

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone: The Primacy of Movement— Expanded Second Edition (Advances in Consciousness Research)

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It is such an honor to review a book by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. I based much of my dissertation, *Kinaesthetic Imagining* (Serlin, 1985, 1996) on her article “Thinking in Movement” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1981) and meeting with her. Now “Thinking in Movement” is included in this expanded and revised book, *The Primacy of Movement*.

Who is Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Why is her Work Important for Dance/ Movement Therapists?

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone is a most unusual combination of philosopher and dancer. She teaches philosophy at the University of Oregon, integrating other areas of expertise ranging from evolutionary biology, anthropology, developmental psychology, and the arts and improvisation. *The Primacy of Movement* is intimidating to approach, but I will try to point to the significant topics that are most relevant for dance/movement therapists.

First, Sheets-Johnstone very capably challenges much of the Western philosophical tradition that underlies the body/mind split. Beginning with Socrates, Aristotle and Descartes, Sheets-Johnstone critiques traditions of disembodied philosophy and psychology (including the recent cognitive revolution), and convincingly establishes movement as the foundation of Being and consciousness by “articulating a metaphysics true to the dynamic nature of the world and to the foundationally animated nature of life” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xix).

As a phenomenologist, she grounds her critique in Husserl’s (1980) injunction to stay with “things as they are,” which can restore dynamic reality to ourselves, our relation to others and to our worlds. Her embodied phenomenology is close to an

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Eastern non-dualistic tradition that supports the mind/body unity of movement and is supported by recent discoveries in neuroscience. Because she so dramatically challenges the Cartesian legacy, is a woman pioneer, understands movement from the inside, and because so much of our work is to help restore wholeness to people who come to us disconnected from themselves or others in the natural world, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's work is highly recommended for dance/movement therapists and students of movement.

Ontology: "I am" as Corporeal Consciousness

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." Sheets-Johnstone challenges the philosophical assumptions that consciousness arises from and after inanimate matter, and that it is our "higher" thinking functions that make us human. Sheets-Johnstone asks for a different kind of consciousness that is in the body and connected to sense of place and other people. By critiquing those cognitive and neurophysiological accounts of consciousness that reduce minds to mere matter, she shows how the mechanization of minds is parallel to the mechanization of bodies; therefore perpetuating the Cartesian mind-body problem. Sheets-Johnstone's alternative to a split mind/body is "animate form," which she prefers to "embodiment" and "lived body."

Next, she critiques the assumption that perception starts with visual perception, and looks at philosophical and phenomenological traditions about perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), "The de-animation of perception and the rise of cognitive science in the past four decades have progressively and strikingly brought the liability to the fore in the form of both information-computational modelings and neurological reductions" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xix).

There is an assumption that consciousness arises from matter and that mind is pure information and this leads us to a separation from our kindred animals. Many believe that humans, possessing consciousness, are "higher" than other forms of life and are the only creatures that are self-conscious, creative, use symbols, make meaning, and feel pain. Using recent research from evolutionary biology and anthropology, Sheets-Johnstone looks at Neanderthals and invertebrates to see their potential for consciousness. She suggests that philosophers are not movers and often do not actually observe nature, but instead form armchair assumptions about "lower" forms of animals and "symbolic meaning" in gestures as the beginning of a higher mental capacity: higher versus lower, organic versus inorganic, and mind versus body. We project our own biases and assumptions because we are not investigating "the things themselves."

Instead, from an embodied consciousness we could understand that a symbol is not a mental representation, but a corporeal map, a "form of analogical thinking" that is "foundationally structured in corporeal representation" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 13) as a "biological matrix" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 14). The relationship between the symbol and the referent is not arbitrary but an iconic "semantic template" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 15). These conclusions are based on observation and description, rather than explanation, and are truly empirical.

We might see that animals are capable of symbolic behavior, gestures that refer to something other than themselves; for example, a honeybee's dance that shows other bees where to find food. Analogical thinking, such as teeth and stones as tools representing hardness and ability to cut, is "grounded in the tactile-kinesthetic body ...corporeal concepts—nonlinguistic concepts such as hardness—are in no way inferior to their linguistic relatives" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 17).

Instead of the historically vertical way of seeing humans as superior, we are given the gift of a new way of looking at a continuity of abilities that gives us a "common creaturehood" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 18). We share links with other species; for example chimpanzees that warn their friends of coming dangers show roots of language and altruism (Vergano, 2011). To understand consciousness, we must observe natural history and the study of evolution as a history of animate form.

In her appreciation of actual physical and non-human realities, Sheets-Johnstone is closer to Aristotle than Plato. She calls Aristotle's philosophy of mind an "evolutionary" and "bio-zoological philosophy" that has an awareness of the continuity in all forms of life (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 106), and "evolutionary" that has an awareness of the continuity in all forms of life. Like Aristotle, she believes that lessons from nature should begin with movement as a fundamental principle. She quotes Aristotle, "We must begin our examination with movement" (Aristotle, *DeAnima* 405b, p. 33). In this worldview, growth and decay are "principles of life" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 103), and that which guides the relationship between animate forms of life and their world can be expressed in terms of an "existential fit" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1986).

Epistemology: "Know Thyself" as a Proprioceptive Imperative

Socrates dictum: "Know thyself," usually means thoughts, concepts, identity. From an embodied perspective, however, creatures know themselves first through movement and the potential for movement. Invertebrates have external sensilla, including hairs and slits: "In effect, creatures know themselves—'they know which thing in the world they are'—in ways that are fundamentally and quintessentially consistent with the bodies they are" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 62). We know ourselves not in a linguistic sense ("I am human"), but in an "existentially kinetic sense, in the sense of being *animate*" (Sheets-Johnstone, p. 62) so that "know thyself" has remained a consistent biological built-in; a kinetic corporeal consciousness informs a diversity of animate forms" (Sheets-Johnstone, p. 63). Proprioception as a way of knowing "is in this sense an epistemological gateway, one that...may be clearly elaborated both affectively and cognitively" (Sheets-Johnstone, p. 67). Our account of perception should come from our own qualitative embodied experience of perception, from localized bodily senses. For example, the warmth of the table we touch is experienced on the fingertips, not in the brain. We taste in our mouths and smell in our noses, not in our brains.

Movement as the Root of Our Sense of Agency

Through movement, “I am” (corporeal consciousness) becomes “I can” (kinetic movement possibilities) (Husserl, 1980, pp. 106–112). Developmentally, infants explore themselves through movement. Our first consciousness is “a tactile-kinesthetic consciousness of our own bodies in movement” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xxii). Psychiatrist and psychoanalytic theorist Daniel Stern describes “vitality effects” that add to our understanding of human experience because

it is necessary because many qualities of feeling that occur do not fit into our existing lexicon or taxonomy of affects...These elusive qualities are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as ‘surging,’ ‘fading away,’ ‘fleeting,’ ‘explosive,’ ‘crescendo,’ ‘descrescendo,’ ‘bursting,’ ‘drawn out,’ and so on (Stern, 1985, p. 54).

According to Sheets-Johnstone, “movement is our mother tongue” (2011, p. xxv) as we make sense of our own bodies and understand the world. Speech as first motoric (gestural) is supported by studies in infant development (Bruner, 1990; Stern, 1985) and bonobo chimpanzees. Movement is the “mother of all cognition” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xxii) and the “foundation of our conceptual life” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xxii).

As we move, we discover a sense of aliveness and of being grounded in movement (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 116). Movement is the source of our senses, in space and time, subjectively in “felt time” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 134).

Cardinal structures of kinesthetic consciousness underlie our experiences of time and space. Sheets-Johnstone identifies four essential qualities of movement—tensional, linear, amplitudinal, and projectional, that have similarities to qualities of Labanotation (Laban, 1975). They add up to something called “style,” our unique combination of orientations to the structures of kinesthetic consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 315). *Thinking in movement* is evident in improvisational dance as a way of knowing, relating, a “*kinetic bodily logos* attuned to an evolving dynamic situation” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xxxi). Even thoughts move quickly or slowly, the qualities of movement help us make distinctions. Making distinctions leads to discernment of qualities; quality is a dimension that has been left out of Western philosophy and discovery-processes: “Quality is what Galileo left behind. It is what Western science leaves behind” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 133). Instead of quality, most Western science focuses on quantity. Privileging of the mental world of cognition separates us not only from our bodies, but also from nature. If we know ourselves as dynamic animate forms, it is in relation to a dynamic animate world, “in situ,” specific rather than a generic one. Sheets-Johnstone refers to evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould when she suggests that we learn by walking, “cogitation and ambulation go hand in hand” (Gould, 1995, p. 15).

This animate world corresponds to the descriptive world of Edmund Husserl. Both Husserl’s phenomenology and Sheets-Johnstone’s study of the natural world always started with descriptions of the “things themselves.” Husserl once called the body a “phenomenological-kinetic method” (Husserl, 1980, p. 117). In this case, the word “kinetic” can refer to the activity of excavating layers of meaning, and

also to using all the sense organs and movement for perception. Imagination as embodied is a verb instead of a noun (Casey, 1976; Sartre, 1968).

What Sheets-Johnstone calls “hold sway in” our bodies (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 51) is an awareness of initiating movement, of its spatio-temporal and energy dynamics, of the way we make our way in the world, organize ourselves, our strengths, and defense mechanisms. Husserl’s description of animation comes close to this: “Animation designates the way in which mind acquires a locality in the spatial world, its spatialization, as it were, and together with its corporal support, acquires reality” (Husserl, 1977, p. 101).

Improvisation, Free Association and Meaning

Sheets-Johnstone suggests that improvisation in movement is a discovery process that uncovers deeper structures of meaning. The act of movement is in itself a meaning-making activity (Serlin, 1985; Sontag, 1966). Free movement is like free association: “If perception is to be constitutive of a thing, then there must also pertain to it the possibility of bodily movements as ‘free’ movements” (Husserl, 1989, p. 323). Aesthetic qualities are created by movement and the discrimination of qualities.

Animate bodies represent meanings corporeally. “In the most fundamental sense, bodily symbols are structured not in reflective acts but in pre-reflective corporeal experience; that is, they are the spontaneous product of certain species-specific bodily experiences” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 15). There is a link between “aliveness,” “I can,” self-discovery, and meaning-making. We “discover” our bodies, not “control” them. Movement is a text with multiple layers of meaning (Ricoeur, 1976; Serlin, 1985).

Conclusion

Dance/movement therapists dedicate themselves to restoring awareness and animation to bodies that may be mute, dissociated, frozen, or stuck. In *The Primacy of Movement*, Sheets-Johnstone gives us a metaphysics and language that expands our understanding of animation as the root of anima, soul, agency and connectedness, kinaesthetic intelligence and imagining. Sheets-Johnstone shows us life as movement, sensing as motion, interaction, imagining and meaning-making as action. We can join her in her calls for us “to be mindful of movement” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xix), to “language those experiences and to come to know them in ways that are phenomenologically consonant with the dynamically resonant kinesthetic and kinetic experiences they are: indeed, it confronts us with this task” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. xix).

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