Primacy of Movement

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A couple years ago I was preparing to teach a course on the importance of the developments in various scientific and philosophical fields to the study of religion and I understood at that time that these insights related to brain and body. For years I had taught courses on various topics around the theme "religion and body" intended to complement what I feel has been a marked disregard of the body. I had tentatively titled the course "Brain and Body," but then in the last couple weeks before the course began I reflected on my interest in dance and in the moving body. I decided that I needed to include something on "movement" and began searching for relevant materials. I frankly saw it then as a small complement to the other topics; a complement that I felt personally obliged to add. That I didn't act in terms of what I then knew, but somehow couldn't acknowledge, is now something of an embarrassment. While teaching of that course I began to recognize that, while we are generally still locked into the binary oppositional terminology of brain and body, movement actually functions to integrate brain and body more successfully than any other academic effort I knew of, or better yet, to circumvent the need for a distinction in the so familiar terms in the first place. There is, as I came to appreciate it, then and increasingly since, a primacy to movement.

Among the most important and convincing statements about movement is found in Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's 1999 book *The Primacy of Movement*. She wrote,

> 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 an 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 a moving body. We don't learn how to move as we come to life even in the womb and after we are born, we come with movement as identical to life itself. Life means moving from beginning to end. Further, we come with a human body that has amazing potential, but not infinite. Knees and other joints bend or flex in just certain plains. Mouths open and close but only so far and do so connected with specific events like eating. Spines flex only in certain directions. And, Sheets-Johnstone 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 as being alive. In movement, however seemingly random in the beginning, we begin to discover ourselves and our world as, in movement, 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 the 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 idea. Husserl tied his idea of "animate organism" to living creatures and the full sense of their livingness, that is, of their carrying on activities in the world.[1] One immediate importance of movement is that we need not separate humans from other animate creatures which arguably would discover their own selves through their self-movement. That they may not come to the sort of perception and awareness humans experience then 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 on this separation which I'm adding here simply because I've recently heard a number of students indicate that they'd never heard or thought about this dichotomy. As indicated in the introductory lectures on the place of dancing in contemporary American culture, religion, and education, we noted a persistent suspicion about the body (prone to sin, decay, illness, mortality) with a privileging of mind or spirit or soul (depending on the context) which has been understood more as the seat of identity, self, vitality, essence. In religious and educational environments the soul/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 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 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.

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

[1] Sheets-Johnstone, p. 134.

> 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*."[2]

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, to our perception of the world we live in, and to our ability to act in the world. 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 world. 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, 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."[3]

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. And I will also consider in greater detail the notions of what she means by "corporeal concepts" under what others, particularly the cognitive scientists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, have referred to as "image schemas."

For now, let me conclude by returning to dancing, since we need to keep clearly in mind our central topic and to assure that we are not simply going adrift by discussing in general human movement. Unarguably dancing is a form of self-movement. As such it participates in and is a channel through which human enact these primal foundational properties of self-movement. It might be sufficient at this point to see that dancing, as self-movement, is a means by which one discovers self and world, comes to knowledge of self-identity, gains specific corporeal concepts that are foundational to all our knowledge, awarenesses, and values. If we can appreciate that dancing offers the outcomes of the primacy of movement, yet in specifically designated ways in terms of the particular movement characteristics of dances, then we can begin to open ourselves both to the general foundational importance of dancing to human knowledge, perception, value, awareness, and vitality, and we can also begin to appreciate that self-movement in terms of different kinds of dancing, that is different dances, would lead to distinctly different understandings of self, world, agency, and value. I cannot begin to overstate the importance

[2] Ibid., p. 135.
[3] Ibid., ppl 136-7

of these insights or the implications they have, first, on our understanding of the primacy of movement, and, second, to the potential of dancing as contributing to human identity, knowledge, perception, and value.