

The Primacy of Movement and Gesture

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There is a great deal of insight in Mark Johnson's 2007 book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, yet I want to take issue with his title. Though I think his emphasis on the term "body" accurately reflects his intention in the book, in some important ways, I think it perpetuates the separation of mind and body that he rightfully is eager to overcome. Johnson relies on Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's 1999 book *The Primacy of Movement*, even to the point of beginning his book with a chapter "The Movement of Life." It is clear to me that he appreciates the implications of Sheets-Johnstone, yet he nonetheless centers his attention on the body rather than movement which would have been my choice and a better one I think. I'll return to provide critique of Johnson, but we first need to at least grasp a bit of Sheets-Johnstone's understanding of movement. Let us begin with this provocative passage:

In the beginning, we are simply infused with movement—not merely with a propensity to move, but with the real thing. This primal animateness, this original kinetic spontaneity that infuses our being and defines our aliveness is our point of departure for living in the world and making sense of it. ... We literally discover ourselves in movement. We grow kinetically into our bodies. In particular, we grow into those distinctive ways of moving that come with our being the bodies we are. In our spontaneity of movement, we discover arms that extend, spines that bend, knees that flex, mouths that shut, and so on. We make sense of ourselves in the course of moving. (p. 136.)

There is enormous gravity and insight in this dense passage. Let's begin to unpack it and to appreciate the implications. Sheets-Johnstone is saying that we are born into the world not with concepts and consciousness, but with a moving body, a body equipped with some sensorimotor programs. Of course, some of these are essential to breathing and all of our physiological processes, but there are others that are engaged in "groping" the world (she calls it "spontaneity") in acts of self and environmental discovery. We don't learn how to move in these ways as we come to life even in the womb and after we are born, we come with movement as identical to and necessary for life itself. Life means moving from life's beginning to its end. Further, we come with a human body that has amazing, but not infinite, potential. Knees and other joints bend or flex in just certain planes. Mouths open and close but only so far and do so connected with specific events like eating. Spines flex and twist only in certain directions. Sheets-Johnstone simply reminds us of what we likely already know perhaps not so much from our own memories as infants, but our experience with infants. Infants move. They do not move to accomplish anything in the sense of some "I can," but rather they move with life. In movement, however seemingly somewhat random in the beginning, we begin to discover ourselves and our world as we encounter the world into which we are born.

The implications of this passage, these ideas, are enormous. We may begin to grasp the meaning of her term "primacy of movement." It suggests that such important concepts as self, consciousness,

awareness, knowledge of the world, perception, meaning, and vitality are all grounded in movement, self-movement, and that we don't learn to move in this primal sense, we move as we are alive.

Sheets-Johnstone looks to Edmund Husserl's works *Ideas II* and *Ideas III* to develop this notion. Husserl tied his idea of "animate organism," an important alternative to mind/body, to living creatures and the full sense of their livingness, that is, of their carrying on activities in the world. (p. 134). The immediate importance of this perspective avoids any separation of humans from other animate creatures, who arguably discover their own selves through their self-movement. That they may not come to the sort of perception and awareness humans experience would be grounded in the physical and kinesthetic differences between physical bodies. Thus humans and other animate beings are alike with respect to the primacy of movement and different in the make-up and functioning of their bodies. Another important insight in Husserl's term "animate organism" is the notion of the understanding of living beings as moving organisms. The rather inelegant term "organism" indicates a complex multidimensional system that is integrated. It circumvents the difficulties that accompany the hierarchical mind/body separation and valuation.

A quick word which I'm adding here on this separation of mind and body simply because I've recently heard a number of students indicate that they'd never heard or thought about this dichotomy. In religious and educational environments that have characterized the west for a very long time, the soul/spirit/mind is strongly encouraged and enabled while the body is discouraged or disabled. In other contexts such as material culture, leisure, and romance the body seems the focus. The exclusionary forces of both these valuations tend to lead to a limited and often conflicted understanding of what it means to be human. This tension between mind and body, brain and body, soul and body, has been defining to much of western history. While the most common strategy to deal with the tension is to establish one position to the defeat and exclusion of the other—that is, mind becomes the sole seat of importance with the body entirely disabled, or vice versa—it is not difficult to see the utter impossibility of this strategy as well as the endless unfortunate implications of pursuing it. Yet, we have been so identified with the structure and tension that we have rarely been able to step aside from engaging it. Johnson, as I'll argue, supports the tension even as he states his rejection of it.

Returning now to Sheets-Johnstone, let me quote another passage:

If we take seriously that the (experience) "I move" precedes the (conceptual realization) "I can do," and if we take with equal seriousness the fact that specific perceptual awarenesses of ourselves arising in everyday tactile-kinesthetic acts of doing something are the touchstone and bedrock of our discovery of "I cans" and in turn of corporeal concepts, then it is clear that movement is absolutely foundational not only to perceptual realizations of ourselves as doing or accomplishing certain things or making certain things happen ... and to correlative cognitive realizations of ourselves as capable of just such acts or activities, but to perceptual-cognitive realizations of ourselves as alive, i.e., as living creatures, animate organisms, or animate forms. Aliveness is thus a concept as grounded in movement as the concept "I can." (p. 135)

Wow, this is one long complex sentence followed by a simple short one. She is saying that movement is foundational to our perception of ourselves and thus our sense of self, to our perception of the world we live in, and to our ability to act in the world (our agency). Even more directly, our sense of self, our self-awareness, our perceptions and perceptive knowledge, our ability to act in our world, our agency are founded on self-movement and the experience we acquire through moving in and interacting with our bodies and environment. And, further, all of this is identical with what we understand as “aliveness.”

Lest we think that this primacy of movement is confined to the early infant pre-language period of human development, a common urge, Sheets-Johnstone writes,

In discovering ourselves in movement and in turn expanding our kinetic repertoire of ‘I can’s,’ we embark on a lifelong journey of sense-making. Our capacity to make sense of ourselves, to grow kinetically into the bodies we are, is in other words the beginning of cognition. In making sense of the dynamic interplay of forces and configurations inherent in our on-going spontaneity of movement, we arrive at corporeal concepts. On the basis of these concepts, we forge fundamental understandings both of ourselves and of the world. (pp. 136-7)

Throughout life we depend on self-movement for our self-understanding and our understanding of the world. In subsequent lectures I will take up in more detail a neurophysiological description of what Sheets-Johnstone means by “the dynamic interplay of forces and configurations” which is most fascinating. I will discuss how it is that our very perceptual faculties are grounded in self-movement. For now perhaps it might be enough to simply note that self-movement, as opposed to simply moving around in some non-engaged and passive manner, involves the integration of sensorimotor-proprioceptive neurological loops with the skeletal-muscular systems, that is, the actual physical moving body parts. Self-movement requires demand on the integrated functioning of at least these systems and it involves the afferent proprioceptive information that would be otherwise missing.

Let me take just a brief moment here to talk a bit about what Sheets-Johnstone refers to as “corporeal concepts” and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, have referred to as “image schemas.” This idea is that in groping self-movement basic relationalities emerge through repetitive experiences. The relationship, for example, inside-outside, up-down, source-path-goal, etc. come to be understood corporeally prior to conscious awareness of them or language referents to them. While many of these corporeal concepts are closely interdependent on the very specific distinctiveness of human body characteristics, it is also clear that such image schemas might very well be associated with differing experiences or values. These schemas are presented as foundational to all conception, thought, images, and even reason itself. When, for example, the simple up-down image schema becomes linked with the metaphor UP IS GOOD or UP IS MORE, then we can clearly understand that it pervades our reason and widely supports, in tacit ways, broad conceptual ideas. Johnson invokes John Dewey’s principle of continuity to suggest that sophisticated abstract language-articulate concepts cannot arise independent of these image schemas. Johnson tends to see a distinction of order, I think, between these two areas of conceptualization. I think the implications of this distinction are in some ways untenable and would prefer a different understanding. And I must note that I think neither term “corporeal concepts” or “image schemas” is

adequate in that both subtract movement in favor of resulting positionality. Perhaps the better term would be “gesture.”

Now let me return to Mark Johnson’s book. His “Introduction” chapter focuses heavily on the “bodily basis of meaning” locating meaning and reason in the sensorimotor portion of the brain and the emotional/experiential. We’ll consider later where the emotional/experiential might be located. He insists, quite admirably, that there is no body/mind separation. My concern is that Johnson’s title *The Meaning of the Body* implicates at least a distinction of body and mind. His book tends to locate meaning in the body or as originating or based in bodily experience, yet it seems that there remains some implication that the mind continues, in its own capacity, to somehow make use of the “corporeal concepts” or “image schemas” for the “higher” (Johnson’s term) mental functions. Thus, while there is much to gain from Johnson’s study, I believe that he retains the mind/body separation and continues to use a hierarchical metaphor HIGHER IS BETTER based on the image schema “up-down” that confirms that the body is low and base while the mind is high and refined and developed. And frankly I don’t get that he is giving us any sense of the meaning of the body (as his title promises), but rather he discusses the role of the body in meaning.

The lesson I am learning is that should one take Sheets-Johnstone’s work, and as I’ll include shortly that of Brian Massumi, seriously, we would place movement, particularly self-movement, as fundamental to life and to meaning. It is important to understand that as we continue to explore self-movement we will discover that it does not place any primacy on brain/mind or body since self-movement requires the looped sensorimotor-proprioceptive systems as they are inseparable from the skeletal-muscular systems. Self-movement cannot occur without the successful integration of all these systems.

While there is much to consider in Johnson’s work, let me leap into Massumi’s remarkable 2002 book *Parables for the Virtual*. His analysis immediately focuses on the way we customarily consider movement which we do by examining grids or trajectories, that is, by looking at movement in terms of positionality. Yet he notes that “positionality begins by subtracting movement.” This observation is a naïve one yet shocking in that we can immediately confirm it in our own experience. Generally, we are interested in place rather than movement. I’ll talk about the academic study of religion in this perspective shortly. Massumi says that we “need to grasp movement as qualitative transformation.” (p. 3) Not so easy.

Sheets-Johnstone and Johnson, relying primarily on Sheets-Johnstone, discuss the importance of quality in movement. We can appreciate that we can consider movement in terms of positionality as a structure, grid, trajectory (yet wringing the movement from it as we do so), but to get closer to movement in itself we can also appreciate that movement has qualities such as smooth, rapid, powerful, jerky, etc., that we can name and comprehend. Massumi offers more provocative ideas: “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation. ... In motion, a body is an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary. The relation ... is real but abstract. ... To think of the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal.” (Pp. 4-5). Movement then, while of the body, is virtual.

Massumi also develops on the legacy of Henri Bergson with respect to our concern with positionality. In Massumi's understanding of the primacy of movement, positionality is the result of back-formation. Yet, it has and continues to be our preference to focus primarily on positionality (place) rather than movement or process. Bergson, Massumi holds, turned this upright by showing that position is secondary to movement and derived from it. (p. 7) Space/place is then a retroduction, a kind of feedback production, which comes about itself in a new movement.

Now let me consider the shape of the modern academic study of religion. I think that, in broad strokes, the last forty years which is roughly the period of the academic study of religion in America, we can paint the options by the broad agendas (I'll later argue these are styles) of Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Smith. Certainly there are many influential scholars beyond these two, but Eliade and Smith articulated positions widely cited and that have been broadly influential.

Eliade was eager to bring some sense to the diversity of the data of religion and sought mid-twentieth century to articulate a broadly applicable understanding of religion drawn in the language of sacred and profane, center and periphery, *in illo tempore* and history. Eliade grasped the common positionalities that he believed underlay the multitude of diverse manifestations of religion. In the simplest terms, religiousness is to know one's place and be in it. This is a locative perspective on religion that continues in many ways to dominate the study of religion today, if now more tacitly so.

Smith's rebellion from Eliade, yet which clearly depended on Eliade's position having been securely established, was that difference is more interesting and provocative than the kinds of similarity that underlay Eliade's comparative enterprise. Difference he reminds us, following on Paul Ricoeur, gives rise to thought. Still, Smith's understanding of religion continued to uphold the Eliadian wisdom which was "a man's religion is adequately articulated in terms of his understanding of place." Smith often quoted the statement attributed to Archimedes "Give me a place to stand and I shall move the world." Smith's 1992 book *To take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* continues to be one of the most important developments of ritual theory.

Yet, the Archimedian statement, which it is believed was made to demonstrate the principle of the lever, clearly focuses on place as necessary for movement. It also upholds that sense of position being the stable, the meaningful, the true, the foundational dimension. Movement happens as a result of place. Thus, the academic study of religion has been a necessarily locative enterprise of giving preference to place, to positionality, and, interestingly not even to go on to movement or agency (even though agency has steadily become an increasing concern in the last 20 years).

Despite Smith's continued emphasis on place, he nonetheless has been interested in those processes, such as ritual, that establish place. It is quite remarkable that in the history of the academic study of religion the study of ritual, particularly in the performative, has been minimal. Smith has had a persistent interest in chaos and in rebellion. Further, his interest in difference as a driving force in comparison placing emphasis on the play of the juxtaposition of items to compare rather than the resolution of the play that would result from locating them neatly on a grid. Smith's recent statements that he believes the future of the study of religion will be shaped by cognitive science, by neuroscience,

by gesture are further promise of the potential of a study of religion that is energized by self-movement rather than positionality.

Were I to point to the great challenge I believe students of religion need face in the next era, it would be the revisioning of religion and the study of religion as proceeding from the primacy of movement. Our most superficial understanding of lived religion suggests the potential of this approach. Yet, this will be no small task given that the academic life-style which severely inhibits groping self-movement and the western religious and intellectual heritage of ignoring anything outside the mind.