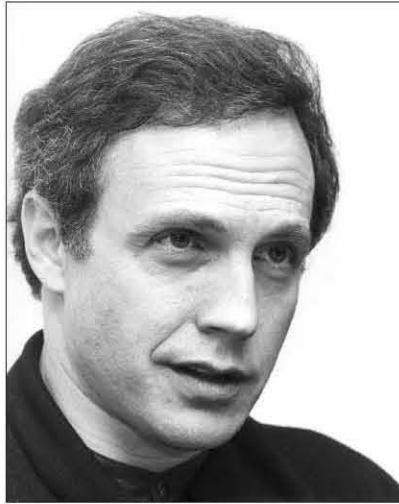


Q & A



RICHARD SHUSTERMAN TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW BOOK, *BODY CONSCIOUSNESS: A PHILOSOPHY OF MINDFULNESS AND SOMAESTHETICS*

Very unusually, your book was published in translation in France before it appeared in the US or UK. Why was that?

It is unusual, but my *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was also published in French a few months before the original English edition. In both cases, the Parisian publishers made every effort to get the books swiftly to market at the most opportune moment, even getting personally involved in production.

My distinguished English publishers were more corporate in style, thus slower. The English version of *Body Consciousness* was also delayed because the marketing department insisted on a cover illustration (a harem nude by Ingres) that was at odds with the book's message, so, when my protests failed to remove the illustration, I had to rewrite the preface to include a critique of the cover.

Even more unusually, the French media, including *Le Monde*, gave you and the book plenty of coverage. This is very rare for an American philosopher. What sort of reception did the book

get in France?

So far the media have been entirely and enthusiastically favourable. Especially gratifying is that the French reviews and interviews show a penetrating understanding of the book's aims and arguments, and of how to situate my views with respect to the contemporary field of philosophy and the human sciences.

Why do you think it touched a chord?

France boasts a rich cultural tradition of refined somatic consciousness (gastronomy, fashion, cosmetics, eroticism), and some of its greatest twentieth-century philosophers – Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, Foucault – made the body a central theme. *Body Consciousness* critically examines their views (along with those of influential analytic and pragmatist philosophers) in developing my own arguments

Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics is published by Cambridge University Press at £14.99/\$24.99

and positions. Moreover, the book's style – neither dumbed down mass-market philosophy nor aridly technical scholasticism – is the sort that French intellectuals seem to prefer.

Finally, by drawing on sources from diverse philosophical traditions, including those of Asia, while also deploying my practical experience as a body therapist, the book may exude an appealingly exotic flavour for French tastes.

How would you sum up the main thesis of your book?

Our living, sentient bodies are not just objects of consciousness but also help constitute conscious subjectivity, displaying various levels of intentionality and awareness, which the book explores. Its main practical thrust is that enhanced and more reflective somatic awareness can improve the quality of our self-use and thus increase our knowledge, self-knowledge, and capacities for virtuous action, happiness, and justice.

Even the most body-friendly philosophers claim we use our bodies best without reflective consciousness, through automatic spontaneity. In refuting their arguments, my book shows how the reflective and unreflective are best integrated in self-use, and how critical somatic awareness can help us resist the oppressive images that enslave our body consciousness.

As *Le Monde* put it: "Against a society that glorifies certain models of good looks, against the conformism of advertised images and the ideology of (physical and technical) outputs, Shusterman seeks to liberate the notion of self-use from its dominant competitive context that is both self-destructive and negates the other."

The word "somaesthetics" appears in the book's subtitle. What does it mean?

Somaesthetics is the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience

and use the living body (or soma) as the locus of sensory perception (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. It is an interdisciplinary field that involves both theory and practice.

Its structure and relation to the traditional aims of philosophy are explained in detail in the book. I coined the concept in *Practicing Philosophy* (1997) and other theorists (philosophers included) now identify themselves as working in this field.

You also talk about "Mindfulness" – a concept from Buddhism. Is that a cue for analytic-minded philosophers to switch off?

It shouldn't be. I was trained as an analytic philosopher at Oxford, and the book (which contains a chapter on Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind) is a structure of clear arguments, not a wispy web of mystic babble.

Are you tempted to write a popular book in the self-help genre to disseminate your ideas? After all, if you're right, there are practices we could all benefit from.

I'm not yet tempted by or ready for that project. There is still so much to explore in philosophy, cognitive science, and various somatic disciplines that it seems wrong to take time off from research to package my views as a self-help capsule.

I'm wary of popular self-help books that tend (through their mass-market, one-size-fits-all attitude) to simplify the complexity of issues both in philosophy and in life. Moreover, somaesthetic self-improvement involves somatic disciplines that demand not just reading but actual body work, which usually requires attentive personal training from an expert teacher to achieve adequate results. I therefore prefer to devote my spare time to hands-on practical workshops.

That said, any intelligent reader of *Body Consciousness* can already find some promising somatic directions for self-cultivation. ■