

Editorial: Life Phenomenology – Movement, Affect and Language

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The “life phenomenology” theme of the 35th International Human Science Research Conference challenged participants to consider pressing questions of life and of living with others of our own and other-than-human kinds. The theme was addressed by keynote speakers Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Ralph Acampora and David Abram who invoked a motile, affective and linguistic awareness of how we might dwell actively and ethically amongst human communities and with the many life forms we encounter in the wider, wilder world we have in common. Conference participants were provoked to consider the following questions: “How might phenomenology have us recognize a primacy of movement and bring us in touch with the motions and gestures of the multiple lifeworlds of daily living? What worlds from ecology to technology privilege certain animations? What are the affects and effects of an enhanced phenomenological sensitivity? What senses, feelings, emotions and moods of self-affirmation and responsiveness to others sustain us in our daily lives? And to what extent might the descriptive, invocative, provocative language of phenomenology infuse the human sciences and engender a language for speaking directly of life?”¹

Through a program comprised of formal presentations and symposia, along with movement workshops, dance performances, poetry readings and story-telling events, the conference organizing committee chaired by Rebecca Lloyd brought phenomenology to life in the very modes, motions and manners of us coming together at the University of Ottawa in the

¹ Cf. Smith, S. J. (2016). Movement and Place. In M. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy* (p. 5). New York: Springer, [doi:10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_92-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_92-1)

summer of 2016.² We were reminded, not only as conference participants, presenters and performers, but also as human beings participating actively in the larger theatre of life, that our scholarly preoccupations with ‘lived’ experiences matter mostly as the means of ‘living’ more fully in the ongoing flow of human and more-than-human encounters. The movements, affects and languages of lively engagement with one another became, in other words, the material means of appreciating the living moments upon which our diverse phenomenological investigations can come to bear.

While all phenomenological scholarship arguably addresses aspects of life, the assignation of ‘life phenomenology’ applies to scholarship that brings ‘lived’ experiences to life again and that discerns what is most movingly, affectively and linguistically telling of the immanent, vital powers of life. The task of life phenomenology, conceived in the ‘living’ of movement, affect and language, is to challenge retentive fixations on appearances and to project vitality and vital contact with others within the upsurge of the inherent forces of life’s ongoing generation. In other words, the impressions we have of being enlivened in our chosen pursuits, our dealings with others and in our contacts with the wider animate world should not be taken lightly and reduced to the manifest ways in which these pursuits and practices appear to tether us to the world. Impressionality is not a precursor to the phenomenological analysis of intentionality but the very manner in which people, things, places, times and events present themselves. Impressionality summons us to attend to *how it is* that our phenomenological foci of interest can have ongoing value for us and for others in coming to live more fully. Life phenomenology, with its emphasis on the immanent forces of movement, affect and language, calls us to be moved and affected deeply by scholarship that divines the impressions of life within the infinite multiplicity of worldly expressions.

The contributors to this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* call attention to the motile, affective and linguistic aspects of life engagement. References are made to the scholarly writings of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Michel Henry in tracing and re-tracing pathways of phenomenological thoughtfulness for the very ways in which the contributors’ own studies can be brought to life. Motility becomes for the contributors a matter of the felt sense of kinesthesia and the correlative kinetic actions distinctive of traditional Japanese puppetry, individual dance improvisation, partnered dance forms such as Tango and Salsa, and interactions with lions, gorillas and horses. Affectivity is revealed in the Tango embrace and in the feeling of seeing in Salsa dance. It is disclosed in bodily responsiveness to the postures, positions, gestures and expressions of others and in primal feelings for the emotional plight of other creatures. And language is cast as the capacity each contributor demonstrates of bringing into textual form the utterances of life that are impressionally and movingly felt. The language of life phenomenology is indicated in the gestural, mimetic practices of puppetry, the subtle modulation of movements in dancing a walk, the infused and perfusive imaginaries of Tango, the lingering sense of a missed connection with a stranger and in crossing interspecies lines of language demarcation. The contributors to this special issue attest to the power of life to magnify itself in the distinctively motile, affective and linguistic manners in which essentially immanent life is revealed to us.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone begins this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* “in praise of phenomenology.” The title of Maxine’s article is, as she points out, purposely

² The following link provides a series of edited videos that highlight what was experienced at the 35th IHSRC conference: <http://function2flow.ca/ihsr35-videos>.

reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "inaugural lecture as Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France." But Maxine does not offer much praise for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy; instead, she calls him to task for focusing on "existential analysis" and thereby appearing to treat "the impossibility of a complete reduction," which is the claim Merleau-Ponty makes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as something less than the challenge of coming to know phenomena through rigorous phenomenological means open to knowledge verification by other scholars. Maxine turns to the foundational studies of Edmund Husserl to show such means of epistemologically-driven scholarship in which the very things we otherwise find so familiar are made strange. She contends, furthermore, that what is most strangely compelling about that to which we turn our phenomenological attention is that we are inevitably "thrown up against the challenge of languaging experience." We need to attune to the very manner in which certain phenomena speak to us – to their tonalities, affects and effects. For it is in these corporeal yet extra-individual resonances that we can discern the descriptive task of phenomenological inquiry as we aspire to undertake "bona fide phenomenology analyses of moment to the human sciences."

Haruki Okui draws attention to how experience can be languaged in his paper on the bodily transformations and emergent utterances constituting the traditional art of Japanese puppetry. Haruki calls upon Merleau-Ponty's analyses of bodily motility and extends the notion of habit-formation to account for the particular ways in which the artists of the Awaji puppet theater learn to coordinate their movements in order to bring the manipulable object in their hands to life. Through mimetic gestures and motional soundings, the master choreographer conveys to the puppeteer threesome precisely how to move their bodies. His instructions are a kinetically-charged lexicon of vitality affects and effects that are literally incorporated in the motions of the puppeteers. Haruki's descriptive account of the kinetic, kinesthetic, affective and linguistic dynamics of particular "training sessions" provides a fine-grained analysis of physical "skill acquisition" that remains expressive of life.

Carolina Bergonzoni addresses how such an habitual action as walking a city street may take on the expressivity of dance. She, too, draws upon Merleau-Ponty's work in challenging his distinction between "concrete" and "abstract" movements. Carolina describes the shifts of bodily attentiveness involved in moving from functional, seemingly automatic actions to those that are fluid and more evidently present-minded and bodily satisfying. In "dancing a walk," she makes the familiar actions of walking seem strange, although not in an alienating sense, but in a way that calls for "self-aware attention." This self-awareness oscillates between inwardly-directed meditation and outwardly-directed performance, which is to say, between impression and expression. Carolina's description of the various temporal, spatial and corporeal shifts of attention that take place when she turns walking into a dance reveals what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone refers to in her paper as the "natural congruity" of motion and affectivity. From the perspective of life phenomenology, this "natural congruity" discloses the kinesthetic unfolding of life feelings in the very expressivity of turning a walk into a dance.

Rebecca Barnstaple is "trading in imaginaries" in her treatment of Argentine Tango. Her paper presents this dance form as exhibiting "exotic-erotic" and "mythic-historic" imaginaries that bring a certain realm of affectivity along with a set of stories to dancing the tango. Distinctions between the imaginary and the real are blurred in the dance form such that the question of "authenticity" can then be posed as a matter of the postures and positions, gestured affects and specific instructional terms of tango dance formation. So, while "trading in imaginaries," Rebecca trades *in* their abstractness for the concreteness of kinesthetic sensibility

and kinetic imagery. Her paper blends phenomenological description with an explicative terminology of movement to give anchorage to the very idea of world-formation that she references in Heidegger's writings. The world of Argentine Tango may well be exotic, erotic and mythically historic, however it is in the very practice of the dance form that we can learn to feel its world-forming possibilities, especially when we find that incarnate life has us in its "sway."

Rebecca Lloyd picks up this Heideggerian sense of life formation in her opening description of the "mutual gaze" in Salsa dancing. She takes to heart the here-and-now, impressionally-felt, intensely-engaging "facticity" of life. This "facticity" requires a commensurate method of experiential description concerned with feelings and flows rather than simply with functions and forms and that demonstrates the very "natural congruency" of motions and emotions. Rebecca follows the inspiration of Michel Henry's "material phenomenology" in describing, via her interview of a world champion Salsa dancer, the essential affectivity of the "mutual gaze" that brings the Salsa dance partners into profound intimacy. Her paper, while providing in-depth understanding of the vital contact that is possible within the world of Salsa dancing, unfolds also with the misplaced sense we have of "missed connections" in everyday life. Rebecca indicates in this way the life-at-large connections of the "inter-feeling" she derives from exploring the "mutual gaze" of the Salsa dancers.

Larger than just human life possibilities are presented in Stephen Smith's paper on "the vitality of humanimality." Stephen draws upon Michel Henry's radical phenomenology of life, Martin Heidegger's notions of world formation and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's analyses of animate consciousness in order to describe the nature of the connections we human beings can have with other species. The question at the core of this study of "humanimality" is about motivation and that which can possibly move us to engage with others of a very different kind. This motivation is revealed in the critical consideration of hunted lions and captive gorillas and in more practiced consideration of domesticated horses. The revelation is that of the "auto-affectivity" of life and its essential "hetero-affectivity." Stephen "brings up life" in this revelatory way by describing the very manner in which we can learn to "move in concert" with those of other animal kinds. His life phenomenology holds implications for how we might, in turn, animate the relations we have with those of our own human kind.

These six papers comprising this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* are indicative of the topics addressed at the 35th International Human Science Research Conference last year. The contributors to this journal issue also draw our attention to the lingering tone of the conference. Indeed, if life phenomenology is to be more than just a one-off conference theme, it is imperative that the movements, affects and languages of life that were felt and expressed at the conference be our ongoing phenomenological preoccupations.