Body Consciousness

Contemporary culture increasingly suffers from problems of attention, overstimulation, and stress. We are plagued by a growing variety of personal and social discontents generated by deceptive body images. This book argues that improved body consciousness can relieve these problems and enhance one's knowledge, performance, and pleasure. The body is our basic medium of perception and action, but focused attention to its feelings and movements has long been criticized as a damaging distraction that also ethically corrupts through self-absorption. In *Body Consciousness*, Richard Shusterman eloquently refutes such charges by engaging the most influential twentieth-century somatic philosophers and incorporating insights from both Western and Asian disciplines of body-mind awareness. Rather than rehashing intractable ontological debates on the mind-body relation, Shusterman reorients study of this crucial nexus toward a more fruitful, pragmatic direction that reinforces important but neglected connections between philosophy of mind, ethics, politics, and the pervasive aesthetic dimensions of everyday life.

Richard Shusterman is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. Educated at Jerusalem and Oxford, he is internationally known for his contributions to philosophy and his pioneering work in somaesthetics, a field of theory and practice devoted to thinking through the body. A recipient of senior Fulbright and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, Dr. Shusterman has held academic positions in Paris, Berlin, and Hiroshima and is the author of several books, most recently *Surface and Depth* and *Performing Live*. His *Pragmatist Aesthetics* has been published in thirteen languages.

Body Consciousness

A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521858908

First published 2008

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shusterman, Richard.
Body consciousness : a philosophy of mindfulness and somaesthetics / Richard Shusterman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-85890-8 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-0-521-67587-1 (pbk.)
1. Body, Human (Philosophy) 2. Aesthetics–Physiological aspects. I. Title.
B105.B64S38 2008
128′.6 – dc22 2007034891

ISBN 978-0-521-85890-8 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-67587-1 paperback

In memory of J.W.S.,
whose body gave me life, love, and consciousness.

. . . her pure and eloquent blood,
Spoke in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought,
That one might almost say, her body thought.
She, she, thus richly, and largely housed, is gone.

John Donne, "Of the Progress of the Soul:
The Second Anniversary"

"The human body is the best picture of the human soul."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

"The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

"Monks, one thing, if practiced and made much of, conduces to great thrill, great profit, great security after the toil, to mindfulness and self-possession, to the winning of knowledge and insight, to pleasant living in this very life, to the realization of the fruit of release by knowledge. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness centered on body."

The Buddha, *Anguttara Nikāya*

"Besides, it is a shame to let yourself grow old through neglect before seeing how you can develop the maximum beauty and strength of body; and you can't have this experience if you are negligent, because these things don't normally happen by themselves."

Socrates, from Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates*

Contents

Preface

Contemporary culture increasingly suffers from problems of attention, overstimulation, and stress. We are further plagued by a growing variety of personal and social discontents generated by deceptive body images. This book argues that improved body consciousness can help relieve these problems and enhance one's knowledge, performance, and pleasure. If body consciousness is a topic unlikely to comfort conventional philosophical tastes, this is not because philosophy has always ignored the body, as too many somatic advocates are fond of complaining. The body in fact exerts a very powerful (though generally negative) presence in philosophy's persistent privileging of mind and spirit. Its dominantly negative image – as a prison, distraction, source of error and corruption – is both reflected and reinforced by the idealistic bias and disregard for somatic cultivation that Western philosophers generally display.

We must not forget, however, that philosophy in ancient times was practiced as a distinctly embodied way of life in which somatic disciplines frequently formed an important part, even if such disciplines sometimes assumed a more body-punishing character in philosophies where mind and soul were thought to achieve more freedom and power through severe somatic asceticism. Plotinus, for example (according to his admiring biographer Porphyry), was so "ashamed of being in the body" and so keen to transcend it that he not only drastically limited his diet but even "abstained from the use of the bath." Today, when philosophy has shrunk from a global art of living into a narrow field of academic discourse, the body retains a strong presence as a theoretical (and sometimes potently political) abstraction. However, the idea of using its cultivation for heightened consciousness and philosophical insight would probably strike most professional philosophers as an embarrassing aberration. I hope to change this prejudice.

Unlike philosophers, artists have generally devoted a very adoring, revering attention to the body. Realizing how powerfully and precisely our mental life is displayed through bodily expression, they have shown how the most subtle nuances of belief, desire, and feeling are reflected in the postural and gestural attitudes of our figures and facial countenance. However, in their idolizing love of the human body, artists have usually preferred to portray it as the attractive object of another person's consciousness rather than the radiating expression of the somatic subject's own probing consciousness of embodied self. Women, particularly young vulnerable women, are the frequent subjects of such objectification, portrayed as lusciously sensuous and obligingly passive flesh for the viewer's devouring delectation. The artistic yearning to glorify the body's beauty as desired object often results, moreover, in stylistic exaggerations that propagate deceptive images of bodily ease and grace.

Such problems can be detected in the illustration that adorns the cover of this book, the famous *Valpinçon Bather* (1808) of Ingres, one of his series of acclaimed Turkish bath and harem paintings portraying naked odalisques (female slaves or concubines of the harem). The young woman here, passively posed on a luxuriously bedded and curtained interior, is fresh and naked from her bath and thus ready for her required sexual service. She presents a deliciously lovely and luminous backside of flesh. But in her static pose, with her head turned away in darker shadow and her gaze and facial expression invisible, we get no sense of her having any active, thoughtful consciousness at all. She even seems unconscious of the close presence of the implied viewer, who sees her in almost total nakedness, apart from the turban on her bound hair and the sheet wrapped around her arm – both more suggestive of her bondage than of protective covering. Ingres, moreover, intensifies the woman's visual beauty and erotic charge by putting her in a postural constellation of legs, spine, and head that highlights her figure's graceful long limbs and curving lines but that in fact is anatomically far from a posture conducive to comfort, let alone effective action. What a shock to learn that the marketing department had selected this beautiful but painfully misleading image for the cover of my book on body consciousness! As a critic of media culture's deceptive objectifications of the body, but also as a Feldenkrais practitioner sensitive to the strain and suffering of the spine, I voiced my objections but was decisively told that the vast majority of my potential readers would only be attracted to the beauty of the Ingres and never notice its unsightly social and somatic import. If that indeed is true, then this book's arguments are all the more needed to open their eyes to other

forms and beauties of body consciousness. Do not judge this book by its cover.

We can easily appreciate, however, why artists would focus on beautifying the body's external form and why philosophers would find body consciousness a disconcerting matter and prefer to think of mind. As bodies are the clearest expression of human mortality, imperfection, and weakness (including moral frailties), so body consciousness, for most of us, primarily means feelings of inadequacy, our falling far short of the reigning ideals of beauty, health, and performance – a point that also indicates that body consciousness is always more than consciousness of one's own body alone. Moreover, despite its share of intense pleasures, body consciousness is perhaps most acutely and firmly focused in experiences of pain. Embodiment thus suggests a discomforting vulnerability or evil, epitomized in Saint Paul's declaration that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." Cultivation of body consciousness has thus been repeatedly attacked as a psychological, cognitive, and moral danger, even though philosophy's commitment to self-knowledge would surely seem to entail the exercise of heightened somatic awareness. Kant, for example, though affirming self-examination as a crucial duty (and despite his meticulous personal attention to details of diet and exercise), sharply condemns somatic introspection for generating melancholia and other corruptions. William James likewise warns that heightened consciousness of the bodily means of action leads to failure in achieving our desired ends.

Do our bodies really function best when we most ignore them rather than mindfully trying to guide their functioning? How should we reconcile this incentive for nonthinking with philosophy's ideal of critical reflection? Without critical somatic consciousness, how can we correct faulty habits and improve our somatic self-use? If philosophy remains committed to the maxim "know thyself," how, then, can we better know our somatic selves, feelings, and conduct? If philosophy is likewise committed to the goal of self-improvement and self-care, could enhanced skills of somatic awareness enable better ways of monitoring and directing our behavior, managing or diminishing our pain, and more fruitfully multiplying our pleasures? How to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful forms of body consciousness? How to combine critical body mindfulness with the demands for smooth spontaneity of action? Are there special principles or methods of somatic introspection for improving body consciousness and then using such enhanced awareness for better cognition and sensorimotor performance? How do these methods

relate to the struggles of individuals whose bodies serve to underline their subordinate social status? How does somatic proprioception expand our traditional picture of the senses and their role in cognition and coordinated action? Is body consciousness nothing more than an awkward term for denoting the mind's reflective consciousness of the body as an external object, or are there truly bodily forms of subjectivity, intentionality, and awareness?

Such questions, and many others related to body consciousness, will be addressed in this book, which is a product of at least a decade of struggling both theoretically and practically with this topic. Though the struggle continues, this book marks a significant measure of progress in my ongoing project of somaesthetics that grows out of earlier work in philosophical pragmatism as a philosophy of life. The pragmatism I advocate puts experience at the heart of philosophy and celebrates the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience. Underlining the body's formative role in the creation and appreciation of art, my *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) included the arts of self-styling. The body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness. In that context, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997) introduced the notion of somaesthetics as a field of theory and practice, which was later elaborated in *Performing Live* (2000). This book is a further extension of the somaesthetic project, with much more detailed attention to issues of body consciousness and to their problematic treatment by past masters of twentieth-century philosophy. I often prefer to speak of *soma* rather than body to emphasize that my concern is with the living, feeling, sentient, purposive body rather than a mere physical corpus of flesh and bones. In fact, were I not worried about burdening this book with an awkwardly technical title, I might have called it "somatic consciousness" or even "somaesthetic consciousness" to avoid the negative associations of the term "body."

***

I gratefully acknowledge the munificent support of my research provided through Florida Atlantic University's Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar Chair in the Humanities that I am truly fortunate to hold. Three other institutions were also particularly supportive of my work on this book. The University of Oslo kindly invited me to spend the month of May 2006 sharing my somaesthetic research with their interdisciplinary

study group on literature and disease (special thanks here to Knut Stene-Johansen and Drude von der Fehr). In the fall semester of 2006, the Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne graciously hosted (through the good offices of Dominique Chateau, Marc Jimenez, and Jacinto Lageira) a series of lectures in which I could test the book's final arguments in a foreign language. Earlier, Hiroshima University (on the suggestion of Satoshi Higuchi) generously invited me to spend the entire academic year of 2002–2003 as a visiting professor (with no teaching duties) to pursue my research in somaesthetics, affording me a much closer view of Japan's extraordinary body-mind disciplines, from meditation to the martial arts. The highlight of that year was the time I lived and trained in a Zen cloister, the Shorinkutsu-dojo, set on a hill by the coastal village of Tadanoumi on the beautiful Inland Sea. I am extremely grateful to my Zen Master, Roshi Inoue Kido, for his superb instruction, which amazingly combined uncompromising discipline with affectionate kindness. It was not an easy time; there were moments of struggle, frustration, failure, shame, and pain. But I cannot remember a more perfect happiness or greater perceptual acuity than what I experienced through Roshi's guidance.

This experience of Zen practice reinforced my faith that despite the problems and risks of somatic consciousness, its disciplined cultivation (in the proper forms, foci, and contexts) can prove an invaluable tool for pursuing a philosophical life of self-discovery and self-improvement that also takes one beyond the self. I first acquired this conviction through my four-year training and subsequent professional work in the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education and therapy and through some earlier instruction in the Alexander Technique. These body-mind disciplines taught me other important lessons: that philosophical understanding of body consciousness can be enhanced through practical training in disciplines of reflective somaesthetic awareness; that our somatic consciousness is typically flawed in ways that systematically hamper our performance of habitual actions that should be easy to perform effectively but yet prove difficult, awkward, or painful; and that somaesthetic insight can provide us with creative strategies to overcome such faulty habits and other disorders involving somatic, psychological, and behavioral problems. Body consciousness is therefore not, as many have complained, something whose cultivation speaks only to the young, strong, and beautiful. Though aging and infirmity bring a disconcerting somatic consciousness we are tempted to shun, the older and weaker we get, the more we need to think through our bodies to improve our self-use and

performance for the effective pursuit of our daily activities and the goals we strive to realize. I know this not only from my Feldenkrais experience in caring for others but also from my personal experience of aging.

***

I am grateful not only to my teachers in somatic disciplines of mindfulness but also to the many scholars who have helped refine, develop, and extend the field of somaesthetics through critical analysis and exploratory interpretations, in fields ranging from dance and performance art to feminism, drug education, sports, and spirituality. Confining myself to a sample of published English texts, I wish in particular to acknowledge the discussions of Jerold J. Abrams, Peter Arnold, Deanne Bogdan, Jon Borowicz, Liora Bressler, David Granger, Gustavo Guerra, Casey Haskins, Kathleen Higgins, Robert Innis, Martin Jay, James Scott Johnson, Thomas Leddy, Barbara Montero, Eric Mullis, Richard Rorty, Simo Säätelä, Shannon Sullivan, Ken Tupper, Bryan Turner, and Krystyna Wilkoszewska. I also acknowledge my debt to the talented philosophers whose work in translating my texts on somaesthetics often prompted me to refine and rethink my views: Jean-Pierre Cometti, Peng Feng, Wojciech Małecki, Fuminori Akiba, Nicolas Vieillescazes, Heidi Salaverria, Robin Celikates, Alina Mitek, József Kollár, Satoshi Higuchi, Emil Visnovsky, Ana-Maria Pascal, Jinyup Kim, K.-M. Kim, and Barbara Formis.

In testing out the book's ideas in preliminary papers, I was fortunate to receive helpful comments from too many colleagues to mention here. But I am happy to acknowledge those of Roger Ames, Takao Aoki, Richard Bernstein, Gernot Böhme, Peg Brand, Judith Butler, Taylor Carman, Vincent Colapietro, Arthur Danto, Mary Devereaux, Pradeep Dhillon, George Downing, Shaun Gallagher, Charlene Haddock-Seigfried, Mark Hansen, Cressida Heyes, Yvan Joly, Tsunemichi Kambayashi, Hans-Peter Krüger, Morten Kyndrup, José Medina, Christoph Menke, James Miller, Alexander Nehamas, Ryosuke Ohashi, James Pawelski, Naoko Saito, Manabu Sato, Stefan Snaevarr, Scott Stroud, John Stuhr, and Wolfgang Welsch. I am thankful that Chuck Dyke and Jerold J. Abrams read an early draft of this book and offered very valuable comments, as did two readers for Cambridge University Press (who were later identified to me as Robert Innis and Shannon Sullivan). Marla Bradford was helpful in preparing the bibliography, Giovanna Lecaros assisted with proofreading, and Wojciech Małecki very generously offered to work on the index.

Some of the book's arguments have already been rehearsed in articles published in *The Monist*, *Hypatia*, *The Philosophical Forum*, *The Cambridge*

Companion to Merleau-Ponty, and *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and the Political* (Cornell University Press). I am grateful for the opportunity to use some of this material, which has been significantly revised and expanded, to help shape a much more developed, sustained, and unified book-length study. It is a privilege to have Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press as my editor, and I thank her for thoughtful advice and encouraging support. My wife Erica Ando and our daughter Talia Emi have continuously inspired my work through graceful intelligence in action and cheerful beauty in repose. This book could not have been written without them.

Richard Shusterman
Boca Raton, May 2007