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Andrew Rosenstock



Nikki Olsen



Mark Johnson

Voyage of Discovery into the Embodiment of Meaning

An Excerpt of the Podcast, *Touching Into Presence*

By Andrew Rosenstock, Certified Rolfer®, Nikki Olsen, Certified Advanced Rolfer, Rolf Movement® Practitioner, and Mark Johnson, PhD

ABSTRACT Professor Mark Johnson has spent his career investigating the philosophy of human embodiment and how it relates to meaning-making. In this article, Rolfers® Andrew Rosenstock and Nikki Olsen interview Johnson about the role of the body in human meaning. Johnson has authored many books about how metaphors are grounded in aspects of our bodily experience. The conversation touches on body-mind duality and the liberation of non-duality – that humans are complex animals to be explained from the bottom up.

Editor's note: This is an excerpt from the Touching Into Presence podcast, episode 61, published December 12, 2022. The original podcast can be found at <https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-m9csu-1330fa0>. Some modifications have been made for our journal's style.

Andrew Rosenstock: It is a pleasure to be in conversation today with Mark Johnson. Mark is the Philip H. Knight Professor Emeritus of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. His research is focused on the philosophical implications of the role of human embodiment in meaning, conceptualization, reasoning, values, and knowledge, especially from the perspective of embodied cognitive

science and pragmatist philosophy. His recent work is a naturalistic account of mind and knowing.

Mark is an author of many books including coauthoring *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003) with George Lakoff [PhD, retired distinguished professor of cognitive science and linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley]. More recently, Mark authored *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason: How Our Bodies Give Rise to Understanding* (2017). In today's conversation, we are going to speak with Professor Johnson about what brought him to this field of metaphors as a foundation of how people view their world. I'm interested in talking about meaning, the dualism of mind and body, cultural

Mark Johnson: I was trained in philosophy in what's called analytic philosophy. The basic idea was that all thought and meaning is mediated by language. If you want to understand how thought works, how we reason and conceptualize, then analyze language itself. There's a lot of insight in that.



Image by Ekaterina Bolovtsova on Pexels.

ontologies, non-absolutism, embodiment, awareness, and world structuring. Let's begin our talk, welcome Mark.

Nikki Olsen: Yes, welcome, Mark. I'm excited about our conversation today. As a Rolfers, I'm exploring how to help change people's movement coordination beyond our traditional biomechanical model. A lot of times, people's pain can be more of a disruption in their perception. Within bodywork, clients come with a chief complaint of pain or trauma, and as practitioners, we hear that person's story. Your work with imagination and metaphors aligns with our work in terms of working with someone's perception. We will hear metaphors from our clients as they tell us their body stories. This is how

I think Rolfers and structural integration fit with your work.

Body, Meaning, and Value

NO: Can you tell us in your own words about what you study?

Mark Johnson: My work has been about the role of the body, meaning, and value, that sort of thing, and I'm sure there are some connections between this and practitioners like yourselves. A lot of my work has to do with perceptual structure and bodily movement. But it's mostly how it underlies meaning-making in human beings. I hope we can make some interesting connections for people.

AR: Some people may say, "Well, we don't want philosophy. We just want to move." To that, I say, "No, you actually need this. You need this background." After I finished reading *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003), I proceeded to recommend it to everyone I knew. If I want to evoke change in my client, first of all, understanding what I'm actually saying is important so that they can also understand.

Let's start by looking at the role of metaphors, especially structural metaphors, and how they affect us as human beings going through the day. And could you tell us about the history of your story with your work with metaphor?

MJ: I was trained in philosophy in what's called analytic philosophy. The basic idea was that all thought and meaning is mediated by language. If you want to understand how thought works, how we reason and conceptualize, then analyze language itself. There's a lot of insight in that, but overemphasis on language can tempt us to overlook important nonlinguistic dimensions of meaning.

For a long time now, people have been buying into dualism, basically of mind versus body. For some, their job was that they weren't that interested in the body. They were interested in whatever they called the mind, what are concepts, and how we think with propositions. I had to learn all of that, but it never quite clicked with me. I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation on metaphor. It was kind of an odd thing to be doing because no one was really talking about it back then.

Later on, I was doing this book on metaphor and on philosophers' treatments of metaphor, and I wanted a linguist to



MJ: I stressed the voyage of discovery metaphor because it was fun and exciting. It was helping us understand ourselves, how we think, how we find meaning, and that sort of thing. [Photo by Daniel Olah on Unsplash.]

write something for it. I had been told about George Lakoff, and I reached out to him. Immediately, we hit it off because we both shared this one idea that we felt that metaphor was absolutely foundational to how people understand their world. It was not merely a poetic device or a rhetorical flourish, but metaphor was at the very heart of our ability to think, to reason, to

find meaning in our lives, and to extend knowledge. So, we decided we'd write a book together.

At first, I said, "George, I don't know anything about linguistics." He said, "Well, I do, and I'll teach you." That's the kind of guy he is.

We were looking at how metaphor structures human understanding across cultures, and it just exploded for us. I've never had so much fun in my life as working on that project. We started seeing how traditional views held onto the mind-body split. There were supposedly two kinds of things: bodily processes, including emotion and perception, and then the mind, which was the source of conceptualization and reasoning. And then never the twain shall meet, basically. So, we started to take embodiment seriously, and we wrote the book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003).

When we were through, we realized we had just begun to glimpse the role of the body in human meaning. That became a basis for the direction George went in his work and then me in my work. Later we got back together and wrote, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), which is our big summary book of what role the body plays in human thought, in human meaning, and in values. Once George and I met each other, we talked all the time over the phone, sharing ideas and writing together. It has been a wonderful experience for me and just opened me up.

It was George who said, "We can't just sit in the armchair and talk about body and

meaning and value. We have to look at some of the science of this." So, he was the first person to nudge me into taking cognitive science seriously. My work took off from that early work on metaphor because we saw that metaphors were grounded in aspects of bodily experience, like moving your body in space, perceiving things, eating, walking, or things like that.

We asked: If mind and body are separate, two separate things, how do you ever get abstract concepts out of embodiment, stuff that seems to be concrete? How is thinking possible? And I've been focusing on the role of the body with meaning and values for the last thirty years.

Voyage of Discovery

AR: When I was reading *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003), it felt like you had a lot of fun with it. I would say that when I was reading it, it felt like both of you really enjoyed what you were doing. You were passionate about it, and it came through.

MJ: George would say the metaphor for what we're doing is the voyage of discovery metaphor. That's the rhetoric. We always wanted to write for a generally educated audience. We wanted to try to keep the technical jargon down. Some people may think there's too much technical jargon in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003), but not compared to other academic work. I stressed the voyage of discovery metaphor because it was fun and exciting. It was helping us understand ourselves, how we think, how

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MJ: I want to start by saying that mind-body dualism is deeply inscribed in Western culture. It's in the language, it's in our institutions, and our institutional practices. . . . But if, like me, you think that humans are complex animals, biological and social organisms, then you have to explain meaning from the bottom up. It's a radical claim if you think about it.

we find meaning, and that sort of thing. And so, it was an adventure. And the idea was, how could we share that adventure?

AR: I've found metaphors are a great way of working around body-mind duality, because, of course, non-duality is something we can't cognitively explain. My background is in technology, but I studied philosophy, not quite academically. And in the last few years, I've gotten much more into existentialism phenomenology.

MJ: Oh, really?

AR: Yes. Postmodernism, deconstructionism, all that sort of stuff. Actually, the very first person I did a Rolfing® 'Ten Series' with was a professor of philosophy. And he said, "What you're doing is my work, embodied."

Mind-Body Dualism

AR: I'd love to hear a bit from you about your way of describing the dualism of the mind-body.

MJ: Oh, yes. Let me say a little bit about that because right now, I'm teaching what may be the last seminar I ever teach because I'm on a retirement track, and it's on pragmatism and cognitive science. It's all built around exploring how you can have a naturalistic, non-dualistic account of human beings.

I want to start by saying that mind-body dualism is deeply inscribed in Western culture. It's in the language, it's in our

institutions, and our institutional practices. It's kind of taken for granted. But if, like me, you think that humans are complex animals, biological and social organisms, then you have to explain meaning from the bottom up. It's a radical claim if you think about it.

In the past, people wanted to talk about concepts. Well, where are the concepts? Oh, they're in your mind. Well, where's your mind? It's connected to your brain somehow. But they didn't have any idea how that might be. And because they didn't go there, the entire philosophy is grounded from the beginning in a fundamental dualism. I'm a big fan of John Dewey [PhD, (1859-1952)], the American pragmatist philosopher, and William James [PhD, (1842-1910)], another pragmatist. And they both profoundly understood how meaning is rooted in our bodily engagement with the world.

And here's the problem, if you want to get rid of the dualism, then you have to explain how all these marvelous human capacities could emerge out of our engagement with an environment. Everything starts with an organism interacting in an ongoing fashion with an environment. And any meaning or values has to come out of that interaction. Now, the environment is physical, it's also an interpersonal environment, it's a social and cultural environment. So, this isn't a reductionist view.

I've got a video that I show when I'm giving talks. It's of my granddaughter

Sophia when she's in her crib, and she's just all this action. Her arms are flailing and her feet are flailing, they're slapping down on the mattress and all. It's just this beautiful upsurge of energy, emotion, and movement. It's all about movement. Then I've got another video of a few months later when she's actually learning to walk. I use these to illustrate the notion of affordance by James J. Gibson [PhD, (1904-1979)], the perceptual psychologist. Your world and your environment afford you possibilities for acting within it. Little human beings are learning the affordances of their world through their body. They learn that certain things can be walked on, certain things can be sat on, and certain things can be manipulated.

And our claim is that out of all of those sensory, motor, movement, and manipulation activities of the human body, all the thought and meaning that is available to us emerges. And this never stops throughout life. I start with the assumption that a human being requires a body that's functionally engaging an environment, a brain that is engaged with a body, which is engaged with an environment. For most people, their environment is enriched, it's social, it's cultural, and it's also physical.

Think about a child learning, playing with containers, and they put an object in a container. And then they put another container in something else. You don't have to get them a fancy-schmancy toy from the best toy store. They just go on

and get the pots and pans out, and what they're learning is containment, what I call the logic of containment. They're learning from the bottom up that one thing can be fit within something else.

That's embodied engagement with the environment. Where one thing is within another thing and then within another thing, that's a pattern of logic. Young children are beginning to learn how things can relate to one another through their bodily actions with the world. And so I introduced, with my book *Body in the Mind* (1987), the idea of an image schema. Containment is a good example. And in that same year George Lakoff introduced the image schema in his book, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987). Another one would be the degree of intensity. So, imagine you turn up a rheostat on a light, and you experience the light coming up in brightness; it increases in intensity. A person watching that will have that surge experience.

Daniel Stern [MD, (1934-2012)], who was a child psychologist, famously looked at the way young children experience patterns of feelings, such as floating, surging, halting, rising, and falling. He called these affect contours. Infants learn their world through these pulses of feeling that structure their experience. The affective patterns blend together in forming a little human being who is learning the affordances of her or his environment and having to build meaning out of that. So that's the challenge, to show how these affect contours can structure our experience of the world and give rise to meaning. And there aren't just spatial schemas; there are also force schemas. You have



MJ: Think about a child learning, playing with containers . . . They're learning from the bottom up that one thing can be fit within something else. [Photo by Lubomirkin on Unsplash.]

the experience of being pushed along by a force that's overwhelming, and you have the experience of being attracted to something. You experience being blocked in your action and frustrated in your action. You have the feeling of forward progress when a blockage is removed.

Those bodily experiences, we call these various kinds of force schemas, become a basis for meaning for children. It's a bottom-up experience. And notice, we are not our brain, we're not our body, and

we're not our environment – we're all of those things in interaction. We're a brain in a body and an environment, an ongoing interaction that is generating values and significance, meaning for what we're experiencing and what it can do, how we can interact with it, that sort of thing. So that's the general account of starting with the bottom and moving up.

NO: It's great to hear the logic behind some of the material you have written about and presented. I like looking at

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MJ: And sometimes, our situation changes, so that we no longer have the same conditions that we had when that cluster of meanings was first developed, when they first came into being. [Photo by Leio McLaren on Unsplash.]

human development and meaning, I have two kids and after I birthed my first one, he started nudging up my belly to find my breast for breastfeeding; it was a meaningful movement.

MJ: A very important affordance for him, yes.

NO: And then when I continue to look at my children's movement evolution, they start to roll over because they're searching for their parent. Once they come onto their hands and knees, they reach for something of desire. Arms have great gestures, and they have so much meaning. And it comes from before we

were walking, we were already grasping, able to really go for objects and people.

Habits and Meaning

NO: In my opinion, we need to have compassion for the meaning that people bring to their regular habits. Even if it's not the most favorable position or movement, there was meaning to it and it served a purpose. Otherwise, we wouldn't be doing it. Can you speak to that?

MJ: John Dewey, as I said already, is my philosophical hero; he explained this in terms of habits. And a habit is not a bad

thing. Our bodily experiences generate affordances for us. And so, we develop habits of movement, habits of standing, habits of object manipulation. Dewey uses posture as an example from the Alexander Technique, actually. He knew Frederick Matthias Alexander [1869-1955].

Dewey pointed out that the self is basically an inter-penetration of habits – habits of your bodily comportment, habits of thinking, and habits of valuing. And the question becomes, and this is a big neuroscience issue, if all these habits get rigidified, how do you break through that? How do you reorganize so as to open up new possibilities for thinking, for being, for valuing? And Dewey had an answer to that, about how habits could be more flexible. These patterns that we learn are meaningful habits to us, but also, they can operate beneath the level of conscious awareness to structure our world. And we can lose sight of the work these habits are doing, for better or worse.

So, Dewey would say, "Look, if you're having posture issues, it's not going to work to say, 'Stand up straight.' What do you have to do? You have to affect your way of interacting with the environment." By altering your environment and the way the body engages the environment, you open up new possibilities for standing, bending, walking, etc. At the same time, there are various structures of power relationships that impose expectancies, possibilities, and limitations.

AR: I teach a class on posture, and it's basically about inviting people to throw everything they were taught about posture out the window because that's just one structural ideology of what good posture could be. 'Good posture' is a picture, it's an idea, it's a concept that may not actually fit with your embodied presence, your embodied being. In this class we breathe, we do exercises, and we move in certain ways. My talk is often somewhat similar to what you were just saying, how do we affect these patterns or these habits? In the class, we don't really even talk about posture.

MJ: That's exactly right. That's the doing and the idea, yes. Let me say one thing about meaning.

The pragmatist view of meaning that makes sense to me is that the meaning of something is what it affords you by way of possible actions, relations, and experiences that you have. And your experiences can be past experiences, the

present context, or it can be projections into the future. But the meaning is about what experiences are afforded by something. If you're feeling unstable or frightened, then your world is threatening to you. It's not just that you feel threatened but that your whole world is actively threatening to you.

AR: It's unsafe, you might say.

MJ: It's unsafe, you feel that, and the body's postures take that on themselves. So I see meaning as the enactment or evocation of experiences, the meaning of something, or the experiences that it can afford you. And those can be in terms of bodily movement or manipulation of objects or things, but they can also be habits of thinking, conceptualizing, how one looks at a problem, or what one's values are. I think that's a big area where we start to talk about morality as a bunch of habits that become ingrained.

And sometimes, our situation changes, so that we no longer have the same conditions that we had when that cluster of meanings was first developed, when they first came into being. We need to find ways to transform our moral understanding that are more appropriate for the complexity of the new situation we find ourselves in. Meaning is important. Meaning can be, therefore, in part, cultural affordances that are projected. But some of it, as you might think, has to do with individual development and growth. The way you have to embody certain meanings is perhaps unique to you.

Culture Pervades Meaning

AR: Yes, absolutely, culture completely pervades meaning. I was a nomad for about twelve years, I traveled all over the world, and worked in different places. I realized later on how I was learning different cultures and about what culture can be. My wife is from mainland China, I'm from America. It's amazing how the same object can mean something entirely different to us.

Look at us three, culture pervades differently with each of us. I'm in Boston, Massachusetts, Nikki's in Boulder, Colorado, and you're in Eugene, Oregon. Here we have three unique microcultures of an American macroculture. All of these cultures are different environments affecting our worldview. And our worldview is affecting how we relate with the world around us. A human being is not just a

mind or a body; it's in relation to the world and navigating the implied meaning.

Humanity is a Family

MJ: That's exactly right. And let me pause for a minute, I want to give you an example. We talked about metaphor, but we have only talked about a single metaphor, a voyage of discovery.

Here's another example because it's a question about whether there are any universal metaphors. George and I worked on metaphors for our moral understanding, specifically what kind of metaphors are operative. Here's a big one: humanity is a family. That's a metaphor. They're not literally your family. To apply that metaphor, you're using your experience of familial relationships to understand broad-based qualities about the global community, universalizing it to all humanity. And so you could say, here's where the culture comes into play.

Say that you have a family, so then you start with a model of that family, and between all of us, those will be culturally different. Lakoff and I worked up the idea of a strict-parent family. So that's a family in which usually the father, sometimes the mother, is the authority figure and they're

supposed to know what's good for you. They impose that on you in a sort of authoritarian way. Your job is to develop an understanding of why that's right. Also, to develop the strength and the willpower to do it. For a strict father, we called it strict-father morality. There are alleged moral absolutes to be learned. They could be moral principles or absolute moral values. And your job is to grow up and conform to those. At some point, it ceases to be your father's morality, and it becomes your morality. You incorporate into yourself the strict father morality.

But that's only one family model. You can get to know cultures worldwide and see in some Christian theological frameworks, that there is a real strict-father morality. In those cases, God is seen as the ultimate Father who issues commandments, punishments, and rewards, that sort of thing. There's also a nurturant-parent morality. And this is tied to notions of attachment theory in psychology. In a nurturant parent, the key notion is care and responsibility for the children.

Here's the point I wanted to make, that you could think there's a kind of universal metaphor for *humanity is a family*. It makes sense since you learn morality usually at the beginning in a family context. It's



MJ: Here's a big [metaphor]: humanity is a family. [Photo by Mario Purisic on Unsplash.]

MJ: [We are] we're fundamentally fallible creatures. There's overwhelming evidence of that. So what do we have to do? What we ought to cultivate is the capacity for critical reflection and reconsideration. That's the only way to break out of that absolutism. Absolutism, to me, is one of the great problems we face – the belief that there is some absolute value, good, or set of universal principles.

acquired that way. It's not surprising that we have these family-based metaphors, but different cultures develop the strict-father model or the nurturant-parent model in different ways. So even though there's something that's universal, there are yet sometimes substantial cultural differences in how the metaphors get articulated.

I like this example because it shows that there's something shared across cultures (the importance of family relationships) and then there's also a difference (different manifestations of strict-parent versus nurturant-parent relations). And that's just what you'd expect to find. That's not unusual. If you want to understand culture, you've got a lot of work to do because of all these operating metaphors. Lakoff extended this to political views, conservatives and liberals and all, and the difficulties of trying to talk to one another. If people are working with these different fundamental metaphors, they will be at cross-purposes, butting heads all the time or moving past each other without really engaging. On that one, I'll stop there.

NO: Well, I think, in some ways, we've been doing that since the very beginning of time. My husband is an archeologist and he has an abundance of books on rock art. While some images have some universal meaning, others are more reflective of the tribe and where they are on the planet. They're drawing a depiction of how the stars are aligned in that part

of the hemisphere versus another part. And they're drawing based on what's meaningful in their life.

The Aesthetics of Human Beings

AR: That's a good example Nikki. And Mark, with regard to different fundamental metaphors, I don't want to blame Descartes too much, but this is why mind-body dualism misses the mark. It takes away from much of our sensual embodied nature that we exist in as living organisms. There can be more information to take in about someone's culture when we think about the embodied arts. It's amazing how much I can perceive about someone without even talking to them, just by observing them and sensing them. By observing how they breathe, and how they move, this embodied view fills in information about who they are.

MJ: Dualism was an idea among people long before Descartes [René Descartes (1596-1650)]; you're right we can't blame him entirely, but he made a big deal out of it.

Something we haven't talked about, but it's been driving me for many years, and it touches what we're talking about today – the aesthetics of human beings (Johnson 2018). I was trained to teach the philosophy of art and the philosophy of language. And Dewey's view was that art is a manifestation of possibilities of meaning, and that's why it's valuable.

Not just that it's entertainment or that it's representational or something like that. These artistic aspects of embodiment that we are talking about, ancient and present, bring aesthetics to the forefront. People are going to be different with their aesthetic understandings, I want to bring this into the conversation, too; they will have styles of movement, interacting, and standing.

People think that it's just a matter of taste, and that the nature of beauty is subjective. Well, it is a matter of taste, but human beings are meaning-making creatures, and aesthetics is about how we make and experience meaning and values. This is stretching the term from its normal locus. For example, if you are talking about rock art, there's a certain aesthetic manifestation with certain possibilities for meaning. We humans are, in a sense, artists of our lives. We are not in control. We're kind of co-artists. We have to work with what's given and what's possible for us, to see how that can be developed. It requires sensitivity, empathy, and imagination. It makes sense to me to talk about embodiment and art as an aesthetic process.

AR: When I reflect on this, it leads me to think about the notion that, *my meaning may not be accurate*. And the more that we can allow for an inquiry into errors within our current belief system, or into other possibilities within our belief systems, the more we can begin to get out of our minds and into an embodied possibility.

Western culture doesn't usually teach us to have room for error, it teaches us to be correct, to be right. That's something I've been working with these days.

For example, I may see something and want to say, "Well, I don't like how this looks." But I don't say, "I don't like how it looks," I likely say, "This is ugly." These two statements are not the same yet I am expressing the two in a conflation that takes the meaning away from what is meant. And then also, my wife may love how it looks. And so for me to step back, look at this object, and say, "Well, I seem to not like how it looks. Could it be that my meaning is fallible?" This is seemingly both an easy task and also a massive challenge, the allowance for a different perspective.

MJ: Yes, we're fundamentally fallible creatures. There's overwhelming evidence of that. So what do we have to do? What we ought to cultivate is the capacity for critical reflection and reconsideration. That's the only way to break out of that absolutism. Absolutism, to me, is one of the great problems we face – the belief that there is some absolute value, good, or set of universal principles. Focusing on only one way to take a situation leads to, "I happen to know the way, and you should listen to me." It completely cuts off communication and creative change. It is a huge enemy of growth and more engagement. And so, Andrew, I think you're right.

AR: Once we start to talk about non-duality, essentially, this is also non-absolute, or as I like to say, except for the absolute of the non-absolute.

MJ: Yes, right. And I want to stress here, we are the product of all these habits that we've developed that have been pressed on us by society. The thing is, change and transformation are possible. That's where one's faith needs to be. These habits are not so utterly fixed and entrenched that they can't be reconstructed in the light of new conditions. And it's the failure to be able to do that or to think that possibility leaves us, then we are controlled by our prior habits, and unable to see new possibilities. We want to enact new meanings, patterns of behavior, and core values.

People will think, "No, we already knew what was moral, what was right." And no new conditions could cause them to rethink that position. With that presumption of absolute truth and values,

no more can be said. You can't engage. It's like we claim to know the truth – here's the truth, and on I've got it – rather than cultivating an aesthetic of reflection and engagement. That requires recognition of, as you said, fallibility and willingness to live in the space of indeterminacy. We're not very good at that, where things aren't just one way or another, black or white. We like things fixed, definite, and clarified. John Dewey said that *people would take any crazy quick fix to get over the discomfort of indeterminacy or the anxiety that it generates in our lives.*

AR: Very much so.

MJ: And we all tend to do that when we are so self-certain that we just shut off the possibility for creative exchange and for growth.

AR: The answer to almost anything in my Rolfing SI training was – it depends. I hated that way of thinking at first. Now, my answer to most things when my wife asks me a question is yes *and* no. She'll say, "Well, which is it?" And I say, "Well, it's both." It's one of the things I love about the bodywork practices we do.

To go back to what you're saying, people will come into a Rolfer's practice a lot of times with a physiological issue that is limiting them, but that's also a pattern. They're stuck in a pattern of movement. And that pattern of movement also has a reflective pattern of thought.

MJ: It does, yes, absolutely.

AR: Ida Rolf [PhD, (1896-1979)], the founder of Rolfing SI, said our role as Rolfers is as educators. I had a client come in and we worked together, but connecting was very difficult. I couldn't quite do what I'd hoped to do. She came back again, and this time we talked for the ninety-minute session. We talked about what the work can be. We talked about her. We talked about many different things, and I didn't touch her at all. My sense was her nervous system was on red alert and that more than touch, she needed safety. She started to experience safety when she first had an understanding of what it was that would be going on during the Rolfing sessions. To lie on the table without understanding what the work was did not feel safe for her.

This is likely why our first session didn't go far, her barricades were up. Later I found out that she was a professor, very academic. I have worked with many

professors and academics, their job is more thinking-oriented.

At the end of the session, I acknowledged that she may have wanted to receive touch stimulus on that particular day, but it also seemed to me talking was what was needed. And she agreed, she said, "Yes, I needed that." She came back again, and everything was different. It was so easy and a pleasure to work with her after that conversation. She needed to let her safety be talked about, which was cognitive understanding first. And then her body changed; everything shifted. Helping her was not just about diving into the tissue. Some of it was asking myself, what's causing the tissue not to move?

MJ: That reminds me of a seminar I did years ago, on embodiment. This was when embodiment was becoming a big issue in philosophy. I had this graduate student who was really brilliant. And for part of these meetings, we went to the recreation center, lay on the floor, and a body movement practitioner took us through a series of experiences. We did that for two hours, twice. I could see that this guy was so uncomfortable. Afterward, he approached me and said, "What are we doing lying on the floor? This is a seminar in embodiment. We're supposed to be thinking out the arguments for this." He was so anxious about thinking, he didn't feel his body, or perhaps he was so divorced from feeling what was going on.

He said, "We're supposed to be thinking." As though thinking had nothing to do with his bodily way of being in the world. It has everything to do with that.

AR: I found that some of my most challenging clients are psychologists, the ones who see that everything in the world is a projection of the mind.

MJ: Psychology in the twentieth century went through a long period of cognitive psychology and the body was a black box. There was input and output, but no real sense of the body at all. It wasn't until ecological psychology was pioneered by J. J. Gibson, who I already mentioned, and E. J. Gibson [PhD, (1910-2002)] that there was discussion about how the body engages its world and how patterns of meaning and value emerge out of that (Lobo, Heras-Escribano, and Travieso 2018).

AR: I have an embodiment question for you, I've struggled with this word a bit. If somebody comes to see me and they have some limitations, then we do some work together. They change; they become



MJ: . . . change is the fundamental condition we all have to realize. [Photo by Miriam Fischer on Pexels.]

more embodied. Were they disembodied before? Or are they as embodied as they can be with what they have at that time?

MJ: Yes, I've dealt with this issue before. So first off, the fundamental assumption here is that the body and mind are one. They are different dimensions or aspects of an ongoing interactive process. So everything is embodied for us, but that doesn't mean that we're aware of it and able to take it up in a meaningful way. It can be driving us, offering us certain possibilities, a world that we don't even critically reflectively engage. There is a

value judgment here that there's more out there for you. But it's like you can't access it. There's no disembodied thinking, at least so I claim. You need at least a partially functioning brain in a partially functioning body having an ongoing interaction, not as a fixed finalized thing, interacting with an environment.

People can be more or less tuned into the possibilities. Consider experiencing a work of art. Some people say that it is just there, given that set of habits that they have constructed in their world. When I look at certain kinds of Asian art,

there are some things I resonate with and others I do not. Becoming aware and able to engage the actual richness of affordances depends on what kinds of patterns of perception one has and how much openness there is to new patterns and meanings. That's what it takes, so there is always a plurality of values in play.

AR: If there is no disembodied state, would you say that there's also no fully embodied state? And that might be because there are no absolutes, right?

MJ: And change is the fundamental condition we all have to realize. It may be very minor, so it may not really be a change we perceive. Neuroscientists, biologists, and zoologists know that the body always changes in ongoing environmental interactions. When it stops doing that, that's when you've got a problem. And we fall out of homeostasis; we fall out of balance.

We fall out of what's called allostasis, which is the ability to adapt to new conditions. When we do that, ultimately, it's death. We're in a process of continual experience and growth. There's no finality until the organism stops interacting with its environment. So, there are no absolutes, because an absolute would be the ultimate terminus toward which something has supposedly been working to find its fulfillment. Fulfillment has to do with the affordances that emerge through your ongoing interactions. So, you never know what other things are out there that can be meaningful.

AR: I think the issue for me with embodiment is always that it's a non-dual thing. And it's only our ideas and our meaning that really label it.

MJ: Yes, that's right.

AR: Embodiment is a perceptual thing, a sensual thing. It has no actual value. Once we have a value, we're into the mind, labeling it, which is just an idea or a concept. Actually, an embodied being is preconceptual. The way that we can recognize that is with perception. Before we have value, there's just this presence. There's this something that we sense before we value it. Or how do I say this?

MJ: Yes, but I want to tune that a little bit.

AR: Please. That's what I'm looking for.

MJ: It's tricky. First off, the fundamental value for an organism has to be what? Maintenance of the conditions for life.

AR: Right. Health.

NO: Would you agree that adaptability is a part of this as well?

MJ: This is the crux of it: the term allostasis is the new term they're using now. That is the ability of the organism to anticipate possible changes in its environment and be able to adapt to those changed conditions rather than just falling out of sync. Adaptability is the crux of this whole process.

Let me point out that we have certain values by the fact that we are biological organisms. We need a certain sugar gradient, we need salt or our brains won't work. If our temperature gets too hot or too cold, we die. So, we already have a set of organism values that we can't ignore, or we ignore it at our peril.

We have values all the way down to our feet. To get back to what Andrew said, then we develop conceptualizations of value relations and value systems. But the values were always there, operating. Some of them we call biological values, and some of them we call interpersonal values – like care, nurturance, empathy, et cetera. Some of them are for larger values that emerge out of our embodied being for larger social groups, like values of justice, fairness, kindness, selfishness, altruism, and things like that.

AR: For me, I don't believe the values always exist. A phenomenon always exists, later, we give it value.

MJ: Yes. What I was maybe contesting there was something slightly adjacent. I don't have any trouble saying values don't exist in themselves, they emerge out of interaction, but we don't have to think about them reflectively all the time. If we had to, we'd never get anything done. If I had to continually and consciously make sure that my heart keeps beating, that I keep breathing, that I digest my food, then I could never sustain viability, because I could never manage those and myriad other functions consciously.

Nonetheless, there is value concerning my need for circulating blood and breathing. If these two functions stop, I'm in a bad way as an organism. If I had to think about these two functions and control them all the time, I wouldn't exist because I couldn't consciously monitor all the systems. So I don't have any problem saying there are a host of unreflective and nonconscious values that are crucial for my survival and well-being, given the kind of creature that I am and the environments in which I live.

There's all this good work on values, the body, and metaphors. We have bodily disgust reactions. Paul Rozin, [PhD] has done all this work on disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987). He points out how we have metaphors for disgust in the moral realm. "That was disgusting," we might hear someone say. Values that were operative for us as biological organisms get taken up into our sense of the meaning of moral acts, and then they become reflectively entertainable. We can think about them. We can see what relations they have, what they portend by way of possible future experiences, and that sort of thing.

Conceptualizing values opens them up to a greater richness. My prior habits and values have been determining the very character of my organic life, my social relations, and my intimate-interpersonal relations. They're all operating there. And then, we acquire the ability to criticize them, to reflect on their adequacy, or to see how they might be tweaked in this context for greater stability, meaning, liberation, or growth.

It's a continuity. It's not a radical rupture where all of a sudden, values have to be brought in from outside somehow. Values are not outside of their circle of interactions. They're already there, but we're not maybe aware of how they're affecting us. And so, bringing them to critical awareness can be a very meaningful and constructive act. If we can't do that, we're bound to be driven by our habitual patterns and the values that they embed in them.

AR: This chat is everything I had hoped for and more, I appreciate you, your time, and everything that has brought you to where you are today. I really want to honor all the work you've done, and I find this so relevant to our work. If we ask, what do metaphors have to do with bodywork therapies, I think it has everything to do with it. How are we structuring our world?

MJ: Exactly. Our sense of ourselves and our relationships, and the possibilities for us, are all wrapped up in metaphor. It's been a pleasure talking with both of you.

NO: This has been a beautiful conversation, very enlightening. I'm excited to share it with my movement community and even with clients. It's an important topic, but perhaps for some, a forgotten topic. It is helpful for people to understand the embodied meaning of who they are, as an organism, the meaning of their postures, and the meaning of their environment. This resonated with me, I feel embodiment as

a continuum, and at the same time, our environment is constantly changing.

MJ: Exactly. And I hope this helps you put your finger on the human moment and importance of what could be thought of as a bunch of academic research, and all this head stuff. It really does bear directly on who we are and what's possible for us. That's what's exciting and meaningful. A philosophy that doesn't engage you where you're at, and help you have some degree of wisdom about how to negotiate your fraught situations, what good is it? It's a pleasure to be able to talk with you and see all the layers where they are in play in your body of work in some way.

AR: Let me close by saying that I think *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 2003) should be a book that all bodyworkers read because it's so foundational to the experience of understanding people and how another person might be relating with the world. We wish you a good day out there; thank you.

Mark Johnson, PhD is an author and philosophy professor emeritus at the University of Oregon. His work investigates the changes in our conception of philosophy that comes from taking seriously the way meaning, concepts, thought, and language are tied to bodily experience. His interests include the ways in which patterns of our sensory-motor experience play a crucial role in what we can think, how we think, and the nature of our symbolic expression and communication. His latest book, Out of the Cave: A Natural Philosophy of Mind and Knowing (2021) argues that mind is a process, an activity, shaped by our ongoing evolutionary history and our individual cognitive and affective development over the course of our lives.

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[We are] fundamentally fallible creatures. There's overwhelming evidence of that. So what do we have to do? What we ought to cultivate is the capacity for critical reflection and reconsideration. That's the only way to break out of that absolutism. Absolutism, to me, is one of the great problems we face – the belief that there is some absolute value, good, or set of universal principles.

Mark Johnson

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