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978-0-521-67587-1 - Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics

Richard Shusterman

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### I

Body consciousness (a term of multiple meanings with widely ranging applications) forms the central focus of this book. In exploring various forms and levels of body consciousness and the diverse issues and theories through which twentieth-century philosophy has tried to explain the body's role in our experience, the book also advocates greater attention to somatic self-consciousness both in theory and in practice. I make the case for heightened somatic consciousness not simply by refuting influential philosophical arguments against the value of such consciousness, but also by outlining a systematic philosophical framework through which the different modes of somatic consciousness, somatic cultivation, and somatic understanding can be better integrated and thus more effectively achieved.

That disciplinary framework, somaesthetics, is explained in the book's first chapter, and its concepts and principles continue to shape my subsequent arguments. For the moment, we can briefly describe somaesthetics as concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice (the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). The term "soma" indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the "aesthetic" in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing the soma's perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the body/mind dichotomy) and its aesthetic

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uses both in stylizing one's self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things.<sup>1</sup>

Before going any further, readers might already object: Why advocate any more attention to body consciousness and even develop a systematic discipline for it? Is not our culture already far too body conscious, excessively fixated on how our bodies look, how much they weigh, how alluringly they smell, how stylishly they are decorated, how powerfully they can be made to perform athletically through drugs and intensified disciplines of training? Are we not, then, suffering from a monstrously overgrown body consciousness whose irrepressible surge is even infecting fields like philosophy that are traditionally respected as devoted to mind in contrast to body? If so, this book would seem more the sad symptom of cultural and philosophical malaise than an instrument for improvement.

A further objection is likely. Our perceptual powers are already fully occupied with more pressing matters than cultivating somatic consciousness. Transformed by the continuing information revolution, inundated by increasing floods of signs, images, and factoids, we already have too much to attend to in the surrounding environments of our natural, social, and virtual worlds of experience. Why, then, devote a portion of our limited and overstretched capacities of attention to monitor our own somatic experience? How can we afford to do so? Besides, our bodies seem to perform perfectly well without any somatic reflection or heightened consciousness. Why not simply leave our bodily experience and performance entirely to the automatic mechanisms of instinct and unreflective somatic habits, so that we can focus our attention on matters that really call for and deserve full conscious attention – the ends we seek and the means, instruments, or media we need to deploy to achieve those ends?

Responding to such questions with one of this book's guiding principles, we should recall that the body constitutes an essential, fundamental dimension of our identity. It forms our primal perspective or mode of engagement with the world, determining (often unconsciously) our

<sup>1</sup> Although I introduced the term "somaesthetics" to propose a new interdisciplinary field for philosophical practice, "somaesthetic" (or as it is more frequently spelled, "somes-  
thetic") is a familiar term of neurophysiology, referring to sensory perception through the body itself rather than its particular sense organs. The somaesthetic senses are often divided into exteroceptive (relating to stimuli outside the body and felt on the skin), proprioceptive (initiated within the body and concerned with the orientation of body parts relative to one another and the orientation of the body in space), and visceral or interoceptive (deriving from internal organs and usually associated with pain).

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. This, of course, includes the structuring of our mental life, which, in the stubbornly dominant dualism of our culture, is too often sharply contrasted to our bodily experience. If embodied experience is so formative of our being and connection to the world, if (in Husserl's words) "the Body is . . . the *medium of all perception*," then body consciousness surely warrants cultivating, not only to improve its perceptual acuity and savor the satisfactions it offers but also to address philosophy's core injunction to "know thyself," which Socrates adopted from Apollo's temple at Delphi to initiate and inspire his founding philosophical quest.<sup>2</sup>

The body expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world. A radiating subjectivity constituting "the very centre of our experience," the body cannot be properly understood as a mere object; yet, it inevitably also functions in our experience as an object of consciousness, even of one's own embodied consciousness.<sup>3</sup> When using my index finger to touch a bump on my knee, my bodily subjectivity is directed to feeling another body part as an object of exploration. I thus both *am* body and *have* a body. I usually experience my body as the transparent source of my perception or action, and not as an object of awareness. It is that *from which* and *through which* I grasp or manipulate the objects of the world on which I am focused, but I do not grasp it as an explicit object of consciousness, even if it is sometimes obscurely felt as a background condition of perception. But often, especially in situations of doubt or difficulty, I also perceive my body as something that I *have* and *use* rather than *am*, something I must command to perform what I will but that often fails in performance, something that distracts, disturbs, or makes me suffer. Such discord encourages somatic alienation and the familiar denigrating objectification of the body as just an instrument (lamentably

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schwer (Boston: Kluwer, 1989), 61. The italics are Husserl's. Hereafter my book will note only when I add italics to quotations.

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1986), 71. William James describes the body in the same terms of centrality, as "the storm centre" and "origin of coordinates" in our experience. "Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view." "The world experienced," he elaborates, "comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest." William James, "The Experience of Activity," in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 86.

weak and vulnerable) that merely belongs to the self rather than really constituting an essential expression of selfhood.

However, even if we objectify or instrumentalize the body (and to some extent we must for pragmatic purposes of somatic care), this is no reason to regard it as not needing or deserving our attentive consciousness. For even if construed as an instrument of the self, the body must be recognized as our most primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought. Just as skilled builders need expert knowledge of their tools, so we need better somatic knowledge to improve our understanding and performance in the diverse disciplines and practices that contribute to our mastery of the highest art of all – that of living better lives. A more discerning awareness of our somatic medium can improve its use in deploying all our other tools and media; for they all require some form of bodily performance, even if it is the mere pushing of a button or blinking of an eye.

The body's role as our primordial instrument or *ur*-medium has long been recognized; the basic somatic terms of "organ" and "organism" derive from the Greek word for tool, *organon*. Yet, Greek philosophy's aristocratic tendency to champion ideal ends while disparaging material means as mere menial necessity has resulted, with Plato and subsequent idealists, in condemning rather than celebrating the body as medium, while using its very instrumentality to exclude it from what is essential and valuable in human being. A medium or means (as etymology indicates) typically stands between two other things between which it mediates. Being in the middle, an interface with two faces, a medium connects the mediated terms, yet also separates them by standing between them. This double aspect is also present in the instrumental sense of medium as means to an end. While being a way to the end, it also stands *in* the way, a distance to be traveled between purpose and its fulfillment.

Plato's seminal condemnation of the body as medium in the *Phaedo* (65c–67a) concentrates on the negative interfering aspect. Prefiguring today's dominant lines of media critique, it argues that the body distracts us from reality and the search for true knowledge by interrupting our attention with all sorts of sensational commotion and diverting our minds with all sorts of passions, fancies, and nonsense. Moreover, our somatic sensorial medium distorts reality through its flawed perception. The body is even portrayed as a multimedia conglomerate of different sensory modalities and technologies (such as eyes, ears, feeling limbs, etc.),

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and such plurality and divisibility of parts provide all the more reason for Plato to degrade it by contrast to the indivisible soul that seeks the truth despite its confinement in the body's distortive prison.<sup>4</sup>

These ancient lines of critique, adopted by Neoplatonism and integrated into Christian theology and modern philosophical idealism, have waxed enormously influential in our culture, as has another Platonic argument (from *Alcibiades* 129c–131d) to denigrate and alienate the body as instrument. We clearly distinguish between a tool and the user of the tool, between instrument and agent; so if the body is our tool or instrument (no matter how intimate and indispensable), then it must be altogether different from the self who uses it, for which it must therefore be a mere external means. It follows (so goes the argument) that the true self must be the mind or soul alone, and consequently that self-knowledge and self-cultivation have nothing to do with cultivating bodily knowledge and consciousness. More generally, the idea of the body as an external instrument used by the self is easily translated into the familiar image of body as servant or tool of the soul. This further promotes the disparaging identification of the somatic with the dominated serving classes (including women), an association that reciprocally reinforces the subordinate status and disrespect for all the associated terms.

Yet Plato's reasoning can surely be challenged, even by extending its basic argument, with its dichotomizing objectifications, into a *reductio ad absurdum*. We clearly use more of ourselves than our bodies alone. We use our minds to think and our souls to will, hope, pray, decide, or exercise virtue. Does the use of one's mind or soul likewise entail its being a mere external instrument rather than an essential part of one's identity? If we strip everything that the self uses from belonging to the real self, we are left with nothing at all; for we indeed use our selves, whenever we use other things and even when we do not. Self-use is not a contradiction in terms but a necessity for living, and to show why heightened somatic consciousness can improve one's use of the self is a major aim of this book. Nor does this express a joyless instrumentalism, because improved self-use surely includes a greater ability to enjoy oneself, with the soma clearly a key experiential site (rather than a mere means) of pleasure.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed critical discussion of Plato's argument and its reflection in contemporary debate concerning the body's relationship to the new media, see my chapter on "Somaesthetics and the Body-Media Issue," in Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 7.

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## II

Contemporary culture undeniably lavishes enormous and, in some ways, excessive attention to the body. But it is not the sort of attention that this book is most keen to advance. Social theorists and feminist critics have convincingly exposed how the dominant forms in which our culture heightens body awareness serve largely to maximize corporate profits (for the massive cosmetics, dieting, fashion, and other “body-look” industries) while reinforcing social domination and inflicting multitudes with self-aversion. Ideals of bodily appearance impossible for most people to achieve are cunningly promoted as the necessary norm, thus condemning vast populations to oppressive feelings of inadequacy that spur their buying of marketed remedies.<sup>5</sup> Distracting us from our actual bodily feelings, pleasures, and capacities, such relentlessly advertised ideals also blind us to the diversity of ways of improving our embodied experience. Somatic self-consciousness in our culture is excessively directed toward a consciousness of how one’s body appears to others in terms of entrenched societal norms of attractive appearance and how one’s appearance can be rendered more attractive in terms of these conventional models. (And these same conformist standards likewise impoverish our appreciation of the richly aesthetic diversity of other bodies than our own.) Virtually no attention is directed toward examining and sharpening the consciousness of one’s actual bodily feelings and actions so that we can deploy such somatic reflection to know ourselves better and achieve a more perceptive somatic self-consciousness to guide us toward better self-use.

Such improved self-use, I should reiterate, is not confined to mere practical, functional matters but includes improving our capacities for pleasure, which can be significantly enhanced by more perceptive self-awareness of our somatic experience. We can then enjoy our pleasures “twice as much,” insists Montaigne, “for the measure of enjoyment depends on the greater or lesser attention that we lend it.”<sup>6</sup> Too many of our ordinary somatic pleasures are taken hurriedly, distractedly, and almost as unconsciously as the pleasures of sleep. If this dearth of somaesthetic sensitivity helps explain our culture’s growing dependence on increasing stimulation through the sensationalism of mass-media entertainments and far more radical means of thrill taking, then such a diet

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 853.

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of artificial excitements can conversely explain how our habits of perception (and even our sensorimotor nervous system) are transformed in ways that elevate the stimulus threshold for perceptibility and satisfaction while diminishing our capacities for tranquil, steady, and sustained attention. Somatic reflection's cultivation of more refined somatic self-consciousness can address these problems by providing more rapid and reliable awareness of when we are overstimulated by a surfeit of sensory excitements so that we know when to turn them down or switch them off to avoid their damage. Such heightened, attentive awareness can also teach us how to tune out disturbing stimulations by means of cultivated skills in redirecting control of conscious attention in one's own experience, as disciplines of mindfulness have clearly shown.

Our culture's general indifference to this cultivated form of somatic self-consciousness is also expressed in philosophy's continued disregard of its importance, even in philosophers who champion the body's essential role in experience and cognition. This book tries to trace and explain this omission in twentieth-century somatic philosophy and to make a case for the philosophical appreciation and cultivation of this neglected type of somatic self-awareness or reflection, whose value is contrastingly advocated by a wide variety of somatic theorists, educators, and practitioners outside the institutional framework of philosophy.

Though I write this book as an academic philosopher, I should confess from the outset that my perspective on body consciousness has been deeply influenced by my practical experience of various somaesthetic disciplines. Most instructive has been my training and professional experience as a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method, a form of somatic education for improved self-awareness and self-use that has inspiringly successful and wide-ranging therapeutic applications, but also an uncompromising integrity whose refusal of commercialized simplification has denied it the popularity and market share it deserves. I also acknowledge my debt to other disciplines that promote heightened somatic consciousness and body-mind attunement: from yoga and *t'ai chi ch'uan* to *zazen* and Alexander Technique.

While providing a critical study of contemporary philosophy's most influential arguments against the heightened consciousness of somatic reflection, this book also makes a case for somaesthetics as a general framework in which the cultivation of such consciousness (as well as other forms of somatic training) can best be understood and pursued. This project involves a phenomenological study of body consciousness that probes the different kinds, levels, and values of somatic

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self-awareness – from essentially unconscious motor intentionality and unfocused automatic reactions involving unreflective somatic habits or body schemata to explicitly thematized body images, somatic self-awareness, and reflective somatic introspection. It also means exploring the ways these different modes of somatic consciousness can be related and collaboratively deployed to improve our somaesthetic knowledge, performance, and enjoyment. A key argument in the condemnation of cultivating somatic self-consciousness is that any sustained focus on bodily feelings is both unnecessary and counterproductive for effective thought and action. Attentive self-consciousness of bodily feelings (or, for that matter, of bodily form or movement) is thus rejected as a distracting, corruptive obstacle to our essential cognitive, practical, and ethical concerns, a retreat into ineffectual self-absorption. Our attention, it is argued, must instead be directed exclusively outward for our engagement with the external world.

The book's defense of reflective or heightened somatic self-awareness will show, however, that such intensified body consciousness need not disrupt but rather can improve our perception of and engagement with the outside world by improving our use of the self that is the fundamental instrument of all perception and action. Indeed, I contend that *any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself*. To focus on feeling one's body is to foreground it against its environmental background, which must be somehow felt in order to constitute that experienced background. One cannot feel oneself sitting or standing without feeling that part of the environment upon which one sits or stands. Nor can one feel oneself breathing without feeling the surrounding air we inhale. Such lessons of somatic self-consciousness eventually point toward the vision of an essentially situated, relational, and symbiotic self rather than the traditional concept of an autonomous self grounded in an individual, monadic, indestructible, and unchanging soul.

### III

For treating all these diverse and complex issues, six twentieth-century philosophers are especially important: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and two pragmatist philosophers whose writings also stretch back to the late nineteenth century, William James and John Dewey. These renowned thinkers are exemplary, not only for their influential somatic theorizing but also for the



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striking way they represent today's most powerful Western philosophical traditions: phenomenology, analytic philosophy, pragmatism, existentialism, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and feminism.<sup>7</sup> In engaging their theories, this book is thus not simply dealing with past historical products but with perspectives that continue to shape the orientations and command the commentary of today's body philosophers. Each of these master thinkers forms the primary focus of one of the book's six chapters, but their arguments will be interrelated in terms of the following narrative.

The first chapter introduces the field of somaesthetics and the book's major issues through a study of Michel Foucault's distinctive and influential somatic philosophy. Advocating the body as an especially vital site for self-knowledge and self-transformation, Foucault argues that self-fashioning is not only a matter of externally stylizing oneself through one's bodily appearance but of transfiguring one's inner sense of self (and thereby one's attitude, character, or ethos) through transformative experiences. Central to this experiential transformation, according to Foucault, is the experience of bodily pleasures. Because their predictable stereotypes and conventional limits, however, constrain our possibilities of creative self-fulfillment and growth, he explicitly urges the pursuit of unorthodox somatic practices to make the body "infinitely more susceptible to pleasure." Yet, the range of pleasures that Foucault in fact advocates remains paradoxically narrow, essentially confined to the most intense delights of strong drugs and transgressive sex, epitomized by his ardent affirmation of consensual, homosexual sadomasochism. The body, however, enjoys many other pleasures that are less violent and explosive without being so boringly conventional that they blunt self-awareness and self-development. Tranquil practices of meditative awareness in breathing, sitting, and walking can generate subtle streams of deep delight and initiate radical transformations, often burgeoning into experiences of intensely exhilarating, yet quiet, joy.

<sup>7</sup> I recognize that my choice of thinkers and movements does not cover the full spectrum of influential twentieth-century somatic philosophy. One major philosophical movement not examined here but often rich in somatic insight is *Philosophische Anthropologie*, represented by Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, and Helmut Plessner (with some phases of Ernst Cassirer's work also somewhat linked to this trend). For a contemporary version of philosophical anthropology based on a systematic reconstruction of Helmut Plessner's work (which is enjoying an especially vibrant renaissance in Europe), see the important two-volume study of Hans-Peter Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen*: vol. 1, *Das Spektrum menschlicher Phänomene* (Berlin: Akademie, 1999), and vol. 2, *Der dritte Weg Philosophische Anthropologie und die Geschlechterfrage* (Berlin: Akademie, 2001).

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Why are such gentler practices and subtler, quieter delights ignored when Foucault's goal is to maximize our capacities for pleasure? More than merely a personal problem of Foucault's tortured psyche, this neglect reflects our culture's general insensitivity to the subtleties of somatic sensibility and reflective body consciousness, a numbness that promotes the quest for sensationalism. And this general cultural deficiency finds salient philosophical expression even in the most progressive twentieth-century thinkers who affirm the body's crucial role. We can better understand Foucault's deafness to subtle somatic pleasures and gentle body disciplines by tracing his impaired body consciousness to a strongly entrenched philosophical tradition that rejects somatic reflection even when celebrating the body.

Chapters 2 and 3 therefore address the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir who form a significant part of the French philosophical background from which Foucault's somatic thinking emerged. Merleau-Ponty is treated first, since Beauvoir's account of our bodily existence explicitly draws on him and since Foucault confessed to have been "fascinated by him."<sup>8</sup> Examining how Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir affirm the body's intentionality and essential role in our personal development, these chapters also explain the ways they resist, for different reasons, the affirmation of *reflective* body consciousness as a means of enhancing one's powers, emancipatory development, and self-understanding. In showing the limitations of their arguments, I demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty's insights about the primacy of unreflective consciousness and Beauvoir's concerns about the objectification and exploitation of female bodies need not be sacrificed by recognizing the value of reflective body consciousness. Though Beauvoir's arguments against somatic self-cultivation (including not only somatic self-consciousness but also the cultivation of external bodily form and performance) are most potently expressed in her feminist classic *The Second Sex*, they also appear in her subsequent book on old age, which merits our attention for its extensive treatment of this important somatic issue that most philosophers have failed to theorize in a systematic way (including the other five past masters discussed here).

The next chapter turns to a key figure in analytic philosophy of mind. Ludwig Wittgenstein is famous for his vigorous arguments against using bodily feelings as philosophical explanations of key mental concepts such

<sup>8</sup> See his remark in Claude Mauriac, *Et comme l'espérance est violente* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1986), 492.