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## BOOK REVIEW

### **THE AESTHETICS OF MEANING AND THOUGHT: THE BODILY ROOTS OF PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, MORALITY, AND ART, MARK JOHNSON (2018)**

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This book review aims to serve two purposes: to give a clear overview of the main arguments made by Mark Johnson in *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, and to reflect on some of his arguments through the lens of my own background in artistic practice and comparative cultural analysis. As the scope of Johnson's publication is quite broad, this book review is not exhaustive of all the details of its contents. It will specifically focus on the implications of his views on aesthetics for intersubjectivity and communication. And it responds to his work in relation to the possibilities of knowledge production within artistic practices.

### **THE AESTHETICS OF MEANING AND THOUGHT**

Mark Johnson is most widely known for his work on neurolinguistics, much of it done in cooperation with George Lakoff. They are famously known for their work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Recent work done by Johnson focuses on the aesthetics of human understanding, on which he previously published in *The Meaning of the Body, Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007). Within that volume, his emphasis lies on the details of the bodily roots of our cognition and explores how philosophical significance is created through our visceral connections to the world. In the volume discussed here, he extrapolates this previous research to the field of aesthetics and its implications for philosophy, the sciences, morality, law and the arts.

His embodied approach to linguistics and cognition is what distinguishes Johnson from other linguists concerned with metaphor. Johnson's findings claim to cut to the core of fundamental human cognitive functions. At times this volume reads as if Johnson would like to instigate a paradigm shift across all scientific fields based on his argumentations. In the introduction, he uses quite some space to position his view on aesthetics, inspired heavily by Dewey, within a larger historical philosophical frame.

Mark Johnson's main argument throughout the book is that as human beings we have a deep visceral, emotional and qualitative relation to our world. Meaning comes to us via patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions and feelings ... that constitute the basis of our experience, thought and language, so that 'aesthetic dimensions shape the very core of our human being' (1). Johnson argues that traditional aesthetic theory has overlooked these deeply embodied aesthetic processes. Aesthetic experiences are not, according to him, separated from other kinds of experiences, but lie at the heart of human meaning and understanding. Consequently, the arts, presenting heightened aesthetic experiences, are thus regarded as 'instances of particularly deep and rich enactments of meaning [...] [which] give us profound insight into our general processes of meaning-making that underlie our conceptual systems and our cultural institutions and practices' (2). He ends with 'Dewey's big idea for Aesthetics', emphasizing the unifying quality of significant experiences and by stating that all experience is aesthetic experience (237).

Listing a set of assumptions he calls '[t]he folk theory of disembodied mind and reason', he rejects the Cartesian split between body and mind, and calls for a revival of the field of aesthetics from its discarded philosophical corner (2–14). Johnson, throughout this book problematizes Kant's system of aesthetics as an exclusively epistemic project, coupled with his neglect of the body as a source of meaning and value (206). He briefly celebrates the influence of the romantics on the valorization of aesthetics, although he recognizes that, in their preference for dualism (mind/body, cognition/emotion, thinking/feeling), they gave too much weight to the senses and emotions over rational thought, and ignored the connections between reason and desire (12). Johnson states how the Anglo-American and European analytic philosophers have overlooked art and aesthetics and their embodied meaning. He then turns to Dewey, who advocates for the pervasiveness of art in all aspects of life (13).

The essays collected in this volume illustrate and explain what it means to say that meaning and thought are embodied aesthetic processes, and they then explore some of the ways these deep dimensions of meaning operate in philosophy, science, morality, law and the various arts.

In Part I, 'Philosophy and Science', Johnson considers how we should conceive of philosophy and the sciences, once we take embodied cognition seriously. Building on previous research done in *Metaphors We Live By*, human cognition as studied through empirical research on mind, thought and language is revealed to be built on a system of (abstract) metaphors (29). All human experience is guided by image-schematic patterns that are neurologically created in every situation we encounter, giving it its specific, situational significance. These specific experiences are then processed through neurological patterns into abstract metaphors, which are at the foundation of our understanding of the world we encounter. These abstract metaphors are formed through our physical experiences and are, therefore, developed within physical, societal, cultural and interpersonal contexts. The image-schematic

patterns are the foundation to a system of abstract metaphors that underlie our moral, legal and scientific values.

In Chapter 1, he argues for pragmatism as the most compelling philosophical framework to explore bodily sources of meaning, understanding and reasoning. He presents a historical framework for the relationship between pragmatism and cognitive sciences, and argues for an enhancement of pragmatist philosophy and cognitive science through mutual critique and ongoing dialogue. Chapter 2 gives examples of ways in which philosophies are elaborations of sets of systematic conceptual metaphors that guide how we individuate, identify and explain phenomena within particular philosophical systems (29). Chapters 3 and 4 argue for precision in philosophical orientation and methodology, and for selecting the appropriate cognitive science to draw on, advocating for pragmatism as the most comprehensive and insightful framework for understanding the implications of embodied cognitive science. Chapter 3 particularly distinguishes ways by which 'linguistic pragmatism' can sometimes overemphasize the importance of language and overlook embodied ways of meaning-making. 'A more adequate theory would come from a classical pragmatist emphasis on experience (not just language) as the starting and ending point of philosophical reflection' (29).

Chapter 4 argues that just as pragmatisms vary, so do various conceptions of cognitive science, and one should choose wisely. 'Philosophy and Science are both endeavours of inquiry grounded in systematic metaphors, which are in turn grounded in our embodied and culturally embedded experience' (30). Chapter 5 gives an account of metaphorical undergirds of scientific models and shows their ties to selected (situated) values.

In Part II, 'Morality and Law', Johnson provides us with partial and selective attempts to explore the implications of our embodied mind, thought and values for our understanding of moral thinking and choice (136). Chapter 6 indicates some ways in which cognitive science research is relevant to moral philosophy (136). Empirical investigations into mind provide a way to examine the link between the 'is' of mental functioning and the 'ought' of morality (138). Thereby Johnson is building on Dewey, who states that the field of ethics is ineradicably empirical (142). Furthermore, he demonstrates that metaphor research conducted by Lakoff and Johnson, among others, reveals that conceptual metaphors lying at the heart of our ideas of morality are often fuzzy and contradicting each other, thereby dismissing moral philosophies that seek a literalist picture of moral thinking (145). Chapter 7 explores what morality becomes when it gives up the illusion of disembodied thought and embraces the central role of imagination in our capacity for moral deliberation (136), making use of Dewey's 'imaginative dramatic rehearsal'. Chapter 8 suggests that our legal concepts and reasoning are, just like morality, shaped by deep conceptual metaphors rooted in our body-based and culturally influenced values (136).

Part III, 'Art and the Aesthetics of Life', proposes that it is ultimately the aesthetic dimensions of experience that underlie and make possible philosophy and all other modes of thinking (of ethics, politics, science, art, philosophy). It sketches what they become when they are recognized as dealing with our visceral engagement with our world and other people, and therefore as revealing how meaning and value arise in our daily experience (200). Chapter 9 deals with ways in which our experiences of art shape our self-understanding. Chapter 10 advocates for Dewey's take on aesthetics to become the new cornerstone of a new philosophy on the bodily basis of our meaning and

thought (201). Chapter 11 offers an illustration of how architecture appropriates the embodied aesthetic structures that make meaningful experience possible, building on Bergens 'embodied simulation hypothesis' (246) and Dewey's take on the pervasive, unifying quality of human experience (247–48). It is remarkable that Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* is absent in the argumentation for an aesthetic, visceral understanding of architecture as signifying artform, even as a reference. Chapter 12 gives a brief survey of how an aesthetics of the embodied mind requires us to rethink many of our received notions about the nature of science, philosophy, morality, law and art (201).

All these chapters can be characterized as a brief exploration of the consequences of Johnson's (and Dewey's) view on aesthetics and embodied cognition for all those fields. It is an ambitious and, towards the final chapters, at times idealistic inquiry. Johnson summarizes that from this embodied point of view, philosophy becomes the *human* quest for meaning and values in our lives – the means by which we can make sense of, criticize and enrich our experiences from very broad and pluralistic perspectives (260). Morality, in his view, becomes an embodied *human* morality, situated within the ongoing development of our species and our world (260). Aesthetics becomes the cornerstone of our new understanding of what it means to be *human* (260). The arts become exemplary enactments of the possibilities for human meaning, intelligence and value in our world (261). Johnson concludes that a fully adequate aesthetically based philosophy does not yet exist; 'it needs to be created like a massive work of art, beginning to emerge in the history of humankind' (261).

This volume contains a historiographic quality in its overview of research in the fields of pragmatist philosophy, morality and law, art and aesthetics. It does, at times, lack a certain rigour in its efficacy of the consequences of putting aesthetics at the heart of human meaning and understanding in each of these fields. The gesture to present Dewey's idea on aesthetics as the answer for development in further research in all of them could, at times, be more critically assessed.

### INTERSUBJECTIVITY, FRAGMENTATION, ERRORS OF JUDGEMENT

It is not often that research coming from the field of neurosciences advocates so passionately for putting aesthetics at the heart of our human cognition and understanding. Johnson emphasizes the significance of our wordless encounters, experiences had over the sun setting, over dancing with a lover or through the rhythm of a well-written poem. These types of experiences are given foundational significance to our human cognition and understanding. Johnson's understanding of aesthetics implies that our creative capabilities might provide profound insight into our philosophical, moral and aesthetic imaginings of this world. His work reminds us of the quality of our human existence and the importance of our physical, visceral engagement with the world and each other.

Nevertheless, the essays in this volume raise some urgent questions about intersubjectivity and about our possibilities to communicate aesthetic experiences within a societal context, about, through and with the arts. His work has implications for human interaction and communication, our social and political practices. Furthermore, a distinction between artistic practice and aesthetic experiences in everyday life needs to be considered.

Concerning communication, Johnson, in Chapter 3, distinguishes between those pragmatist linguists who focus on language and the experience of

language as the source for all meaning-making. They argue that even pre-lingual or non-lingual experiences can only be understood through linguistic frameworks (86). Johnson then persuasively gives the example of dancing with his wife, and explains that in the physical exchange of the movement, much more is communicated than language could express, arguing that our meaning-making exceeds linguistic sources. This example frames this situation as an experience through which sense can be made of the world, and possibly the relationship between these two people. However, this does not solve the problem of a possible difference in experience and interpretation of that dancing situation between them. To which extent do linguistic, cultural and social frames colour the interpretation of the situation, and how could those interpretations be understood beyond language? If such a (embodied) conceptualization beyond language exists, as Johnson claims, does not the mere difference between his body and his wife's influence their embodied interpretation of the situation? Interpretation, as part of communication, even beyond the linguistic, is still not infallible. Johnson later briefly references the work of Benjamin Bergen (246), in which he mentions our capability of embodied simulation, stating that we understand others' intentions through mimicking their actions and experiences. We understand others' actions and expressions through firing similar neurons in our brains, simulating what it would feel like to act or express as if we were them (246). But it is not considered to which extent we have the possibility to present our (aesthetic or artistic) experiences to others in such a way that they recognize and mimic them correctly. Furthermore, an aesthetic foundation to our cognition is considered to have a heightened influence on our *moral imagination* throughout the book. But our dialogic, fallible relationship with ourselves and others, the often-hampered reciprocity of our communications and the often-obscured social and cultural contexts in which we operate and create significance are not given a great amount of attention. Johnson also does not pay much attention to the *political* implications of his argument for a human understanding beyond or including non-lingual communication. The embodied and situational nature of our cognition problematizes the extent to which experiences can be shared in a meaningful way, in the context of power structures, prejudice and social inequality.

Throughout the volume, Johnson opposes Kant's dichotomy between aesthetic experience and rational judgement. The practice of the appreciation of art should not be separated from our abilities to experience the aesthetic in everyday life. Johnson uses 'art' and 'aesthetics' as interchangeable terms, because in his view all experiences are aesthetic experiences. This makes one wonder whether he deems an aesthetic *process* as had by an artist through their practice, similar to an *aesthetic experience* had in everyday life. Even, if making art and experiencing art as a non-artist are similar aesthetic experiences. The process of meaning-making is considered a reciprocal aesthetic, embodied process, but within that process, roles of reader/interpreter, creator or conveyer of messages (whether linguistic or otherwise) are not distinguished in satisfactory detail. In addition, Johnson does not give much significance to power relations that might be at stake, regulating which aesthetic experiences are available to whom and under which conditions. A reference to the work of Jacques Rancière on the distribution of the sensible (2004), for example, could have contributed to the depth of the argumentation for an aesthetic basis of our human cognition and philosophy.

In the introduction to this volume, Johnson dismisses Edward Bullough's suggestion of the necessity to *separate from life through art* (10). Johnson has a clear stake in the persuasive argument for an aesthetics that incorporates everyday life. But this type of *separate* experience in and through the arts, as Bullough mentions, cannot be completely dismissed as illegitimate. Artworks are used both ways: to escape life and surround oneself with beauty and a heightened sensuous experience, as well as to reflect on and engage with everyday life. Johnson's claim against a fragmentation of aesthetic experience, against a separation of the aesthetic from everyday life, problematizes the possibility for a human being to exist and experience multiplicity, as well as to experience a multiplicity of contradictory voices of rational thought and visceral experience. For Johnson, these fragmentations are part of our experiences; a fragmented thought is an experience as well (240).

By claiming our understanding of situations to be of a particular *unifying quality*, building on Dewey, there seems to be no space to consider inner contradictions, or errors of judgement. Johnson does briefly recognize that our moral imaginings are built on contradictory conceptual metaphors and can become fuzzy and unclear (145). But still, the visceral experiences on which our imaginings are built are considered to be trustworthy. Even so, human beings, apart from being embodied creatures living for emotional qualities, are also highly vulnerable to the manipulation of their sensuous perceptions, both through the communications and actions of others as through their own.

I am thinking, in particular, of Lauren Berlant's work in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), in which she describes how that affect indicates how our desires and hopes for the future can sometimes create errors in our judgements of the conditions we live in. Consequently, our positive hopes for an imagined future can become detrimental to our own flourishing. When that hope is lost, or a situation cannot be distinguished as part of a particular 'genre' of experience, this creates a situational 'impasse' (Berlant 2011: 199). Can we understand Dewey's 'pervasive unifying quality' that 'gives identity and meaning to our experiential situations' as similar to Berlant's concept of 'genre'? The question is raised how Johnson's interpretations of our embodied emotional encounters and our moral imaginings that follow are related to Berlant's affect theory. It problematizes to which extent Dewey, and thereby Johnson, differentiates between individual experiences of this 'pervasive unifying quality' and communal or group experiences, and it questions our ability to assess our (lingual, conceptual, embodied) experiences.

### ARTISTIC PROCESSES OF MEANING-MAKING

Johnson's argumentation for an embodied, aesthetic experience of human meaning and understanding becomes stronger when accounted for in detail and through specific arguments for specific contexts, especially when considering the arts as knowledge-producing discipline. He does provide more details in relation to image-schematic patterns of meaning, leading to abstract metaphor theory.

'Out of our bodily interaction with our environmental affordances, we take the meaning of things and events in certain specified ways, according to specific interactional patterns. These recurring patterns of interaction are called "image schema's" (Lakoff and Johnson 1987)' (18).

In relation to these image schemas, Johnson explains the importance of experiential qualities, such as *verticality*, for the way we mark significant

relations, both literal as metaphorical and of *scalar intensity* (brighter, dimmer, rougher, smoother, hotter, colder, etc.). Other qualities of experience he deems important to our human understanding are relations such as centre/periphery, near/far, in/out, front/back, right/left, balance/imbalance, containment, source-path-goal-movement, iteration, straight/curved, locomotion and so forth (19).

These image schemas are recognizable as building blocks used in artistic practices. Relating to and making use of these types of embodied image schemas is a recurring part of the artistic crafting process, informing the artist of possible steps that can be taken to explore the material at hand. In the crafting process of a play or poem, considering or exploring these schemas can be part of the text's overall structure, narrative, narrating voices, qualities of sound, rhythm, references to or presentations of sensuous perception. Johnson makes a short reference to this process in Chapter 9, where he discusses the 'felt sense' of a word, phrase or passage, as introduced by Gendlin (211). He demonstrates how a poet might use this felt sense to make decisions about the next lines he writes. He does not refer to image-schematic patterns that might inform these decisions.

These types of crafting processes and how they make use of our everyday aesthetic experiences can, therefore, be considered in more detail. Understandably, this is outside the scope of Johnson's volume, but it could be a great addition to it. Two additional questions recurred:

1. What would happen if Mark Johnson considered the *crafting process* of aesthetic products/acts/experiences, considering that artistic products are created by the artist through a process of association, technique, translation of visceral, embodied knowledge and making use of tacit knowledge to shape and reshape their artistic endeavours? What would this type of reflection on (visceral) knowledge coming from the artistic *crafting process* do for our views on the aesthetics of human understanding? What kind of knowledge is produced within these processes? The book mentions the artistic process briefly in Chapter 10:

The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities *as perceived* have controlled the question of production. The act of producing that is directed by intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have.

(239)

The suggested deliberateness and even linearity of this process and the artists' agency over it should be considered further. As many artists know, it is often spontaneity and uncontrolled action that spurs the artistic process to seek the creation of experiences beyond what could previously be perceived. Artistic practice creates space for new visceral, aesthetic experiences, beyond possibly pervasive unifying qualities of situations. This is what, in fact, makes the process *creative*.

2. What would happen if we translated Johnson's image schemas of *verticality* and *scalar intensity*, his accounts of affordances of a cup or a bottle and

how it shapes our understanding of these objects, if we would translate those ideas into *creative writing exercises*?

In the conclusion of this book review, I would like to refer shortly to a class situation in which I have tested this idea. I asked a group of undergraduate students from a humanities course, through a technique of *freewriting*, to write down all associations, feelings, sensuous perceptions and affordances they could recall when thinking of a cup. I did the same for *grapes*. (Throughout his book, Johnson refers to the many *affordances* of our experiences of a cup, a bottle or bowl, to explain that: how object and person interact, is how things signify to us.) I did the same for *grapes*. I followed with a similar exercise, focusing on sense perception, to seek for different interpretations of the concept of *mourning*. One of the things this practice foregrounded and problematized was the extent to which visceral-embodied knowledge (provided that *is* the type of knowledge we were able to tap into through these exercises), which Johnson rightfully claims to be important, can be shared and used as a tool for analysis and mutual understanding. Our embodied, visceral knowledge tends to be grounded in very specific *situations*, as Johnson claims himself, creating a multitude of situational knowledges that *differ per individual*, perhaps more so than they are *shared*. If a group of people is asked to write about their experiences with mourning, as many accounts of what mourning might be, or mean, will be given as there are people in the room. To which extent are their experiences *aesthetic*, and how do they differ from experiences had in *artistic practice*? If *mourning* is conceptualized partly through embodied cognition, how do we communicate about this? Can we communicate about (embodied) concepts outside of the particular situations in which these knowledges were build?

Deeming human aesthetic experience as the foundation of all human understanding raises new questions about the exchangeability of these subjective aesthetic experiences in everyday life and the claim on knowledge that can be made through such a practice. Further research is needed to know what knowledges are produced through aesthetic/artistic *acts*, aesthetic *processes* and aesthetic *experiences*. If those are not considered separate (experiences), the ways in which they are combined need to be elaborated on more thoroughly. The implications of Johnson's work for social and communicational contexts and for affect theory need to be explored. Scientists and philosophers in every field he taps into need to consider the consequences of his findings in more detail for their own expertise. Johnson's work deserves consideration in situated, embodied, physical contexts, as they are the playing field for knowledge production, as he so passionately advocates in this book. Possibly, an inquiry into research done on crafting *processes* of artists of several disciplines (and beyond the traditional ones) could be one of the many points of departure for the creation of a philosophy based on aesthetics, as the massive work of art Johnson would like to see emerge (261).

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