Body, Mind and Society

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In 1927 John Dewey gave a talk to the New York Academy of Medicine. This talk, published as "Body and Mind", expresses in marvelously concise form, much of what Kelly was referring to when he said that Dewey's "philosophy and psychology can be read between many of the lines of the psychology of personal constructs." This paper reconsiders Dewey's talk and argues that his view of the "integration of mind and body in action" provides a basis for appreciating the bodily character of personal meaning. It is in the unity in action that personal meaning can be found to be embodied as well as constructed. It argues further that, in action, the continuity of body and mind can be found to extend to continuity with the social world. Social meanings are also embodied in the qualities of action.

Dewey began his talk by harkening back to the time before philosophy, science and the arts had gone their separate ways. "In those days," Dewey lamented,

> Science and philosophy had not parted ways because neither was cut loose from the arts. One word designated both science and art: techné. The desire was to command practices that were rational and a reason embodied in practice.

It seems clear that this is the kind of thing that the PCP community aspires to, which is one reason I think that what Dewey had to say that day is important to us. One of the results of the Greeks' embracing this ideal was that "there arose the idea of an art of life based upon the most comprehensive insight into the relationships between conditions and ends."

Dewey says that he chose to introduce the topic of the relations between body and mind with a discussion of techné because, "The conspicuous trait of the period in which science, philosophy and the arts were closely connected was the sense of wholeness." As he quotes Hippocrates, "We cannot understand the body without a knowledge of the whole of things." In contrast, "the very problem of mind and body suggests the disastrous effect of the divisions that have since grown up." Dewey lays

modern problems from religious fundamentalism to materialistic business practice to the aloofness of intellectuals at the doorstep of this presumption that body and mind can somehow be treated separately from each other or from everything else.

The "mind-body problem" has had many forms and many proposed solutions, but the fragmentation is so persistent that even such hyphenated attempts to express their unity as "mind-body" only serve to perpetuate it. Dewey himself finds the solution in "unity in action."

> In just the degree in which action, behavior, is made central, the traditional barrier between mind and body break down and dissolve. …the habit of regarding the mental and physical as separate things has its roots in regarding them as substances or processes instead of as functions and qualities of action.

A typical example of an act that is both physical and mental, and indeed also social, is eating. "The trouble," says Dewey,

> is that instead of taking the act in its entirety we cite the multitude of relevant facts only as evidence of influence of mind on body and of body on mind, thus starting from and perpetuating the idea of their independence and separation even when dealing with their connection.

This is by no means a merely academic distinction for Dewey. He finds that much of society's fragmented behavior derives directly from this presumption that our actions can be separated in this way.

> The more human mankind becomes, the more civilized it is, the less is there some behavior which is purely physical and some other purely mental. So true is this statement that we may use the amount of distance which separates them in our society as a test of the lack of human development in that community.

There is indeed much at stake.

> Thus the question of integration of mind-body in action is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilization.... Until this integration is effected in the only place where it can be carried out, in action itself, we shall continue to live in a society in which a soulless and heartless materialism is compensated for by a soulful but futile idealism and spiritualism...for materialism is not a theory, but a condition of action...and spiritualism is not a theory but a state of action.

The paragraph that follows has such a clearly constructivist flavor, and is at the same time so insistent that it is precisely *in action* that this unity is to be found that I will quote it in its entirety.

> In insisting upon the need of viewing action in its integrated wholeness, the need of discriminating between different qualities of behavior due to the mode of integration is emphasized, not slurred. We need to distinguish between action that is routine and action alive with purpose and desire; between that which is cold, and as we significantly say inhuman, and that which is warm and sympathetic; between that which marks a withdrawal from the conditions of the present and a retrogression to split off conditions of the past and that which faces actualities; between that which is expansive and developing because including what is new and varying and that which applies only to the uniform and repetitious; between that which is bestial and that which is godlike in its humanity; between that which is spasmodic and centrifugal, dispersive and dissipating, and that which is centered and consecutive.... What most stands in the way of our achieving a working technique for making such discriminations and applying them in the guidance of the actions of those who stand in need of assistance is our habit of splitting up the qualities of action into two disjoint things.

Dewey next sets out to make more explicit the claim that body and mind find their unity in action. Within this unity "body stands for the means and agencies of conduct, and mind for its incorporated fruits and consequences." His way of doing this forms a bridge between objective and subjective—or between scientific and phenomenological ways of considering the body. We may consider the body "in its connections with the processes which are going on outside" it. This leads us to an ability to apply our knowledge of physics and chemistry, for example, to our own processes. It allows us to view ourselves, and our actions as part of physical nature. But this is only one side of the story. "If it were the whole of the story," Dewey says, "bodily action would be wholly assimilated in inorganic action, and the inclusion of the body in behavior that has mental quality would be impossible." The rest of the story is that these physical processes proceed in ways that,

> Have reference to the needs of the organism as a whole and thus take on a psychical quality, and in humans at least are in such connection with the social environment as confers them intellectual quality…. Organic processes are thus seen to be constituent means of a behavior which is endued with purpose and meaning, animate with affection, and informed by recollection and foresight. In the end, the bodily is but a

> name for the fact that wherever we have consequences, no matter how ideal, there are conditions and means.

The main point to be drawn from Dewey's talk is that both Hippocrates's claim and its converse are true (i.e. worth asserting). The body is not understandable without knowledge of its environment—especially the social environment. But neither is society understandable in isolation from consideration of the corporality of the personal action.

These are all, of course, common themes in Dewey's philosophy. But what is not so widely known is that they are strongly influenced by Dewey's contact with FM Alexander. Dewey was a student and friend of Alexander's for many years. By the time of this talk he had written introductions for two of Alexander's books (he later did a third). My point in bringing Alexander into this discussion is not to claim that he had any sort of secret hand in Dewey's philosophy, for Dewey understood the importance of context (what I am calling the converse of Hipprocrates's claim) far better than Alexander did—and therefore, I think, understood the importance of Alexander's own work better than he did himself. My point is simply that Dewey's discussion of the unity of mind and body in action was based on a particular systematic set of concrete experiences, and so, though it may not be easy for the casual reader to appreciate, his generalizations are rather more inductive than speculative. Indeed, the way to appreciate their inductive character, as Dewey agreed, is to seek out similar personal experience as a basis for drawing the conclusions for oneself.[1]

One of the things that such experience leads to is an interesting take on Kelly's Fragmentation Corollary. This corollary implies that we can have incompatible constructions in different domains of experience. But the kinesthetic constructions in the domain of our perceptions of our own movements is set of meanings that is always present, and indeed always primary—simply because if we do not <u>move</u> there is no action, and thus no meaning. On the other hand, perceptually, social meanings are just as immediate in experience as are those "physical" meanings derived from our perception of our own movements. Thus kinesthetic experience is already saturated with social meaning. And often the "test" of the validity of social meaning is kinesthetic.

[1] I refer the reader to my papers written in the "invitational mood" presented at earlier PCP conferences.

I know I am doing the right thing in the right way because it "feels right." This symmetry is exemplified by the woman whose chronically tense back muscles and constant straining to make money are both embodiments of their felt need to "support" herself. Upon gaining new freedom in the movement of her back as she walked, she suddenly turned and said, "I have to make a lot of money." The declaration was the beginning of a reconstruing that was equally about kinesthetic and social meanings. What I want to emphasize is that trying to reconstrue the personal meanings that can be articulated, whether they are uniquely personal meanings or products of socially shared construction, is always problematic if it is attempted in isolation from the kinesthetic meanings that are already articulated in the qualities of personal action. The only hope for a concretely embodied reconstruing—and thus also, the only hope for real social change, lies in the "unity in action" that Dewey referred to.

So, in the end, what do I mean by my claim that Dewey's "unity in action" extends to the social world? Dewey's notion of unity in action seems to have implicit connection to Aristotle on one hand and Merleau-Ponty on the other. If human action is the phenomenon in question, then "body" involves the matter and "mind," the form of that phenomenon. To the extent that society affects personal meaning it is a part of the context in which the meaning of action takes form. Thus the social world might be considered a part of what Dewey means by mind. Conversely, to the extent that the social world has concrete reality beyond the sum of the experience and action of its individual members it might be said that these individual actions comprise the "body" of society. For they are the concrete means by which society can reach its ends. And thus the qualities of individual bodily action are inseparable from the quality of the life of society.

Finally, it is significant that questions of the quality of embodiment (action) at the most immediate level, and their connection to questions of meaning in the social world, have been almost universally ignored. But according to Dewey's own argument—and on the evidence of his own colleagues' and students' virtually unanimous lack of even curiosity about his interest in Alexander's work—this is not surprising.

References:

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