new situations, but instead I somehow discovered that I really actually liked dancing. And maybe in Social 1 I missed the point about how we see the world; certainly, I heard and internalized all of the lessons, but I thought the most about applying them to dance, which is why I was so surprised by my friend's quote about perceiving the world. It took a contrast, a Social 3 that seemed to be about dancing at least on the surface, for me to realize what I can get out of social dance besides recreation, and though I signed up for Social 3 in order to become a better dancer, I also ended up with some perspective.

I'm taking Social 2 next quarter, firstly so I can get better at cross-step and swing; but I wonder what other ideas I'll pick up along the way. . .