

I move, therefore I am

The Latin dictum “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) coined by French philosopher Rene Descartes claims that the ability to think for oneself is indicative of one’s existence. In the proposition, the “I think” that thinks refers to the mind. However, this Cartesian philosophy is fundamentally flawed in its implication that thinking is as an activity limited to the mind. That is, to assume that thinking is something only the mind engages in and moving as something only the body does is to deny the possibility of thinking in movement (Sheets-Johnstone 428). The notion that “I move, therefore I think” is then a more accurate depiction of the way in which the body utilizes movement to “think” just as much as the mind does.

To understand the basis of thinking as movement, consider the following thought experiment: imagine that your body has been frozen—you are unable to move any of your limbs, but your mind remains perceptive to your surroundings. In the distance, you see children in a playground swinging on swings. You wonder about the feelings associated with swinging – is it frightening being so high above the ground? Does the upward movement of swinging relate to a sense of happiness? Quickly, you realize that without the freedom to move, it is difficult to make sense of who you are in the world. Thought alone fails to characterize our existence.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone goes against the traditional philosophical idea that movement is simply the output of thought. Instead, she suggests that the brain and body are simultaneously one; to separate the mind and body would be to reduce a vibrant kinetic reality into a “faint and impotent pulp” (Sheets-Johnstone 422). This notion of thinking as movement is expressed by Sheets-Johnstone through the paradigm of an

improvisational dancer. In the process of improvising a dance, a dancer explores the world in unrehearsed and spontaneous movement. With every movement that the dancer takes, the action of the body parallels the thought and emotion of the mind:

“At the same time that I am moving, I am taking into account the world as it exists for me here. Movement and perception are seamlessly interwoven; there is no ‘mind-doing’ that is separate from a ‘body-doing’” (Sheets-Johnstone 422).

The intimate relationship between body and mind is further supported by studies of social and cognitive development in infants. Indeed, the notion of “I move, therefore I think” is represented by the fact that an infant’s first mode of thinking is in movement; that is, infants have an inborn capacity to move and test their surroundings through movement even before they establish an intentional order of cognitive thought. For instance, a 2-month old child does not crawl across a living room because she purposefully thought to; rather, her perception of the softness of the carpet or the hard surface of the tiles is interlaced with her movement as she explores the space of the room. Through these movements, a “direct and immediate kinetic relationship” is established with the world, through which meanings are then later forged and learned (Sheet-Johnstone 20).

One does not need to be an improvisational dancer or an infant to appreciate the synchrony of thinking and moving. Even in our daily lives, thought is intrinsic to our gestures and body language. When we make hand gestures while speaking on the phone, we are really attempting to articulate thoughts and feelings through movement. When we open doors, pick up a pencil, or drive a car, we know not just “*how* to move in such ways; we know *that* moving in such ways fulfills certain desires or aims” (Sheets-Johnstone

19).

In any case, while “I move, therefore I think” characterizes the interrelationship between body and mind, it fails to emphasize how the power of movement defines our existence. After all, it is movement that gives us a sense of style, as conveyed through gait, facial expression, and posture. Perhaps “I move, therefore I **am**” rather than “I move, therefore I think” illustrates more clearly how movement is fundamental to our sense of self and existence.

References

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. "Thinking in Movement." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39.4 (1981): 399. Web.