

May 2010: Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

In her first life, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone was a dancer/choreographer, professor of dance/dance scholar. In her second and ongoing life, she is a philosopher whose research and writing remain grounded in the tactile-kinesthetic body. She is an independent, highly interdisciplinary scholar affiliated with the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon where she taught periodically in the 1990s and where she now holds an ongoing Courtesy Professor appointment. Her book publications include *The Phenomenology of Dance*; *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*. She was awarded a Distinguished Fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University in the UK in the Spring of 2007 for her research on xenophobia.

The following is a transcript of the original audio, which is part of the Somatic Perspectives series (www.SomaticPerspectives.com). Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange, not an edited piece. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: Hello I'm with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Hi Maxine

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone: Hi Serge

SP: so you talk a lot about the primacy of movement and one phrase you have used is we come into the world moving in a way this phrase also applies to your career as you started being a dancer before being a philosopher do you want to say a little more about this career?

M S-J: Well its very true. In my first life I was a dancer, choreographer, professor of dance, dance scholar, and in my studies at the University of Wisconsin where I got my doctorate in dance and philosophy I found myself at odds with what I called the party line, which is a definition of movement and dance as a force in time and space. The reason it didn't agree with me was if I thought about it at all, I thought, well, airplanes and winds are forces in time and space and that's not getting us anywhere near movement and dance. So I was a kind of heretic and I got off in detail in

phenomenology, which is a very rigorous way of methodologically of examining experiences and that work was eventually the basis of my doctorate which was my book of phenomenology of dance. And one of the prime things that I showed in there is that movement is not a force in time and space but that movement creates its own time, space, and force, which is what gives it its particular qualitative dynamics and those qualitative dynamics are apparent in the way we see people walk and recognize their walk, the way they laugh, or do whatever they do and although we pay less attention to ourselves and our own kinesthetic dynamics, they are there also in our own movements. So it pertains to the everyday as to dance. It's really recognizing the essential features of movement itself in terms of its qualitative dynamics.

SP: yeah that's certainly a bridge a common point between your work and that of body-oriented psychotherapist recognizing movement and its own language and I think you said in someplace there is--

something like movement is our mother tongue, do you want to say more about that?

M S-J: Yes, well, in “The Primacy of Movement” there’s a chapter called “On Learning To Move Oneself,” and in that chapter I talk about the fact that we come into the world moving, that we’re not still born, and our conception of infants as pre-linguistic is really off the mark because infants aren’t pre-linguistic; language is post-kinetic.

S P: so I want to stay with that just in a way first to what you were saying before that infants are not still born that was a very proactive use of words and how movement was there and that the point is that language is post-kinetic so do you want to say more about that?

M S-J: Well, that is to say that movement is our mother tongue. That’s the way in which we learn our own bodies; we learn to move ourselves; we learn the surrounding world in which we live; we explore the world in movement; and that’s the way we understand things and come to know them. People like the psychologist Jerome Bruner talk about the focus of infants and young children on “agentivity,” on agent and action. He didn’t get into movement as our mother tongue, but that’s certainly the underlying thesis of his observation--not thesis, but the underlying conclusion from his observations. I should say from that perspective that--in other words, most people don’t pay any attention to movement but immediately characterize it as behavior; they certainly characterize it as some kind of action while you are eating, or you’re sleeping, or you’re laughing or you’re smiling. Whatever its is, the actual movement dynamics, the qualitative movement dynamics of our existence, are swallowed up when we package them in those behavioral or action terms because we don’t pay attention to the qualitative kinetic dynamics.

S P: right, so we make an artificial distinction between movement and thinking when in fact one is movement and thinking or thinking and movement are related?

M S-J: Yes, very much so because in the same chapter--“On Learning To Move Oneself,” I talk about the fact that “movement forms the I that moves before the I”-- not the visual eye but the “I,”-- “movement forms the eye that movement before the I that moves forms movement.” In other words, an infant makes incoherent gesture movements: it kicks its legs; it does all kinds of things just in a spontaneous way and discovers its own body and bodily possibilities--movement possibilities in the course of movement. And all of that movement comes into forming the self that evolves and develops before--when I say “before the I that moves forms movement,” that pertains precisely to becoming aware, thoughtful, cognitive about the world as well as oneself, so thinking and moving allow the developing infant and young child to move about efficiently and reasonably in the world.

S P: Yeah, yeah, so that is similar in a way to the work you’ve done in talking about the roots of thinking

M S-J: Yes, very, very much so. I’ve had--maybe I should just mention this on the side because it has been a great influence on my work and writings and everything that I’ve done. I went back to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for a second doctorate in evolutionary biology. It’s incomplete but I wanted to ground my work--whatever I did--in the realities of evolutionary thought and ontogenetical thought as well as in phenomenology. In other words, bring all these strands of our lives together in some kind of meaningful way. So in *The Roots of Thinking*, I was very concerned with paleoanthropological case studies. One of them had to do with taking up the very popular notion in anthropological circles--or paleoanthropological circles--that stone tools replaced teeth. It was kind of like a

truism and nobody explored or specified how that happened. I mean how would that happen? In a detailed analysis in a chapter of the book, I showed how the core tools and the flake tools, which were the original tools of early hominids, are coincident with the morphology of our teeth in terms of our molars and our incisors, which have very, very different structural forms. And what I began calling our “tactile-kinesthetic body” is the basis for the discovery about the difference between our molars and our incisors, because when you move your tongue across the dental arcade, starting from your molars and moving across your incisors and onto the other side, you feel a very definitive change in the structure--in the spatial form--of the teeth, the molars having protruding edges that are sharp but not evenly so, which is coincident with the structure of core tools. And then incisors, which are thin and sharp and edged, and are like the flake tools that were first formed and used. If I could just say this last thing--analogical thinking grounds basic human fundamental concepts, analogical in a sense of coming from the body.

S P: yeah, so it's the experience of having teeth and specifically of noticing the difference of incisors and molars that leads people to actually recognize in nature in stones the possibility of either finding stones that are similar or shaping them that way and that's at a very basic level you know analogical thinking

M S-J: That's right. And in making stone tools, in other words, they are aware of what their molars do, which is grind things to pieces. Their incisors bite things, rip them, tear them. They function in different ways precisely in the way that core tools and flake tools differ in terms of what they can do. There's a parallel.

S P: and so we infer from this that our ancestors did not get to this point from drawing diagrams or studying laws of physics or you know abstract thinking but basically reasoned from that experience

kinesthetic, tactile experience of the teeth and then recognizing it in another object we are talking about the analogy functioning as opposed to an individual more layered form of reasoning that would come later

M S-J: Yes, yes, right, yes. But the body really functions in this beginning way as a somatic template for making one's way in the world. Certainly thinking evolves in multiple directions, but in a very fundamental sense, fundamental concepts come from bodily experiences.

S P: yes and that's a very important point of how these fundamental concepts come from bodily experiences so, so how do you see all the present day brain-science explaining everything in terms of circuitry compared to what you are talking about

M S-J: Well, I have a very difficult time with that kind of thinking. It reminds me of Alison Dopnik's “The Philosophical Baby” book, which is really an investigation of infants by way of experimental programming and imaging techniques and computer analogies rather than in-the-flesh observations of infants such as those of Daniel Stern and other psychologists. I think “The Philosophical Baby” is a forgery in the sense of not giving us the life dynamics of an infant growing up or of young children growing up. I think experimental research has a definite place in psychology and neuroscience. Certainly it does. But I think it also kind of runs away with itself and now it's as if the central point of interest is *the brain*. The brain is like the oracle at Delphi, the place to which all neuroscientist and cognitive scientist and philosophers go to have all of their questions answered. And I think it's the wrong route. And my sense quite simply is that until a kinetic neuroscience comes prominently to the fore, an investigative science that scrutinizes movement and comes to understand it--and not simply as a *motor* phenomenon--cognitive science cannot achieve its vaunted aim, which is to explain in terms of brain events, and no one will know in an actual

experiential sense how we come to know what we know

SP: so in a way what's more fascinating is the part that's not explained in there

M S-J: Exactly. Because as long as you are talking about motor phenomenon--I mean people talk about "sensorimotor subjectivity," for example. Well, *motors* don't have friends and don't feel hunger pangs. And they don't do a lot of things, the things animals--humans included--do. I think the term "motor" is terribly unfortunate. It's to my mind very much like the term "embodied," which people use as a cover for everything they don't want to explore--which sounds pretty critical, but I really do think that the term "embodied"-- I have written about it as a "lexical band-aid that is covering over a 350 + year-old wound that is still suppurating and is not going to be healed by the lexical band-aid of "embodiment." I might mention in this context that the publishers of "The Primacy of Movement" want to come out with a second edition of the book. It was published in 1999 and I've agreed to do this and I've agreed to write an additional chapter for the book and have titled it--tentatively anyway. In part it will be talking about cognitive neuroscience present-day, what's going on in the 10 years since the book was published. The tentative title is: "Embodied Minds or Mindful Bodies?"

SP: that's a beautiful distinction can we talk more about that mindful bodies vs. embodied minds?

M S-J: Yes, that resonates. Mindful bodies are the way in which we come into the world. It ties into the fact that movement is our mother tongue, that we are already aware, cognizant in beginning ways of the world about us and of our own bodies. The really astounding experiment that Daniel Stern--an infant psychiatrist and clinical psychologist-- wrote about in "The Interpersonal World of the Infant"--was the experiment that he and others did on

Siamese twins before they had the operation that separated them. They did an experiment in which they tried pulling out the thumb-- the infant's own thumb--from its mouth and then its Siamese twin's mouth. What was so fascinating is that most people think (or have thought in the past) of the infant "self" as unified with its mother. It doesn't function in any kind of separate way. But when they tried pulling the arm of the infant sucking its own thumb away from its mouth, the infant pulled it towards its mouth, towards its mouth because it was its own thumb that was in its mouth. When it was the thumb of its Siamese twin that was in its mouth and they tried pulling it away, the infant reached after it and followed it. In other words, it bodily followed that thumb. So there's obviously a tactile-kinesthetic body that's alive and well in the body of infants. They know their own body. And it just seems to me that that was a fantastically insightful experiment to run and of critical importance.

SP: so I think its very nice to stay at these levels because we have in our culture we have a lot of confusion what's the mind what's the body to what extend do they overlap there are a lot of creating distinctions you are talking about being in your head or being in your body but this is what you are talking about is there is a mindful body that we have from birth on there is a sense, knowledge, awareness, that exist very deeply at a body level so do you want to talk a little more about what that experience is both in terms of your studies, thinking and your own experiences as a dance but also as someone when you do workshops with people you actually don't just talk but you actually encourage them to move and experience their own movement

M S-J: Yes, I think our usual sense--idea--our usual idea that we have five and only five senses is at the basis of . . . well, it just says a lot about the way in which we ignore proprioception and kinestheisa. They are overlooked sensory modalities, modalities that are actually basic to our lives. If you

look at psychology textbooks, there are reams written about vision and almost the same number of reams written about audition. There are some on smell, and some on taste and tactility, but certainly nowhere to the point that tactility should be highlighted throughout our lives, for we are never out of touch with something.

SP: I mean just the expression out of touch or in touch

M S-J: When we sit, we're always sitting on something; our feet are on the ground; our backs are against the chair. We might have a fork in our mouth. I mean we are always--we're never out of touch with something as long as we are alive. And in terms of kinesthesia: kinesthesia is tied to tactility because any type of tactile exploration involves movement; our tactile sense is tethered to kinesthesia. When we dance, we're always grounded some place. Even if we are momentarily airborne, we come back down to earth. There's a line actually from a book by D.H. Lawrence that has always resonated for me. He wrote, "We ought to dance with rapture that we are alive and in the flesh and part of the living incarnate cosmos." He went on to say several things about the body, one of which was: "that I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly." I thought that was just a beautifully stated--just an eloquent statement of our lives.

SP: so at a broader level its also that sense that we cannot exist, nothing exist in isolation everything exist in relationship to something else

M S-J: Yes, yes, right in a sensory sense, in a tactile sense, yes very, very much so. And in a movement sense too because we are (in an everyday sense) never unsupported--when I say we're never out of touch we're something: our weight is always supported in some way; and we may be supporting ourselves in some way. I mean that's very, very basic. We don't pay any attention to it normally at all. We take it for granted, but its there in our experience. We'd be very

surprised if there were nothing--a tactile void. In fact, some times it happens that a person thinks that there's a chair underneath and there is nothing there. Going back--wait a minute I was going to go back to your question relating kinesthesia and proprioception to dance. There was for me a very obvious, strong, strong training in kinesthetic awareness, as is true in the training of any dancer, and my work has really been just a broadening and a continuous elaboration of the meaningfulness of kinesthetic awareness. Not that I have worked on that topic wholly without attention to anything else. This is beside the point of our discussion, but I'm just going to mention it as an example--but in a way it does have to do with tactility and kinesthesia because my research for the past 2 years--I had a Distinguished Fellowship at the Durham University in the U.K. at an inaugural--at the inauguration of the Institute of Advanced Studies, and the title of that inaugural year was "The Legacy of Charles Darwin." I was writing on xenophobia and have been since. That has been the topic of my concern. And in a basic way, xenophobia is related to movement in that we keep our distance from strangers. At any rate, the moving body has really been at the basis of almost everything I have done. It's influenced me all the way along.

SP: so when you are alluding about this for example in that study about distance you've studied things like the development of language related to somatic concepts like inside outside do you want to talk a little more about that?

M S-J: Oh yes. That's very, very interesting because actually, in a chapter of *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*--this is a book that came out in April of 2009, published in the U.K. and it is--it has--13 chapters. The chapters are essays that I have written over the past 26 years, but it also has two new chapters. One of them is titled "On the Challenge of Languaging Experience." In that chapter, I used "insides" as an example--that is, the

word “in” or the concept of “inside.” I wrote about this concept actually in *The Roots of Thinking* because it was of moment with respect to writing about the origin and significance of Paleolithic cave art. Everybody who writes about Paleolithic cave art never considers the fact that those people who went into caves to paint in them went *inside*. The writers never talk about the fact that they went *inside* a cave, and that the inside of a cave was for them (with no knowledge of geology) remarkably different from the outside world. So when they went inside--that must have been a formidable experience. At least it seems so to me. Even for someone today, to go inside a cave is a remarkable experience.

SP: so I just want to draw something that is an way a similarity and a difference with some form of psychoanalytic thinking where you could say, say the cave or the basement of the house for some people is a symbolic representation of inside the psyche or the inner most part and what you are talking about is actually not a symbol but something that is an earlier experience that we have that is actually our basis for the language itself

M S-J: Yes very much so. As I pointed out in *The Primacy of Movement* and in the chapter “On the Challenge of Language Experience” in *The Corporeal Turn*, I read a lot of books about the beginnings of language written by psychologists who were doing experimental work: Lois Bloom, Eve Clark, and a number of others including Bowers and Piaget, and it turned out that the first preposition that a child learns has to do with one thing being put inside another, or putting one thing inside another, and so on, so at the beginning of its language-learning, the first preposition--there’s a prepositional primacy of the word “in” as both a locative state and act. In other words, the locative state of something being inside another and the act of putting something inside another is primary. And this understanding comes before their understanding of, or use of, *on* and *under*. If you think about this priority,

you realize that infants are put *inside* a crib; they have a nipple *inside* their mouth; their arms are put *inside* a sleeve. Young children--I mean in terms of toilet training--feel something is coming out from *inside* of them. They distinguish between inside and outside. So they have a kind of attraction to *inside*. I mean not only in terms of putting something inside another, but also in terms of what you are saying about the psyche. It seems to me like a cave that has a very mysterious kind of--you don’t know what you are going to find there. And from that point of view, it seems to me to relate to Jung’s concept of the shadow. You tend to keep your distance from the unknown. Actually, there is a wonderful description by Leonardo Da Vinci. He described his experience of standing at the entrance of a cave. He said he was suddenly struck by two feelings: fear and longing. He was afraid of the dark ominous cave and at the same time, he was longing to see if inside there was something wonderful inside. So in a way that--does that resonate?

SP: yeah, yeah very ,much so

M S-J: I think the way in which language develops and the concepts that we have are in a fundamental sense tied to feelings. I’m not saying every single word has these kinds of historical (evolutionary or ontogenetical) origins, but certainly some of them resonate very deeply for us--very, very deeply.

SP: so as we are coming to the end of this conversation is there something you would want to say to conclude?

M S-J: I think I will just reiterate what I said about a kinesthetic neuroscience coming to the fore. I think about that because I think movement is on the crest of being recognized. It still has a far way to go, but I think eventually it will come to the fore, not only in terms of organizations promoting movement--trying to do something about obesity, for example--but simply in terms of what I call a feeling of aliveness, and in terms of realizing too the tremendous

conceptual way in which our own movement is the source of fundamental concepts. I think that that will eventually come to the fore because it's there in experience. It's not fabricated; it's not speculative; it's out there too in a lot of literature--maybe between the lines at present--and needs to be brought *into* the lines themselves. I think it definitely will become apparent . . .

SP: in other words--

M S-J: movement is of central importance to life . . .

SP: that its there, we become more conscious of it we see it more

M S-J: . . . and we become aware of its qualitative dynamics and of the

meaningfulness of those qualitative dynamics: the way in which we relate to others; the way in which our tactile-kinesthetic and affective bodies are intertwined. We didn't get to talk about these intertwined feelings. I have written about their dynamic congruency, our feelings in an affective sense and our feelings in a kinesthetic sense. They are interlocked. The fact that we can restrain emotions or that we can feign them is evidence of the fact. We can put on a smile and we can restrain a smile only because we naturally--normally--experience them together.

SP: Yeah well thanks Maxine.

*This is part of USABP's "Somatic Perspectives" series, edited by Serge Prengel.
Transcribed by Sarah Hassan.*

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