

Movement & Meaning

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The encouragement of movement among our children from infants through early childhood perhaps reflects our intuition that movement is essential to learning during this early and crucial period. In this period before language has been acquired or remains seemingly more pedestrian than the communication of concepts and ideas, movement seems the key to both acquiring knowledge, gaining and expressing meaning.

Mark Johnson discusses the relationship between meaning and the body in his 2007 book *The Meaning of the Body*. In his first chapter focusing on the role of movement, he holds that “*from the very beginning of our life, and evermore until we die, movement keeps us in touch with our world in the most intimate and profound way. In our experience of movement, there is no radical separation of self from world.*”¹ Importantly, Johnson expands upon Sheets-Johnstone’s idea of the primacy of movement by showing that movement is basic to the establishment of meaning. Furthermore, in this passage it is key that he understands that this interconnection is not simply one of those tender formative pre- or early-language years, but is essential “evermore until we die.” Too bad we haven’t adequately felt or understood this connection because we have a life trajectory that strongly tends to progressively limit and reduce movement. Why then would we not expect an accompanying decline through life in vitality affects and the capacity to create fresh meaning?

Johnson discusses movement patterns, similar to the terms that Daniel Stern discusses vitality forms, as having a defining trajectory or shape. For example, movement may be vertical or horizontal, may move from inside to outside or vice versa, may be straight or curved, and so on. He also notes that movement, perhaps capturing something of the sense in which we have discussed “movement in itself,” as being associated with qualities such as explosive, graceful, halting, weak, or jerky.

Following Sheets-Johnstone who called these distinguishable patterns of movement that have both shape and quality corporeal or body concepts, Johnson refers to them in the terms he and George Lakoff developed, namely, *image schemas*. He understands these image schemas to be foundational to, and constitutive of, all meaning, no matter how highly conceptual or seemingly abstract. While we may be comfortable with this sort of understanding of the acquisition of meaning for pre-language children, we will likely find it challenges our understanding of how we acquire meaning in later life. We commonly think that meaning is contained in concepts that we are then taught through explanation and exemplification. That is, we think of meaning as something delivered to us by means of language in terms of concepts. Johnson states his position quite clearly, “*The key to my entire argument is that meaning is not just what is consciously entertained in acts of feeling and thought; instead, meaning reaches deep down into our corporeal encounter with our environment.*”² That is, all meaning is based in and founded on the experience of the human body moving in and interacting with its environment.

¹ Johnson, p. 20, ital. in orig.

² Ibid., p. 25.

Meaning is grounded in felt and experienced qualities and in principled relationships all established in movement.

One simple image schema that is easy to understand is INSIDE-OUTSIDE which can then be paired with the CONTAINER metaphor. Clearly from earliest human experiences, even prenatal, there is the experience of the distinction between inside and outside and most often in qualitative terms. Inside the womb is safe and nurturing. The movement from inside to outside is highly charged even in the preconscious experience of birth. Eating and excreting require movement from outside to inside to outside and are highly charged emotionally from birth. The body and particularly movement involving moving from outside to inside the body and the inverse are fundamental movement experiences in which we understand not only our bodies in relationship to the world, but the fundamental relationship with all the accompanying logic of INSIDE-OUTSIDE and the CONTAINER metaphor that underlies everything from concepts of category to issues of definition and distinction. Yet, we can also appreciate that it is quite possible that lived experience in life would lead to different experiential bases as well as relational principled understandings of this fundamental bodily concept or image schema. Consider how attentive we are to such things as setting “clear boundaries” and avoiding “inappropriate boundaries” or the “trespass of personal boundaries.” We are concerned with touching others because this behavior establishes the experiences and principles of very fundamental image schemas that then provide the basis for so much else of what we understand and experience. We often attribute personal difficulties or seeming aberrant behavior to such fundamental image schematic formations as INSIDE-OUTSIDE.

These basic image schemas are usually constructed not from a single experience or movement (although they may be powerfully shaped by a traumatic experience), but rather through routinized movement, patterned movement. We'll take this up in much greater detail when we consider gesture, but it is clear that it is relevant to dancing. Dancing presents repetitive patterns of movement that are often strongly associated with quality and that establish specific sets of distinct image schemas or bodily concepts.

Let's take stock a bit. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone offered “bodily concepts” as foundational to human discovery of self and world. Mark Johnson, relying on work done with George Lakoff, developed this idea in the terms of “image schemas.” Image schemas seem to be processes and relational, akin to verbs. Lakoff, more focused on categories, developed the notion of “basic level categories” relying on a history of the concept that stems from the middle of the twentieth century. This construct complements the “image schemas” by being more like nouns. What is constantly present in Lakoff's discussion of “basic level categories” is that they arise from and are based in movement patternings, that is, the development of sensorimotor programs, or we might appropriately refer to them as gestures. This reveals the movement, relational, active, bodily, neurophysiological grounding of categories ... and that is a major revelation. For example the basic level category “chair” is bodily grounded in the gestural pattern of sitting. Notice that the higher level category “furniture” does not have a single gestural program associated with it, but many rather different movement patterns and would thus, necessarily it would be argued, arise at a later stage. Also lower level categories such as “kitchen chair” or “bean bag chair” are connected with the general gestural program “sitting” yet have refinements or sub-programs that allow the subset distinction. Thus, there is strong evidence that basic

level categories which are foundational to the way we understand ourselves and our environment are based at once necessarily on both the distinctiveness of the human body (its distinctive neurophysiology) and also on movement/gestural/touch interactional experiential processes.

Continuing our stock taking, because basic level categories are grounded in human experience, the implications for category theory are deeply significant. The establishment of basic level categories serves to undermine classical category theory which is grounded on the notion that reality exists independent of human perception and conception shaped in itself in the terms we grasp as categories and distinctions. Grasping basic level categories demands the development of category theory.

A major aspect of the development of category theory is the awareness that basic level categories are shaped on gradients of characteristics that correlate with experience. While all human bodies have closely similar neurophysiology, clearly not all human experience is the same. There are obviously cultural, historical, and individual variations. These add a healthy messiness to category theory that is always considered unwanted in classical theory. It is proposed that understandings and distinctions of categories are based operationally on best cases or “prototypes” rather than on logically defined distinctive features. A prototype is a loose idea of what a representative of a category should generally look or be like and then other members of the category can be admitted or excluded based on some proposed likeness or difference to the prototype. Obviously this similarity/difference could be constructed in terms of limitless attributes of the prototype. The prototype arises based on the most common or natural gestural patterns, affordances (Gibson), enactions (Varela) one would have with a category delimiter and there are fairly clear grounds for how these prototypes are selected and function. Best examples usually function without awareness or consciousness to distinguish categorical boundaries. And, obviously, best examples (prototypes) are not the same from culture to culture; they are not universal. This helps us appreciate the complexities of communication and the rich varieties of world views. It might be argued that if classical category theory held, there would be no need for comparative culture studies.

Movement then is the stuff of meaning in every sense from infancy throughout life. Mark Johnson sums it up this way:

We humans are live creatures. We are acting when we think, perhaps falling in and out of step with the environment, but never are our thoughts outside of it. Via the aesthetics of our bodily senses, the environment enters into the very shape of our thought, sculpting our most abstract reasoning out of our embodied interactions with the world.³

We now appreciate that bodily concepts/image schemas and basic level categories are the mechanisms by which through movement/gesture/touch we discover and construct ourselves and coincidentally relationally our environment. Dancing as the quintessential human form of movement/gesture/touch is then inseparable from the most fundamental human meaning-making.

³Ibid., 154.

Being aware of this aspect of dancing we may begin to think of the relationship between meaning and dancing in quite different terms. We often ask ourselves, "What is the meaning of that dance?" And we may sometimes even come up with some programmatic explanation or description; usually, however, we are confounded as to how to approach this question. Yet, were we to understand that dancing, as routinized patterned movement that in itself may have not specifiable meaning whatsoever can easily be understood in the terms of bodily concept and image schema and basic level categories to establish the experiential and even logical reasoned basis for the very principles on which meaning can be acquired and expressed. Further, we may begin to understand that the analysis of meaning related to specific genres or types of dancing is not in offering some explanatory statement of its meaning, but rather in articulating what image schemas or bodily concepts and basic level categories are being established in the bodies of the dancers.

Now, this proposition seems rather abstract at this point. In the next lecture I will offer an extended comparative example.