

## Book Review

### ***Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics***

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Richard Shusterman. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 239 pp. ISBN 978-0-5218-5890-8, \$24.99 (pbk.)

In a world that had largely adopted a Deweyan sense of itself, *Body Consciousness* would not have to be written. In such a world, it would be taken for granted that philosophy should account for sensory experience as much as for cognitive experience, that there are no minds apart from the bodies that support them, and that conscious reflection on the health and well-being of those bodies is a necessary element of any journey to enlightenment or happiness. However, we do not yet live in such a world, at least not we philosophers, who continue to write as if thinking can be thought about in isolation from the physical environment, that intelligence is a purely mental quality, and that focusing on the body is both narcissistic and unrelated to moral growth. Contemporary culture reflects this lack of understanding in its fixation on idealized images of the external body, its increasing reliance on pain-killers and other symptom-alleviating drugs (both legal and illegal), and its failure to adequately overcome social and racial inequalities and stereotypes often associated with bodies that are different from a norm. For a Deweyan philosopher, the underlying presumptions of these cultural failings are preposterous, given Dewey's lifelong attempt to describe experience as situated and transactional, body-mind as a continuous whole, and freedom as the result of a willingness to incorporate the physical environment into intelligent action.

Richard Shusterman is most definitely a Deweyan, having developed his own flavor of Deweyan pragmatism in previous essays and books—most clearly in his 1997 *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*—and this

book reflects that orientation throughout, leading to a wholeheartedly Deweyan consummation in a chapter entitled “Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey’s Philosophy of Body-Mind.” This consummation comes, however, only after a thorough examination of ideas about the role of the body in the works of Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Wittgenstein, and William James, in each case showing how those ideas—while an improvement on the classical mind-body dualisms of Plato, Descartes, and Kant—are still limited in terms of either philosophical theory, ideas about everyday living, or the practical means of incorporating “body consciousness” into healthy living. For this book seeks not only to overcome traditional dualisms about mind and body, questioning philosophy’s longstanding reluctance to take full account of the role of the body in lived experience, but also to overcome the tendency of philosophy to distance itself from embodied practices, such as meditation, yoga, and the Alexander/Feldenkrais methods of somatic education, as well as from the “merely” empirical sciences and such seemingly nonphilosophical everyday activities as sex, eating, and exercise. What Shusterman seeks, and what he eventually suggests that Dewey has come closest to providing, is a comprehensive understanding of experience, incorporating thought, word, deed, and even spirit.

I found myself both engrossed with and intrigued by this book throughout. It is lucidly written for a general educated audience, assuming little specific knowledge of the philosophers it treats, but moves quickly beyond reiteration, not distracted by irrelevant details, as it continually builds toward its Deweyan conclusions. It includes numerous helpful footnotes that provide guidance to those who wish to explore Shusterman’s more controversial claims in further detail. I especially liked the way that Shusterman weaves contemporary issues such as commercialism, the proper role of technology, policies towards people with disabilities, and attitudes towards difference into his narrative. Perhaps the only meaningful criticism I can make of the book is that, for a reader with a solid understanding of Dewey’s work (that is, well beyond his explicitly educational writings), the book sometimes tantalizingly withholds the obvious Deweyan implications of a particular dialectical line of thinking until the last chapter or hints at them in a footnote referencing Dewey. Such readers will see through some of Shusterman’s more obvious rhetorical ploys—not so often as to frustrate, but certainly enough to leave a knowing smile of anticipation. I think this demonstrates that Shusterman is not just preaching to the choir here: he wants to effect some conversions as well. Convicted Deweyans will have to tolerate these moments for the sake of Shusterman’s greater ambitions.

Somaesthetics, which Shusterman first introduced in *Practicing Philosophy*, is a disciplinary framework that critically examines the relationship between the soma, or “living, feeling, sentient body” (p. 1), and philosophical thought, while seeking to change the ways that we think about ourselves and live our lives. Somaesthetics includes three branches: “The analytic study of the body’s role in perception, experience, and action and thus in our mental, moral, and social life; the pragmatic

study of methodologies to improve our body-mind functioning and thus expand our capacities of self-fashioning; and the practical branch that investigates such pragmatic methods by testing them on our own flesh in concrete experience and practice” (p. 139). Essential to the successful pursuit of the discipline, then, is not only a willingness to acknowledge the role of the body in our entire lives, but also a willingness to use our own bodies to explore and understand that role and how certain experiences can shape ourselves and our culture.

Somaesthetics unconditionally accepts that our bodies represent the core of our being and identity, forming “our primary perspective or mode of engagement with the world, determining (often unconsciously) our choice of ends and means by structuring the very needs, habits, interests, pleasures, and capacities on which those ends and means rely for their significance” (pp. 2-3), thus inexorably affecting our thinking and our culture. Thus, we both have bodies and are bodies; everything we feel and do is mediated by and through our bodies. If, Shusterman argues, we fail to adequately understand the sheer physicality of ourselves and others—if we think about thinking without acknowledging that all thinking takes place within organic living brains that cannot in any sense be separated from our bodies or from the physical environment in which we live, breathe, and experience—then we will establish both moral ideals and cultural practices that lead inevitably to moral and physical disease and social discord. Avoiding such consequences requires “body consciousness.”

One interesting aspect of the book is that it doesn’t follow a chronological path. Rather than showing how Dewey represents the culmination of a steady improvement of thought through the generations, with each philosopher incorporating the insights of his or her forebears, Shusterman starts in the recent past with Foucault, and proceeds from there backwards in time to Merleau-Ponty, then Simone de Beauvoir, then Wittgenstein, and then William James. It’s as if he is trying to show where contemporary philosophy went awry in its trajectory, locating significant errors in recent thinking, and then digging further back to find the source of those errors, looking for something less off the track. Thus, Foucault, writes Shusterman, shows a far greater willingness than many of his peers to explore the relationship between thought and body—especially the body’s physical pleasure or pain—and to see the body as “an especially vital site for self-knowledge and self-transformation” (p. 9), but gets trapped in a crippling obsession with deviant practices such as sadomasochistic sex and the use of drugs. Seeking the origins of this distraction, Shusterman traces the roots of Foucault’s thought in the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, who, while seeing the physical body as the source of all spontaneity and truth, places conscious reflection about the body into a forbidden zone, lest such consciousness allow small-minded logic to smother the body’s truth. Even Simone de Beauvoir, who worked to bring the experience of philosophically neglected women and elderly people into philosophy’s purview and wrote extensively about the objectification of the body in Western culture, was trapped in the view that working directly on one’s own body was inevitably to feed forms of social

oppression. Merleau-Ponty's and Beauvoir's errors, says Shusterman, can be traced in part to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein did more than any other twentieth-century philosopher to dispel certain unconscious assumptions about the relationship between mind and body, many contained in our linguistic inheritances. Wittgenstein offers a key insight in showing that human thought and action—rather than originating solely in the mind or completely in the organic systems of the body—reflect the entire context in which they take place, including the physical environment as well as social norms, ideals, and common practices. While he briefly touches on the ways that better consciousness of emotions and feelings in relation to that extended context can be utilized for both moral and aesthetic self-improvement and for political progress, Wittgenstein fails to adequately develop the implications of his insights, especially the possibility of adjusting people's visceral reactions to others of different ethnic backgrounds through a form of mindfulness training. In short, while Wittgenstein comes very close to an understanding of the role of the body in thought and culture, his work stops short of the pragmatic implications of such theory that Shusterman wants to include in his somaesthetics. In pursuit of such implications, Shusterman goes back further to a thinker who catalyzed many of Wittgenstein's ideas: William James.

In James, Shusterman finds some of the original conceptions that he seeks. James, more than anyone who came before and many of those who came after, developed a comprehensive understanding of the continuity of mental and physical experience, failing only in the specific recommendations he made for cultivating the body—an error Shusterman attributes to James's own physical ailments and the New England culture in which he lived—and in an inadequate conception of the relation of body and mind to the will. James understood the essentially continuous organic nature of mind and body to a degree that many of his twentieth-century followers did not. Quoting James's "The Experience of Activity," Shusterman writes, "The body . . . is the storm centre, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in [our] experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view" (p. 135). James's clarity on the body is due in part to his early training in anatomy and physiology and his knowledge of the emergent field of experimental psychology. This foundation gave James a unique perspective that allowed him to bridge disciplinary boundaries (boundaries which, by the way, have gotten deeper and wider in the intervening years; this perhaps accounting for why contemporary philosophers have proven unable to build successfully on James's comprehensive understanding). Shusterman spends a good deal of effort discussing both the strengths and limitations of James's account of the body, with special attention to the ways that James's life experiences relate to the ways that he developed his ideas. The details of James's biographical and autobiographical stories give Shusterman an opportunity to discuss more fully the pragmatic and practical sides of somaesthetics in a way that will likely resonate with his scholarly readers, many of whom, like James, may be afflicted with imperfect "uses" of their bodies, perhaps exacerbated by too much attention given to the life of the mind (or to their computers).

Shusterman devotes considerable attention to James's systematic treatment of the role of habit in human experience. Habits, for James, are the building blocks of both individuality and of culture, representing the organic embodiment of attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, and ideals, and blessing humanity with both the transformative possibilities of successful education and the frustratingly difficult task of social improvement. Shusterman doesn't simply reiterate James's insights on habit, but shows how they are reaffirmed to a large extent by the findings of contemporary neurology, most explicitly in the work of Antonio Damasio. Habits operate continuously, usually unconsciously, providing a background of self-identity and performative automaticity that makes human consciousness, willful attention, and sustained reasoning possible.

The final chapter of *Body Consciousness* further explores the importance of habit through examination of the work of Dewey, who found his entire conception of the human self fundamentally transformed by reading James's *Principles of Psychology*, and who, more than James, completely accepted nondualistic naturalism, not only in biology, but in psychology, aesthetics, and even religion. Indeed, Dewey invented the term "body-mind" (or "mind-body") to express the oneness of the self and to avoid falling into old habits when discussing their relationships. This naturalist conception infuses Dewey's middle and later works, most explicitly in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), which explores in detail the ways that habit interacts with native impulses and intelligence, and the important implications of these interactions for human and social development. Dewey also incorporates insights he gained from his personal experience of relearning how to use his own body from F. M. Alexander and his brother, A. R. The Alexander method was essential in cementing Dewey's theoretical views into a coherent world view. Most importantly, Alexander helped Dewey to see that the refusal to allow a habit to kick in—what Alexander referred to as "inhibition"—is a key to understanding the mechanisms of free will without falling into dualistic thinking, as James had. For Dewey, there is no opposition between habit and thought or will; rather, the important distinction is between unintelligent or routine habit, and intelligent or reflective habit. Self-fulfillment for Dewey is a matter of employing intelligent, or artistic, habits to gradually modify the "bundle of 'complex, unstable, opposing attitudes, habits, impulses' we call the self" (p. 205; quoting Dewey, MW 14:96), in a direction that is compatible with desired ends-in-view. The self constitutes what Shusterman says is a "multifaceted, complexly integrated, dynamic field rather than a simple, static, linear system" (p. 208), and successful living requires conscious appreciation for, selective attention to, and painstaking amelioration of the self's pluralistic elements in all their dimensions.

Recall that somaesthetics involves both pragmatic and practical aspects as well as analytical ones. It therefore cannot be confined, as much of philosophy has been, to mere theory. Nor can it be constrained to widely accepted social practices. Thus, Shusterman applauds Foucault for his transgressive assault on contemporary sexual practices as well as James for his experiments in various methods of personal

improvement, including “moral holidays,” wearing corsets, electric shocks, spinal vibration, marijuana, and mescaline. While Shusterman himself doesn’t claim to participate in these forms of investigation (although he explicitly refers throughout the book to his own training in Zen Buddhism and the Feldenkrais method, and often uses examples that implicitly reveal some of his own experiences of sex), he does suggest that the successful somaesthetician—indeed, the successful human—will examine both personal habits and social norms, regarding them as fundamentally tentative.

Dewey’s experiences with the Alexander method as well as Shusterman’s own experiences suggest that efforts at self-improvement often require the guidance of trained teachers and wise others, who can help us to see ourselves in new and more comprehensive ways. For we must understand our bodies not only from the inside, but must gain appreciation for how they look from the outside and for how their actions and inactions affect and are affected by the environment. An expanded notion of self that includes not only the mind and body, but the entire social and physical context in which they exist, leads Shusterman to an essentially spiritual conclusion: “This relational symbiotic notion of the self inspires a more extensive notion of somatic meliorism in which we are also charged with caring for and harmonizing the environmental affordances of our embodied selves, not just our own body parts” (p. 215). He continues, “By enabling us to feel more of our universe with greater acuity, awareness, and appreciation, such a vision of somaesthetic cultivation promises the richest and deepest palate of experiential fulfillments because it can draw on the profusion of cosmic resources, including an uplifting sense of cosmic unity” (p. 216). That sense of unity, which motivated Dewey and motivates many of us, can provide us and our communities with enhanced meaning, direction, and purpose. This, Shusterman claims, is ultimately why we should pay attention to the life of our bodies as well as our minds.

## **References**

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