

# ***The Phenomenology of Dance: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition***

A conversation with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

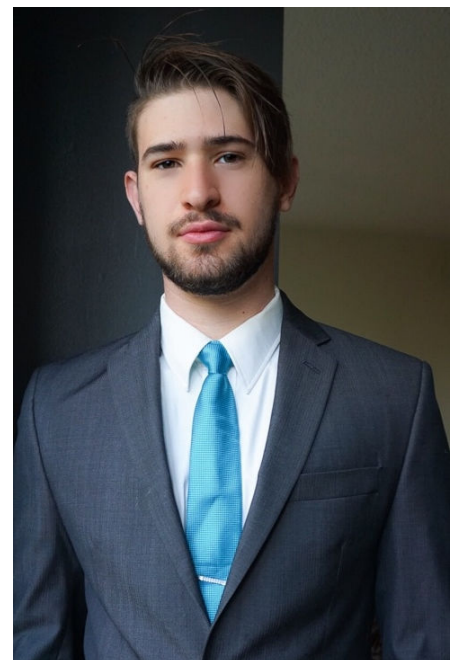


## Editor's Note:

I think a question on many of our colleague's minds is, "Why do therapists write books in the first place, and how do they make the time?"

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's first book, *The Phenomenology of Dance*, came out in the mid 1960's and was pioneering in terms of its subject matter. Her book publications also include the following: *Illuminating Dance: Philosophical Explorations*; the "roots" trilogy—*The Roots of Thinking*; *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies*; and *The Roots of Morality*; *Giving the Body Its Due*; *The Primacy of Movement*; and *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*.

With the publication of the *50th Anniversary Edition of The Phenomenology of Dance* now available, SPT asked Michael Fiorni to speak with Maxine to learn more about her writing process. We begin the conversation with Maxine sharing why she wrote *The Phenomenology of Dance* in the first place.



“Why did I write it? Because I was very puzzled as to why people would define movement as a force in time and space when the experience of movement is not of a force in time and in space. On the contrary, any and all movement creates its own distinctive qualitative dynamics, which means that each and every movement creates its own distinctive spatial, temporal, and force quality of movement. The watch word when I was studying in the sixties—the basic idea—was that movement was a force in time and space. You heard this as a model explanation of movement, and analyses of movement followed this thinking. It was through my studies in phenomenology that I was able to open up an entirely new mode of analysis, and this through a very rigorous methodology that allowed me to look at movement as movement, and not from a simplistic point of view.

*In doing that, in looking at it in this new way, particularly because you started out as a dancer yourself and not necessarily having existing work on dance phenomenology to build upon, what was your writing process like?*

“The writing process was challenging in the extreme, because of what I have described as “the challenge of languaging experience,” a challenge that, when met, takes you outside of, or beyond every day conversational modes of description and analysis. Oftentimes in everyday life, you don’t describe experience in terms that really nail it down in precise and distinctive ways, ways that give voice to the actual phenomenon itself. Phenomenology was a decisive aid for me in this sense: I had to rise to the challenge of putting words to experience. There’s a whole process within phenomenology called eidetic variation. You sit and imagine over and over, and extensively, any and all kinds of experiences of the phenomenon in question. I was concentrating on movement--just imagining all kinds of movement, whether it

was a leaf falling, or a wave crashing, or a piece of toast popping up from the toaster. On the basis of all variations, what are the basics? What is essential in all those experiences of movement? Eidetic variations are what allowed me to get at the central character of the phenomenon of movement.

*In many ways you mention that what your book is about is movement itself and not necessarily dance, which speaks to its wide applicability in different fields and sciences in addition to dance itself. You discuss in your book that the influence of kinesthesia is central to what you’re talking about. How did your experience as a dancer inform the descriptions you used?*

I was considered a heretic by the people in the dance department because I didn’t conform to their way of thinking or talking about movement, or dance, for that matter. On the other hand, I was highly esteemed as a choreographer and I did a lot of choreography. What kept me alive in choreographing was really listening to the dynamics of the movement I was creating. When you listen to the movement in this way, your awareness is precisely on movement. In other words, you don’t just do the things that you like to do or do things you do particularly well. Thus, in the end, when you’re dancing, you’re not moving through a form; the form is moving through you. The form is what is speaking. It’s not you doing this and that.

*At the end of the new preface to the 50th edition of your book, you say that rather than dance being a means to education, education should be a means to dance. It sounds like you’re arguing against the over intellectualization and rigidity of standards and expectations of what dance should be and how it can be expressed, though you frame it in terms of educational values. For our readers, how do you feel that wisdom*

*might be applied to somatic psychologists, their practices, and their patients?*

You mean in terms of listening to their patients, listening to the movement of their patients, rather than just taking them through a series of movements that you think, from a theoretical point of view, are good for them. Is that what you mean?

Yes.

Yes, definitely. The ways in which you analyze movement have a lot to do with how deeply you grasp the movement of the patient. I'm not deeply familiar with Laban analysis or other modes of analyzing movement, but I think it's essential to be awake to the movement itself, to its living qualitative dynamics. The fine-grained analysis of the movement comes afterward. What I mean is that you do not put everything—the patient included—into preset categories and expectations, but have the actual experience of how the kinetic dynamics of the person moving before you are being actually created and shaped by the person him or herself.

*Moving forward to the book itself, it's my understanding that the book came out of your doctoral dissertation. How much of the original dissertation ended up in the book?*

Just about all of it. My major professor in dance, after a year and a half, said she wouldn't work with me anymore. That was because I had written a paper on the imaginative consciousness of movement that has to do with body lines. If your arm is overhead, you know whether it's straight or bent. That knowledge comes from an imaginative consciousness of movement because all you have are joint awarenesses. What you do is elongate imaginatively the felt angularity of a joint or joints and in this way become aware of the linear quality of your body and your body in movement. Part of the imaginative consciousness of movement is indeed the linear design of the body and the ways in which that design

shifts and changes in moving. Another aspect of the imaginative consciousness of movement has to do with linear pattern—the directional line or lines created by movement, as when you do something as simple as turn a corner. My professor was arguing that a line was a geometrical entity. It didn't have anything to do with bodies, or dance, or movement.

*That must have been jarring to hear coming from your perspective.*

It was incredibly jarring!

*Some writers feel like having a highly influential early work, and in this case your first book, can be a challenge when trying to come up with material and further your ideas later on. Do you feel as if that was a factor in your experience as an author? (in what you've done subsequently)*

Absolutely. I've written nine books and close to eighty articles for different journals, some written in more attenuated ways, but all very much anchored in an awareness of the centrality of bodily life to life itself. I've written about movement and emotions, for example, and the way in which, in the run of everyday life, emotions and movement are dynamically congruent. Short of this ordinary dynamic congruency, we would not be able to feign an emotion or restrain ourselves from an emotional expression. I've written too about how our bodily life in movement is the foundation of basic concepts. Our early cognitions and conceptual development are rooted in movement—of near and far, sharp and blunt, weak and strong, and so on. My initial work influenced me a great deal—not directly all the time, but certainly in undercurrent ways.

*The preface to the new edition of your book discusses a great deal of contemporary work in dance, its methodology, its relation to*

*neuroscience. What were your thoughts in producing the new edition and its revisions?*

I was, and still am, very disturbed by ways in which reductionist practices in modern day science—particularly in brain science and in cognitive science—reduce things to the brain, and then make all kinds of what I call “experiential ascriptions” to “the brain.” The brain “understands,” the brain “ascertains,” the brain “chooses.” It’s deflating because it overlooks real life experience. I was particularly concerned too about what seemed to me to be arbitrary divisions and diametric contrasts in phenomenological writings, divisions and contrasts such as those between agency and ownership, and those between body image and body schema. Those terms seem ready-made to me. In other words, they don’t have real phenomenological depth to them in the sense of penetrating to their origins. Instead of dividing and conquering, so to speak, by means of labels, saying “this is body image, and this, in contrast, is body schema,” for example, or “this is agency, and this, in contrast, is ownership,” thus stating that “this term stands for this and that term stands for that,” we would do well to ask ourselves about real-life, real-time bodily experience--how the experience of agency, for example, comes to be. In short, there is a need to delve in depth into the experiential substrate of such notions as body image and body schema and such terms as agency and ownership.

*Was there anything that you feel you didn’t include in the new edition that you would have liked to have included?*

No, but it’s interesting that you ask the question because before Temple University Press had wanted to publish the book, I’d asked the publisher of another book of mine about her possible interest in re-publishing *The Phenomenology of Dance*. That editor wanted to republish it, but asked that I “bring it up to date.” Her request didn’t

make any sense to me, because the phenomenological analysis given in *The Phenomenology of Dance* is root bottom as far as I’m concerned. It’s not that people can’t amend a phenomenological analysis. They most certainly can. They can furthermore certainly question an analysis. Phenomenological analyses are open to emendations, but I had no intention to make any kinds of corrections: there were no edits that were necessary to make. The only thing I thought was necessary was done in the new Preface, which I had initially thought of as the “Introduction,” but the editor thought “Preface” preferable. I was very happy to have the book itself stand as it was, and to just say something about the way in which present day research and writings about movement and bodily life often enough don’t yet arrive at and understand the foundational dynamics of bodily life, much less dance. I really do think, however, that movement is coming to the fore, taking over habitual recourse to talk of “behavior” and “action,” not to mention “embodiments” of all sorts.

*Could you talk more about that? Them not describing movement according to your vision of this concept.*

Right. They’re not looking at experience in an exacting forefront way and are really talking more from a kind of tangential, neuroscientific point of view. Not all of them are reductionist, but it’s precipitous to start off with anything less than experience first. When one starts with experience, one can hardly write of an “embodied self” or “embodied subjectivity,” for example, much less “embodied movement.” As I originally wrote, such packaging is a lexical Band-Aid covering over a still suppurating 350-plus-year-old wound.

*Are you surprised that the book has had as much an impact as it has over the last fifty years?*

# “Dance is a central aspect of life that people commonly overlook.”

I'm utterly astonished! When I was writing the book, I just felt that I was getting to the bottom of things—to the bottom of aspects of dance that I'd experienced: dynamic line, expression, rhythm, and abstraction. I thought that the topics and chapters might really offer something to people in dance. I now feel beholden to a lot of people, people who have taken an interest in the book and found it insightful. I'm thankful that the book has been meaningful.

*I wanted to go back for a moment to the quote I mentioned from your preface, "rather than dance being a means to education, education should be a means to dance." You were a dancer who decided to study philosophy. Do you feel as if your academic considerations of dance ultimately changed how you danced, or how you perceived your experience of dance?*

No, I think it only intensified my belief that creating forms in dance was absolutely central to understandings of the aesthetics of dance. I went back to the University of Wisconsin for a secondary doctorate in evolutionary biology. I didn't write a dissertation to finish it, but I did a lot of work in and studies in that area. I did that, because a lot of people central to

phenomenology like Heidegger, for example, talked about humans as if they dropped out of the blue. My studies have always been anchored in the dynamics of life itself, and studies in ontogeny and phylogeny enhance understandings of those dynamics. But studies of dance are equally central. They, too, are central to insights into those dynamics. Dance is a central aspect of life that people commonly overlook. I think all my academic studies enhanced my experience of dance and being a body in the sense of intensifying in various and complex ways my appreciations and depth understandings of movement and the art of choreography.

*Is there anything you'd like to add that hasn't already come up?*

I think it's truly wonderful and am very grateful that what I have done in terms of movement and bodily life has come to the attention of practitioners in body, movement, and dance psychotherapy. I feel so very grateful that it has awakened their interest, that it has been engaging, and that it has been helpful in opening up lively and continuing conversations about, and insights into bodies, movement, and dance.

