

Editorial Introduction

The editors are pleased to devote this issue of JASHM to a paper written by Dr. Charles Varela. The paper builds substantially upon an earlier contribution written in response to important theoretical problems in the work of the philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (see JASHM Vol. 2, No. 3, 1983). The current paper widens the context to include similar philosophical problems in the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. It also deepens substantially the earlier analysis and places developments in the anthropology of body and human movement in the context of general social theory and the history of western philosophy.

Despite Merleau-Ponty's desire to transcend Cartesian mind-body dualism he can be said to have created a "solipsism with a body" instead (Hamlyn, 1989). Varela gives an appreciative but critical reading of Merleau-Ponty's work and shows exactly how notions such as the "lived-body" and "bodily intentionality," fail to solve the problem of the disembodied actor in the social sciences, even though they were important sensitizing correctives to Cartesian intellectualism at the time of writing.

The problem is that two equally ambiguous notions of agency stem from both the Cartesian tradition and phenomenological existentialism. In the former, a non-material mind creates a "ghost and a machine" whereas the latter provides an equally ghostly notion of agency deemed to be located somehow in the body. In contrast to this dilemma, Rom Harré's notion of "causal powers," offering as it does an alternative to Humean causality, provides a definition of human agency that is grounded in new theories about substance and causality that come from a new realist philosophy of science. This results in a concept of "person" as agent who is empowered because embodied and so capable of genuine action.

Varela's examination of these issues is important and timely for socio-cultural anthropology generally if it helps clarify conceptual errors evident in the work of anthropologists eager to join the current groundswell of interest in an anthropology of the body. Much of this recent work has been stimulated by the work of Michel Foucault on the body and social control but it also builds on an earlier anthropological tradition (see Farnell, in press, for references). Renewed interest in the work of Merleau-Ponty stems from this current focus on embodiment but proponents have so far failed to come to grips with

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underlying philosophical problems and we welcome Varela's contribution because it brings alternative strategies and solutions the attention of the JASHM readership.

The current interest in embodiment encompasses such topics as the sexual body, the medical body, the body politic, the decorated body and so forth. While this "body" is certainly a social/cultural construction, it is viewed largely as a social object and exactly how actions contribute to the process of such constructions and ongoing practices continues to be absent from most analyses. Even Bourdieu's reintroduction of the notion of "habitus" (a term used earlier by Mauss and Durkheim), while it certainly calls for embodiment, restricts attention to habitual actions within the spaces of everyday "practices." Bourdieu offers no theoretical or methodological strategies for the systematic inclusion of action signs into ethnographic analyses.

Varela suggests that Williams' semasiological approach to the anthropology of human movement, grounded as it is in Harré's new realist philosophy of science, offers a more fruitful agenda and a genuine alternative to the pendulum that has been swinging between intellectualist and subjectivist perspectives for so long. We now have embodied persons whose lives are enacted because truly agentic in both mind and body.

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REFERENCES CITED

- Farnell, B. In Press. Introduction. The Visible and the Invisible: Human Movement Systems in Cultural Context. Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey.
- Hamlyn, D. 1989. A History of Western Philosophy. Penguin, New York.