Philosopher wants more folks to mind their bodies

The trouble with intellectuals is that they live from the neck up. It's all words, words, words, blah, blah, blah. They're disconnected from their bodies, and it shows. In the physics department, they tend to look like Woody Allen. So you can imagine how pleasantly surprised I was when I met Richard Shusterman the other day.

He is chairman of Temple's philosophy department, has a Ph.D. from Oxford, and has written books with titles such as Pragmatist Aesthetics and Practicing Philosophy. In other words, he's a bona fide brainiac and egghead.

On the plus side, he was a soldier in the Israeli army. He runs five miles a day, and at one point he was so enraptured by the discipline of bodybuilding, he had to buy a new toedoo to accommodate his more massive, manly chest.

But not only does he know his way around a barbell, he is trying to encourage his fellow philosophers to take day trips from Mount Olympus and mix with the plebes. His aim is to make philosophy more relevant to our everyday lives by demonstrating that it is not just about words and intellectual dallying. It is also about ideas and wisdom that can help us with such mundane matters as how to understand, use and enjoy our bodies.

Back in the good old days (anywhere from about 500 B.C. to the birth of Jacques Derrida), "People studied philosophy not to get a degree but to live better," says Shusterman. In other words, the main concern of philosophy was "the art of living."

"Socrates wrote no books," says Shusterman, "but he inspired by his way of life."

Your local bookstore has aisles and aisles of self-help books, says Shusterman, because latter-day philosophers have ceded that turf to middlebrow sages like Robert Bly and Wayne Dyer. Modern philosophy has become so "textualized," so

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Reuniting philosophy and body

ART CAREY (from C) preoccupied with language and propositions, that it's not only impossibly abstract and meaningless (for normal boxes like you and me) but also has no application to anything in the real world.

"Philosophy has forgotten that the body is a vehicle for the art of living," says Shusterman.

It is high time to fix that. "We may one day improve the lot of humanity, in the meantime, says Shusterman, "thinking seriously about the body is useful."

As a philosophical pragmatist, Shusterman believes in usefulness. He knows that taking care of his body is good and right because it works, because it makes him feel and think better. "I don't fall asleep at lectures," he explains.

Shusterman also believes in practicing what he preaches, in translating ideas into action, which is why he is offering a noncredit course, beginning Friday at Temple University Center City, titled "Minding the Body." In four sessions over four weeks, it will cover such topics as body and identity; diet and exercise; control and pleasure; and body harmony. Among the compelling philosophical questions he will be tackling:

• Is the body useful or a waste?
• Is it good to be healthy?
• Is it good to be fit?
• Is it good to execute good intentions?

The bottom line: "A certain degree of bodily prowess and vigor," says Shusterman, "is essential for a virtuous person to perform virtuous actions."

Even those who rejected the body as earthly and profane, dirty and base, such as early Christian ascetics, still depended on it. It was by chastening the flesh through fasting, wearing hair shirts and wandering in the wilderness that they sought to enhance their spirituality.

"Shusterman: "They needed the body as a battleground for the victory of the spirit."

For More Information

Richard Shusterman can be reached at 215-204-8296. The four-week "Minding the Body" course is $100.

It's the first part of a series that includes two other four-week courses, "Fits of Fashion" and "Eat, Drink & Think Merry," taught by others.