

The Psychopathology of Disembodiment and Reconnection through Enactment

A Conversation with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD



What would you say when the key words assigned to your address sparks distress throughout your body?

Discussing her upcoming keynote address at the 15th European Congress Maxine Sheets-Johnstone shares her concern that the word embodiment and its derivatives are currently conjoined with an array of topics such as mind, self, subject, experience, action and language and they simply create an illusion of legitimacy, that the body is involved in a fore fronted way when in fact it is not.

“The word embodied is a lexical band aide for a 350-year-old wound that started with Descartes, the whole mind/body thing,”

she says. “It is now affixed to all kinds of experiences: embodied language, embodied self, embodied cognition, embodied mind. No matter what it is associated with, putting embody in front does not solve all the problems, does not challenge the current concepts. We need to delve into the bodily life.”

Her concern is so prominent she wrote an article on the topic entitled: *Embodiment on Trial: A Phenomenological Investigation* (2015) where she notes that “embodying” short-circuits phenomenological accounts of experiences. It muddies the concept of the body I have and the body I am, she says.

“You cannot avoid the tactile-kinesthetic body/ affective body—the basic aspect of being a body—it is kinesthesia and dynamic. When you get into static postural notions of body, such as knowing whether your legs are crossed or not, you are not telling us something about everyday living—this preeminently posturally-tethered body is a dynamically emaciated body—one that falls short of being recognized as an animate organism” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015, pg. 28).

Rather than talk about actions, Maxine emphasizes we need to focus on dynamic real time, on our lives as animate organisms. The lived body and subject body as a phenomenological concept is not bonafide, she says, though it is used by people all over, in all sciences . . . “the word embodied is deflative, it includes the use of the body without getting down to the aspects of basic development, history, and our evolutionary grounding in animate life,” she says.

When asked about the first phrase of the address’s title: Psychopathology of Disembodiment, Maxine mentioned R.D. Lang who wrote about embodied and unembodied in lucid ways. In his writings, she says, he tried to anchor the relationship of the self to the body in concrete experiential ways, using concrete studies. “I don’t think anyone has improved on this sense,” she says. “The unembodied self is one object among others as the core of an individual’s own being; that is, the body is passed over.”

“We have lost the depth of our connection to the body,” she says. “We are an experiential being born moving. We are moving before we have language. A whole lot of learning takes place that is nonverbal that is the foundation of our core self.”

“Movement is our mother tongue,” she continues. “We come in moving and all this talk about embodiment belies the real focus on movement and on the body.”

According to Maxine, people over look what’s there—movement and becoming to move as the creation of the self. I move precedes I do and I can, she says. Our fundamental human concepts are generated by movement. Our basic cognitions are

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saturated in concepts derived from movement, such as concepts of distance. All distinctive kinesthetic dynamic fundamental human concepts: hard-soft, in-out, strong-weak, near-far, jagged-smooth are derived from tactile-kinesthetic bodily experiences, which are directly relevant to everyday adult perceptions and cognitions as well as infant perceptions and cognitions (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015).

“We are not inanimate we are animate,” Maxine says. “This does not mean we don’t have cognitions. But, corporeal concepts are not linguistic. We have vocalizations but these are not linguistic in the sense of naming and specifying language. We babble, coo, and cry, which is all part of the non-human animal world of communication. But it is not a naming type of beginning of language that offers more basic fundamental concepts of relating to the world.”

“One thing I don’t remember seeing often in early-life research and writings is that the baby also recognizes the way it’s held, even by whom it’s held. Whether it is held in a tightly and intense way, or in a more gentle way and rocked, the infant is aware of tactile communication with the world as well as movement. Vocalization is part of that world, it is present and meaningful. The infant knows if it makes a sound it can generate the appearance of mom, dad. This is learned, however, it is not automatically known.”

“A long time ago I did some research on the generation of language of infants and the first preposition they know is ‘in’ like inside something else. Where did that come from? Well they are put in a crib, their arm is put in a sleeve, their tongue is in their mouth. They feel these things. This impressed me. Infant and early childhood experiences that are non-linguistic appear and the infant recognizes his experiences.”

Reconnection through Enactment

Moving on to the second phase of the address title: Reconnection through Enactment, Maxine says once again it is a deflection. Enactment is not movement. Therapists are putting things in a package—you enact it so you are all through, done.



“Movement is dynamic, reconnection occurs through movement,” Maxine says. “Our natural proclivity is to move. When someone is shot or has a stroke the first thing you want to know is, can this person move? Movement is taken as a sign of life. No movement and you assume the person is dead.”

“Feeling alive is an experience not be missed. People don’t realize it, they just connect movement and feeling alive. People who run, just feel great afterward. When people are energetic (I do not like to use the word exercise as when they put on music and drown out any real sense of kinesthetic awareness of moving body) they feel alive. Feeling an aliveness that is generated in movement is an important part of therapy.”

Communication through Movement

There are also qualitative dynamics in movement: spatial, temporal, and energetic aspects. Our basic communication with another often involves movement. What if someone makes a slapping motion with his

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hand? Maxine offers. "It may mean 'the heck with it', it may mean 'get out of here', it may mean a whole lot of things. This is different than how the hand moves to say good bye as well as other natural situations. We are attentive to dynamics or movement from other people and we take our clues from that to interpret what they are feeling, thinking, and thinking about doing, and we decide whether to back off or open ourselves toward them."

Writing her article entitled, *Movement and Mirror Neurons: A Challenging and Choice Conversation*, Maxine noted that we are not born with mirror neurons—this is an important part, she states. "Mirror neurons are purported to exist and direct everything as Gallese et al. said, but they are there because we learned how to move our self. They are generated on the basis of our own movement. In the experiments with the monkeys, they made mention that prior to the experiment they had done another experiment to measure the kinesthesia (muscularly in those monkey when reaching or doing something). Originally the experiment had to do with moving, to find out what one thinks neurologically and in movement and it passed over to mirror neurons as embodied simulation—the basis that we recognize what the other person is doing. Embodied simulation is what the other person is doing."

"This goes back to our own kinesthetic development, our sense of moving our bodies," Maxine says.

"Movement subsumes our emotions she continues. "We are moved to move, emotions move through us, trust moves through us, sadness moves through us, this is different from joy and disgust. Feelings are not static, not indifferent, not a state of mind. Emotions are a fluid bodily phenomenologically thing that move through us and move us to move."

According to Maxine, it is paramount to recognize that the core meaning of being a body and being alive is moving. Although she expressed feeling a little bit challenged by the title of the address and by her copresenter Genovino Ferri, who will speak from a theoretical Reichian perspective, having spent time with both speakers, I sense an opportunity for a lively and interesting exchange of perspectives as each addresses embodiment.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, PhD, is an independent scholar and courtesy professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon. Before completing her doctorate, she worked as a dancer and choreographer. In addition to authoring articles in over seventy art, humanities, and science journals, she has authored nine books, including *The Roots of Thinking*, *The Primacy of Movement*, and *The Corporeal Turn*. She has lectured around the world about dance, movement, and on how to consider them philosophically.

References

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