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Mark JOHNSON, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2007. 308 pages.

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Mark Johnson is Knight Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. His name is most widely known in conjunction with that of his collaborator, George Lakoff, who is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. In their popular book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson argued for the pervasive role of metaphor in human language, cognition, and everyday life. Their second major collaboration, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), applied the theses and analytical techniques of the first work to the philosophical tradition. Lakoff and Johnson argued for the ubiquity of metaphor in philosophical concepts and theories, and criticized traditional and contemporary philosophical treatments of metaphor. The metaphorical nature of cognition, and the structuring of metaphor by the body, lead logically to the notion of *embodiment*; i.e. the thesis that human thinking intimately depends on the human body. It is this theme that Johnson pursued in *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1990), and, most recently, in *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007).

Johnson identifies the topic of *The Meaning of the Body* in his characteristically direct and simple style: “This book is about meaning – what it is, where it comes from, and how it is made. The guiding theme is that meaning grows from our visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life” (ix). The bulk of the book advances the thesis that “what we call ‘mind’ and what we call ‘body’ are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all our meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic

dimensions of this embodied activity” (1).¹ Johnson’s “real target,” however, is not metaphysical dualism so much as the “disembodied view of meaning” to which it gives rise (7).

In the Introduction, entitled “Meaning Is More Than Words and Deeper Than Concepts,” Johnson contrasts his embodied theory of meaning with what he sees as the dominant approach to meaning in contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy; according to the “conceptual-propositional theory,” meaning derives solely from concepts in propositions, which are taken to have no inherent connection to the human body. John Dewey’s “principle of continuity,” which will appear in many guises over the course of the investigation and serve as its guiding thread, is here introduced, but its exact meaning and status are not made sufficiently clear.²

The book is organized into three main sections. Part I gives a thick description of the bodily origin of meaning at its most primitive. The first chapter draws on contemporary phenomenology to suggest that human beings first begin to make sense of their bodies and their environments through the primordial experience of bodily movement. This form of sense-making is qualitative, pre-linguistic, and mostly non-conscious, yet it forms the ultimate basis for even the most abstract conceptualization. Here, Johnson jumps ahead to give the reader a sense of how the overall argument of the book unfolds. In addition to concepts whose meanings seem obviously to depend on the experience of bodily motion, such as *curved*, *straight*, and *vertical*, so too does the abstract concept of *time*: “We (adults) conceptualize time via deep, systematic, *spatial-movement* metaphors in which the passage of time is understood as relative motion in space” (28). Our body-based, experiential understanding of how objects move in space relative to our bodies is mapped, via metaphor, onto the concept of time. We metaphorically conceptualize the passage of

¹While Johnson prefers to describe his investigation by the term “aesthetics,” it could also be called a “hermeneutics” of embodiment.

²The status of this principle does not seem to be entirely consistent in Johnson’s argument; at various points, it seems to function as an assumption, formal theoretical requirement, methodological principle, hypothesis, or conclusion.

time as though it were an object moving towards us in space (this is not, Johnson stresses, a *literal* comparison). This body-based understanding then finds its expression in language, as, for example, when we speak of “Tuesday *following* (or *coming after*) Monday” (30). Conceptual metaphor realizes the crucial “continuity that exists between our mostly non-conscious experience of embodied meaning and our seemingly disembodied acts of thinking and reasoning” (31).

The rest of Part 1 describes other qualities and structures of embodied meaning.³ Chapter 2 posits continuity between adult sense-making and the pre-linguistic, affective, and inter-subjective ways in which infants begin to make sense of themselves and their environments. In Chapter 3, Johnson draws on the cognitive neuroscience of Antonio Damasio to argue that embodied humans interpret their environment through their emotional responses, which are physiologically realized in the body. Chapter 4 presents Dewey’s notion that the analysis of any situation takes place within its overall felt quality. In Chapter 5, Johnson endorses William James’s radical thesis that all thinking, including logical reasoning, is grounded in feeling; Johnson writes: “Human thinking is a continuous feeling-thinking process that is forever tied to our body’s monitoring of its own states” (98).⁴

While the first part of the book draws on phenomenology, psychology, and pragmatism, the second part turns to the cognitive sciences. Johnson places human cognition on a continuum with that of animals, with the aim of showing that human thinking is “embodied, situated, and goal-directed” and does not, *contra* representationalist theories of mind, rely on internal symbols which represent and refer to external things and events, as Jerry Fodor maintains (112). Johnson then gives a fuller account of how abstract concepts come to be vested with bodily meaning through conceptual metaphor, along

³It is a pity that Johnson has apparently not read Proust, as the latter’s works would have provided excellent illustrations of many of his phenomenological descriptions, and would also have reminded him of the crucial importance of *memory* in perception, which he neglects to discuss.

⁴Incidentally, this thesis suggests an experiment to test its own truth: read it to an analytic philosopher and then observe whether his hackles do indeed physically rise.

the lines of the “time as a moving object” analysis outlined above. Furthermore, Johnson puts forward the fascinating (albeit admittedly tentative) suggestion that the structural mappings inherent to metaphor may have neural correlates in the brain. The overall thrust of this section is to provide empirical evidence from contemporary cognitive science to support the embodied theory of meaning.

Part 3 is an excursus into the realm of art. Johnson endeavors to defend, through analyses of particular works of art taken from painting, literature, and music, that artistic creation is meaning-making at its most powerful, and, furthermore, that the meaning manifested by works of art is intrinsically connected to the human body. The aesthetics of embodied meaning developed in the previous two sections is here illustrated and applied. The argument relies heavily on Dewey, whose strongly positive appraisal of the value of art is set up in opposition to the “subjectivization of the aesthetic” (Johnson cites Gadamer’s phrase) brought about by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and its legacy in the analytic tradition, i.e. the denial that aesthetic judgments carry cognitive value and the subsequent marginalization of aesthetics as a discipline.⁵

In the final chapter, Johnson recapitulates the book’s argument and explicates, in a series of numbered points, his notions of “meaning” and of “body,” explicitly contrasting his views with the conceptions of analytic philosophy. Just as in *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh*, a strong polemical element runs right through this work. The methodology alone, which draws on pragmatism, phenomenology, the cognitive sciences, and art, challenges conventional analytic argumentation. Johnson’s *primary* criticism of the tradition in which he was educated is not that its theories of *meaning* are false, but that contemporary analytic philosophy as a whole is not *meaningful*. Seen from this angle, Johnson’s own thesis of embodied meaning forms just one premise in the book’s overall polemical argument, which can be reconstructed as follows: philosophy ought to be meaningful to people. Meaningful philosophy deals with

⁵Johnson regularly gives courses on Kant’s aesthetics at the University of Oregon.

human meaning. Human meaning is embodied. Analytic philosophy does not recognize embodied, hence, human meaning. Therefore, analytic philosophy is not meaningful. Therefore, “the necessary remedy for our current problematic state must be a non-dualistic, embodied view of meaning, concepts, mind, thought, language, and values . . . a new philosophy” (264).

Johnson’s essentially humanistic critique, whether or not one agrees with all of the stages of its argument, is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself. It is indeed, if nothing else, a *new* philosophy: Johnson and Lakoff’s approach has only been visible on the philosophical scene for the last twenty-five years, and the bibliography of this 2007 publication contains references to numerous recent, current, and forthcoming titles in a range of up-and-coming fields.⁶ Johnson’s interdisciplinary methodology, expressed in an accessible style, has made a new form of philosophical writing available to a relatively wide audience. In addition, this critique of analytic philosophy is distinct from those voiced from outside of the tradition, and even from that of Richard Rorty, who, like Johnson, mounted a pragmatism-inspired rejection of the tradition in which he had been schooled.⁷

Reflection upon the polemical aspect of Johnson’s work raises important questions about the nature of contemporary philosophy. Ought philosophy to be *meaningful*? The answer is not self-evident; the history of philosophy bears witness to many different conceptions of what philosophy ought first and foremost to be, such as *true* (e.g. Leibniz), *revolutionary* (e.g. Marx), or *scientifically rigorous* (e.g. Husserl). Moreover, is a philosophical theory of meaning, *ipso facto*, meaningful? This too requires reflection – a theory of truth,

⁶Referring to the most recent developments in the empirical sciences of the mind is a methodological principle for Johnson.

⁷Johnson mentions Rorty, with whom he parts ways because of the latter’s dismissal of metaphor. Curiously, and disappointingly, Johnson at no point refers to the later Wittgenstein, who bitingly criticized literal/logical conceptual analysis, and stressed the importance of the human body and of the pragmatic principle of “use” to the meanings of words.

for example, is not necessarily true. Furthermore, “meaning” itself is perhaps not the topic that is most meaningful to people generally; ethical issues, it could be argued, are more directly relevant to human life.

Indeed, Johnson’s own theory of meaning is not as meaningful as could be desired. While the book contains fascinating ideas and discoveries from several fields that are not usually found together – and is well worth reading for this reason alone – the result is more an agglomeration or enumeration than a powerful philosophical synthesis.⁸ A challenging and promising new direction in contemporary philosophy, embodiment theory needs to be fleshed out.

⁸For example, the “body,” for Johnson, is biological, ecological, phenomenological, social, and cultural; such an account is commendably broad and inclusive, but the full meanings of these concepts can only emerge from a consideration of their *relations* to each other in a theoretical synthesis.