

1996

# The Spiral Dance: Toward a Phenomenology of Somatics

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## Repository Citation

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# The Spiral Dance



## Toward a

In order to express it, the body must become the thought or intention that it signifies for us. It is the body which points out, and which speaks . . .

Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>

### Phenomenology

Like somatics, phenomenology holds a nondualistic philosophy of the body. Phenomenology develops the inclusive concept of “the lived body”: ourselves as our bodies, experienced as mind, soul, flesh and spirit. Phenomenology is the study of experience—sometimes called the study of consciousness. It studies immediate awareness as lived whole-body consciousness.

### Somatics

Somatics develops educational techniques and therapies based on awareness of our bodies at rest and in motion, the same awareness that phenomenology describes. *Somatic education and therapy affect experiential materializations of bodymind integrity.* An integrity is an unbroken whole; the term also refers to honesty, which points in this case to a bodily lived soundness. The term *affect* is used here in a twofold sense: “to influence change” and “to move the emotions.” These meanings are also basic to a definition of the aesthetic, a theme I develop more fully in *Dance and the Lived Body*.<sup>2</sup> One of my purposes here will be to explore affectivity as a foundational link between somatics and aesthetics.

### The Spiral Dance

My use of “materialization” in the paragraph above suggests that the body is less objective material and more ongoing process than we typically suppose—as Judith Butler’s text, *Bodies That Matter*, explores.<sup>3</sup> Butler articulates a feminist, phenomenological, and post-structuralist view. Despite this mouthful, her insight can be stated quite simply in a phenomenological context. We are constantly becoming—thus coming to “matter”—in ways that we ourselves make come true. And this “mattering” is actualized physically and metaphysically at once, as a dance of becoming.

In the above, I am weaving together my worlds of phenomenology, its feminist developments, dance, and somatics. It seems I am forever defining phenomenology whenever I write or speak about it, because it is more than a word. It is a worldview, in fact—a recognized and much-trodden path in philosophy that seeks to describe the self-evidential core of being, and refutes the notion we inherited from Aristotle that there is something non-material called “mind” that moves something material called “body.”

Modern science does not bear out the dualistic notion that we inherited from the father of biology. We gain

# Phenomenology of Somatics

by Sondra Horton Fraleigh, M.A.

from Aristotle the double-blind myth of mind/male dominance, that the mind moves the inferior body (the myth of the mind in the machine, as phenomenologist Gilbert Ryle has studied it in *Concept of Mind*),<sup>4</sup> and the myth of man as superior to woman.

Aristotle's biology teaches that the male is the true parent, the female merely the bearer of the child. His philosophy of human types places man in the position of mind and agency. Woman is passive; she is body as vessel, and further still, an incomplete male, distorted.<sup>5</sup>

Phenomenology as it is being written today rejects this double-blind myth, although earlier, especially in Jean Paul Sartre, phenomenology perpetuated male normality and female abnormality. Sartre saw woman as both docile and dangerous, the "slimy" other "in the form of a hole,"<sup>6</sup> even as he disputed mind/body dichotomy in his existential phenomenology which grew as a protest philosophy. Phenomenology did not identify the body as an independent entity, implying that the mind is somehow other and non-physical.

Through new phenomenology and somatic practices, we understand that the body is minded, besouled, and spirited (the tripartite that classical Greek philosophy treated as *psyche*). On the physical level, the body has a brain with its nervous system branching throughout. Can mind (if we see it arising from the brain) operate "within" still a separate category called the body? How would one divorce the brain-mind from the body? We could cut off the head. See how absurd it gets?

As a philosophical method, phenomenology pays particular attention to how body/mind issues are described. Dualism is established or eradicated through language. Phenomenology evolved the concept

of "the lived body," or more currently, "the living body," and it developed "corporeity" to describe the body subject. We are not ever just objects; the body is alive with subjectivity from head to toe.

I do not hold with all of phenomenological discourse as it developed with Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidigger, and the first contemporary feminist in philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir. (De Beauvoir was the first to explain the "anti-essentialist" and still-debated thesis that gender is constituted through learned and culturally established behavior.) But I do find a continuum of thought extending from these first existential phenomenologists to more recent phenomenology. (Butler is also an anti-essentialist.) It has held consistently that mind and body are not different entities; they are merely different ways we have developed of explaining physical and mental bodily phenomena. The living body is the source of thought and feeling.

*Differentiation comes through our experience of body and with language.* Body consciousness can seem either whole or fragmented. Our awareness is constituted out of the whole bodymind in both cases, even though we can describe experiences where the body seems absent or even dead in certain parts.<sup>7</sup> We can describe differences between reason and emotion, splits of attention, altered states, and indeed many other states of the body, even feelings of disembodiment. And many researches into near-death experiences indicate that consciousness may travel beyond ordinary reality in manners similar to the dream state. The above examples do not imply that the body and the mind are metaphysically separate. They point to our ability to objectify and describe various levels of experience through language. We commonly call such experiences spiri-

tual, physical, emotional, and mental according to their differing affective qualities. We might even think of them as produced through our bodily lived aesthetic, as feeling tones surface to color our moods and movements (or otherwise get obstructed).

One of the primary insights of phenomenology is that the body is a subject, not an object. We can objectify the body, as we necessarily do in medical research or in learning movement (which foot goes forward on step three in a dance or awareness of the torso over the pelvis in a somatic exploration, for instance). But this does not make the body an object. The alive body remains always a subject, even though we can objectify it in awareness and in language.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* was an explicit refutation of body/mind dualism. Like Sartre's and Heidigger's, his philosophy was a criticism of the dualisms initiated by Aristotle that were further consolidated by Descartes. Since Descartes, we mistakenly suppose that mind and matter are separate, even oppositional, as Descartes carries material/nonmaterial dualisms further than Aristotle in his *Meditations*.<sup>8</sup> The field of somatics is not immune to these problems of language and their influence on perception. The body/mind split is assumed in somatic literature and practices that seek to "integrate the body and the mind"—as though they were separate to begin with. This is a misleading figure of speech. "Bodymind integrity" might be a good substitute, as an expression of the inseparable unity of psyche and soma. "Integration" may indeed be accomplished in somatic therapy, but it is usually descriptive of structural and functional improvement that involves the bodymind as a root given, with all the complexities of body consciousness that ensue from this source.

Body/mind dualism is far from the truth of our experience. Without our bodily existence, there is no source for the evolution of mental phenomena nor "house for the soul" (in the language of dualistic theology). The original phenomenologists saw that the body is not an object, not some "thing" we have as a possession (or a burden) to transport through life and relinquish at death, as though our essential self were other than body. *We don't have bodies* (joyfully). *We are bodies* (even though in somatic bodywork we might describe "finding" our body, as though it had been lost).<sup>9</sup>

New phenomenology, particularly its feminist branch, holds that the body is performative. We "say" our bodies constantly, incessantly, performatively. That the body can express and does speak its truth (its problems, secrets, and intrinsic powers) is not news to dancers and somatics practitioners.<sup>10</sup> Somatic explorations are also performed as human expressions, with intentional awareness, often in a therapeutic mode, and sometimes with an aesthetic intent that is like dance. In any case, somatic modalities may be dancelike, as consciously undertaken activities that tap our habitually materializing "body speech." Ultimately, they undo performative intentionality in a therapeutic mode of nondoing, to let the dance happen.

That the expressions of the body exist in a cultural context is a concern for phenomenology and somatics alike. New phenomenology is examining how our cultural milieu influences and even fixes the limits of our bodily capabilities. Butler's focus is how bodies come to matter (to "matter" is also to "mean"), which bodies come to matter more than others, and how gender power differentials are culturally and politically enforced. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone critiques the veiled patriarchy of early phenomenology extending into psychoanalysis and attitudes toward (de)constructions of the animate body. In *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies*,<sup>11</sup> she exposes the oppression of women's bodies as psychically rooted in our unexamined cultural assumptions and attitudes toward the body and control (the mind in control of the body, and phallic control as power). She critiques Sartre's ontology and Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalysis based on Sartrean ontology as pro-

ducing a psychoanalytic of sexuality that conceives of power as penetration, "the filling of holes." The penetrating penis is commonly called a gun; it has power to shoot, and is equated with control and conquest. Sheets-Johnstone shows that in our cultural milieu, "what is not a matter of (phallocentric) control is not a matter of power."<sup>12</sup>

Beneath the cultural trappings of power, where do our original feelings of empowerment form? Feelings of power are first awakened as bodily powers (I can open and close my hands, turn my head, make sounds, whistle, swim, walk and run). These are mitigated by cultural permissions and constraints associated with such powers. (I learned to whistle very shrilly between my tongue and teeth at young age, an "empowering" accomplishment that I rarely use since becoming civilized.) Sheets-Johnstone shows how evolutionary heritage generates corporeal archetypes that are culturally "reworked," then individually elaborated, entrenching even more deeply the reigning conceptions of power. She points toward the immense work of empowering from a basis of transformation rather than penetration, the universal but largely unacknowledged coupling/relational character of the penis, the transformative character of birth, and of infant and human development. Then power would no longer be power to control.

Might "change" itself, as rooted in the inevitable ongoing cycles of nature, ever be culturally valued? The modern field of phenomenology is based on understanding the temporality of perception and our intersubjective position in the changing life-world. Likewise, the field of somatics is based on the "power" of the bodymind to change toward health and well being through integrated and functional actions that sustain positive intersubjective relationships to others and to nature, the ecological life-world of which our living body is an extension. The fields of phenomenology and somatics provide examples of theoretical and methodological means toward a new definition of power as transformation. Both are interpersonally founded in letting go of needs to judge, to be right, to force solutions, to have one's own way. Such transformations are effected through listening and trusting while knowing when

these soft boundaries need to state clearly "yes" or "no," in respecting one's own body wisdom. I refer to the power to differentiate and discriminate.

### Natural Powers and the Core Self

In reflecting a philosophy of nature that includes differentiation and human development, we can turn to infant life and its powers of differentiated embodiment *per se*. As Sheets-Johnstone critiques the psychoanalytic of Jacques Lacan, she sees it as essentially *disembodied*, proceeding from linguistics, and not somatically founded: "a microcosm of twentieth-century Western practices" scientizing and silencing the living body. Lacan's "fragmented body" stage of infancy (and Merleau-Ponty's glossing over it)<sup>13</sup> misses the core realities of kinaesthesia in infant life and human development. He is unaware of the further realities that should empower an ethics of care—not control. The infant experiences a confused reality in Lacan's account; it is not in command because it is not in control. "It has no power."<sup>14</sup> The infant as nondiscriminating and inept is not borne out in research (unavailable to Lacan and Merleau-Ponty). For more positive views, we can turn to Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols*,<sup>15</sup> to Daniel Stern's work on intelligent infant life, and the work of cognitive psychologist J. J. Gibson, who showed that basic knowledge of space and objects is given in perception itself.<sup>16</sup> When Stern considers "the sense of a core self," he states that at two to three months the infant gives impressions of being a distinct self, and between two and seven months it completes its differentiation of self from other. He challenges the notion that the infant lives in a non-differentiated state of oneness with the mother. The infant creates an interpersonal world. Stern sees that the core self is formed on the basis of self-agency, self-coherence, self-affectivity and self-history, a sense of being a nonfragmented, physical whole with boundaries and integrated action, both while moving (behaving) and when still.<sup>17</sup> The affective signals somatic "awareness" of feeling. It is that which is felt or sensed and embodied at the somatic level. Many experimental psychologists support Stern's claim that the natural unfolding of abilities of infancy have been underrated.<sup>18</sup> Cognitive psychology

shows through experimental research how perception interweaves the senses. Separating the senses is an analytic, not an experiential reality.

The phenomenology of Sheets-Johnstone and cognitive psychology (as initiated by J. J. Gibson) show that kinaesthesia as manifest in movement is the very basis for renditions of bodily life. Where movement and its affect are missing in accounts of human learning and therapies, there is no persuasive accounting for the living body. The adult is her/his body history. This link we have with ourselves through our body memory of somatic sensation is implicit in Andrea Olsen's elaboration of experiential anatomy, *Body Stories*.<sup>19</sup> Our body holds our history and our future unfoldment. We carry the self that Sterns calls "the core self," the self that Gibson calls "the ecological self," related to its environment in our memory from infancy on. We are a continuum, especially in our changing and transformation, even when experiencing the interruptions of illness and self-denial. It is after all ourselves (the several selves that are elicited in various situations and

forms) that manifest in all of our experiences. Although some phases of life may be repressed or rejected, they are nevertheless contributing to the whole of our experience. While we can feel dualistic splits (we even say, "I am not myself lately"), metaphysically we are on a continuum with the core unfolding of a self in process.

In speaking and writing about the self and our consciousness of self, we need maps that will not substitute words for experience, but rather find the words in the experience. This, of course, has been the main task of phenomenology at its descriptive level. Phenomenological generation of theory and analytic is based on intuitive/descriptive study that seeks to uncover "the essence" of experience, or the phenomena of consciousness, as it is sometimes called. I offer the following as an initial foraging into the territory of somatics with the tools of a phenomenologist. Some of the topics emerge from the above phenomenological discourse and its inclusion of related matters from cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, aesthetics and feminist analysis.

### The Spiral Dance in Phenomenology and Somatics

The affective is the aesthetic, the "aesthetic" in kinaesthetic. We are aware of movement and experience its affective qualities from our earliest days. We could properly call the experiential in movement its aesthetic dynamic. This indicates that some quality has arisen to attention and can be identified in its perceptual character; the movement's color (or tonus, or shape, or temporality, etc.) is not simply there, it is in consciousness, sensed as differentiated, somatically present. The aesthetic (affective) already carries a somatic threshold. The affective is what it is because it is persuasive in consciousness. The somatic is what it is because it has achieved aesthetic dimensions—become alive to itself in awareness. The aesthetic as the affective is that which is valorized in consciousness, selected somatically beneath the sway of thought and language, an embodied quality that "moves" us to think about something, to laugh, to dance, to feel grief, etc.

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Stern describes kinaesthesia as “a pervasive reality of self-action whether the action is initiated by self or passively initiated by another.”<sup>20</sup> Our capacity to move makes possible the very conception of ourselves as “animate form.” And our experience of ourselves in a world of others, how we come to know ourselves “somaesthetically” further delineates our movement. We move away and toward, are attracted and repelled, experience the other through our movement toward and away as conditioned by the approach of the other. We experience the ultimate magic and miracle of touch. Courage, fear, love and hope are all born in our experience, or somatic life, if you will. They are “kinaesthetically” expressed in our movement, large and small, even the micro-movements that animate a smile or a sneer, and color immediately the entire person.

Recently a student asked me what the universals of somatics are. I hesitated and stammered. I don't know if there are universals, unless we think of them as common links between the various somatic movement education and therapeutic philosophies, disciplines, methods, and techniques. I place philosophy first, because there is a philosophy either implicit or actually stated in all somatic designs. As I began to work out my understandings of the somatic strategies I have studied (Feldenkrais®, CranioSacral Therapy, Myofascial Release, the Alexander Technique, yoga, and Holotropic Breathwork), I became aware of how they all converged in certain methods I had acquired philosophically from phenomenology.

Phenomenology and somatics both study awareness, allowing “the essence” of a phenomenon (anything) to arise in consciousness, getting “in touch” with it intuitively, allowing it to express itself as it is. “Back to the things themselves” was Edmund Husserl's declaration as he articulated the foundation of phenomenology. Somatics, like phenomenology, gives up the need to judge and interpret, listening to “prereflective” consciousness, not anticipating, not assuming anything. They both partake of the code of the samurai, “Expect nothing, be ready for anything.”

Phenomenology and somatics begin in concern for the “life world,” not accepting theories in advance, reducing superfluous noise so that the

elusive essence of the phenomenon of attention may become clear. Consider this in the concern of Moshe Feldenkrais for “the elusive obvious.” Phenomenologists know it is not easy to describe what is sensed, to say what is directly in consciousness, and to “reduce” this to its essence, its very core. Moreover, they acknowledge the subjectivity of their descriptions, even as they strive to draw forward “the object” of attention, the thing itself.

Perception is layered over with interpretation; we learn to distrust the directness of our intuition. Yet this is exactly what both phenomenology and somatics aim for, but with different means. Phenomenology is at root verbal and descriptive. Somatics is nonverbal; its means are movement and touch. The methods in both unite and integrate, however. Scattered attention and incomplete body image become whole when the performative self is quieted and soma comes into its nature. Then the core self manifests. The being we call “being” shines. We become fully present, even to the past. Words also flow from such presence, and can become part of somatic processes.

Phenomenology also works from an intuitive base, understanding that we can only name from the vantage point of our experience. It begins in silence, wiping away predispositions, *then spirals inward to name what has already been waiting there*. Similarly, somatic movement education and therapeutic bodywork hope to elicit (or go back to) the natural intelligence of the body, its (momentarily hidden) self-healing and self-regulating core.

The manner of phenomenology is open. It aims to describe the “life world” as it appears immediately to consciousness, without resorting to interpretation or analysis. It asks simply, “What is this?” There is a similar attitude in somatics work that deals with awareness. It also begins with a question: “What am I feeling right now?” And this is not an intellectual question. Indeed, this question aims to go to the source of causality, before the cause was causing anything. There is an innocence at this level of probing: the innocence of the inquiring body, not figuring, not forming, not yet firmly in mind yet somatically awake and kinaesthetically acknowledged.

One of the tenets of phenomenology (and quantum physics) is that we

cannot separate ourselves from our observations. Perception is an activity, not a passivity. The observed (the object) and the observer (the subject) become one (and interact) in the moment of observation. How much more do we interact then when we touch others or move with them in somatic process? In each case there is a unique (phenomenological) interaction and integration of whole systems, or selves, in which both are affected. Phenomenology calls this “intersubjectivity” and “intercorporeity.”<sup>21</sup> This relation is most apparent in somatic processes, and can be described in the personalized style of phenomenological description: When we touch with healing in our hands, we give our hands to nature, listen to the nature of another, tune our nature to that nature, become part of that nature. Expect nothing. Wait. Spiral inward. When pain moves a dance between us, we trace its nascent sorrows, let them be silently spoken. We mark the changes that occur, converse with the body's wisdom and frustrations, sometimes its joy and peace. Not being willed, the dance is healing. In the Zen of nondoing, it finds its own way. ☸

## Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 197.

2. Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

3. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 27-55.

4. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

5. Women are “monsters . . . deviated from the generic human type,” Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* (G.A.), in *The Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (London: Oxford, 1912), I, 4:2, 767B5-15. Women are merely “mutilated Males,” (G.A., II, 3:737a). Men are “more divine,” (G.A., II, 1:732a).

6. Here I see the problem of contemporary phenomenology as building on the insights of its founders while critiquing them. Sartre continues with, “Conversely woman senses her condition as an appeal precisely

because she is in the form of a hole." This is the true origin of Adler's complex (the complex of inferiority).

"Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis—a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration. The amorous act is the castration of the man; but this is above all because sex is a hole." *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 614.

7. We can also describe various capabilities such as singing, acting and dancing in terms of their bodily origins. At the same time, we know that these bodily actions are also kinaesthetically intelligent and mindful (full of mind). Unless they are wholly improvisatory or performed in trance, they will involve clear focus of concentrated thinking in the particular forms of their complex operations.

8. Though Descartes's letters to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, 1616-1680, suggest that he may not have been the dualist he presented in his major work. Some of his other nondualistic insights are contained in part 5 of his *Discourse on Method*.

9. And the question of the body in death may not be what is left behind, but what of bodily subjectivity continues after death. The existential view of some phenomenology has been atheistic, but for me questions concerning death and afterlife are relevant.

10. I described "dancing as saying" to make explicit the implicit expressive intent of dance. Sondra Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body*, pp. 86-88.

11. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies* (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1994).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

13. Merleau-Ponty, pp. 96-155.

14. Sheets-Johnstone, p. 245.

15. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Barrie and Jenkins).

16. J. J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

17. Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and *Diary of a Baby* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

18. See Butterworth, "Structure of the Mind in Human Infancy," *Advances in Infancy Research*, vol. 2, ed. Lewis P. Lipsitt and Carolyn K. Rovee-

Collier (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1983), pp. 1-29.

19. Andrea Olsen, *Body Stories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1991).

20. Stern in Butterworth, "Structure of the Mind in Human Infancy," p. 12.

21. Elizabeth Benkhe has initiated the use of "intercorporeity" in phenomenological and somatics discourse, and Fraleigh defines "intersubjectivity" through feminist and somatic concerns in panel presentations for "Back to the Things Themselves," International Conference on Existential Phenomenology, University of New Hampshire, March 1995.



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