

TULLY RECTOR AND JOHN BOVA
**IN CONVERSATION WITH
RICHARD SHUSTERMAN**



Tully Rector: Much of your work focuses on the idea of self-fashioning, the creation and shaping of oneself, as *askesis*. What constitutes *askesis* for you?

Richard Shusterman: It's a very interesting term, *askesis*. It's from the Greek of course and the verb was originally used in poetry not to mean mere "discipline", but actually to mean "creating something artful" or "producing something artistically", or even a "disguise" or "adornment". That's in Homer and Aeschylus, but now we all know *askesis* in the sense of "discipline", like in athletics, for example. That's what the early prose usage was—connoting some sort of rigorous training.

TR: Being an ascetic.

RS: Yes, by practicing *askesis*.

TR: Renunciation?

RS: Well, that's something that Christian asceticism really emphasized later on, with less attention to the artistic/adornment/make-up aspect. But the basic ascetic idea of training or discipline doesn't have, as its primary meaning,



the ideal of renunciation or denial. Usually athletes love to do what they do, they enjoy the training that they do.

TR: But they have to sacrifice engaging in other forms of life to perfect that, to achieve excellence.

RS: Well, that's true, but as long as you don't go to extremes, you know, you can manage your life with discipline but without self-flagellating, repressive denial. I think the idea of *askesis* as something primarily negative, as essentially denial, came to predominate in Christianity, where it also, however, often finds positive expression. Kant has a short essay on education, where he talks about discipline as being *only* negative, as being the inhibition of disruptive behaviour, but I think *askesis* is something that is basically very positive: training, developing a skill, a craft, a character. I mean, of course inhibition is basic to all action in a physiological sense, but I think people have overemphasized the repressive denial in *askesis* and forgotten the positive aspects. The other mistake people make is in contrasting the aesthetic and the ascetic. Pierre Hadot does that. He criticizes Foucault for talking about the philosophical life as aesthetic—Hadot says no, it's an ascetic, disciplined life. But in my point of view there's no inherent contradiction at all. Confucius makes that pretty clear in the *Analects*. He praises his favourite student, Yan Hui, for being able to derive pleasure from the most humble things that his conditions of material hardship provided him. And when you go back to the American idea of the "simple life" in Thoreau, you find a similar celebration of the basic pleasures and beauty of plain living.

TR: Yeah, but in Confucian thought there is also the necessity of sacrifice. Built into the logic of valuation is the idea that something significant must be, you know, *given up* for a project to have value. You don't get value for free. It's a different sense of sacrifice from the one you were talking about, from repression

or denial.

RS: In that tradition *askesis* takes the form of ritualizing your behaviour, and this is both aestheticizing and asceticizing. In ritual you control your manner of expression, your behaviour, so it is not a repression of movement but a stylization of movement: it is aesthetic. There are moral implications in that, including the goal of harmonizing your conduct with the situation and with others to create a more aesthetic social context. In Hsun-Tzu, following Confucius, music and ritual are very important ethically, because they refine your actions and your emotions --emotion, action, and thought all being elements of one composite life. In the Asian tradition I don't think the aesthetic and the ascetic are divided, in the Greek tradition I don't think they're divided, and my philosophical project is to escape a sort of theological Cartesianism still dominating modernity and postmodernity that divides the body from the mind, that makes the ascetic a negative denial of life rather than a way of stylizing your conduct, of affirming life. I have a much more positive understanding of *askesis* — as an artful, deliberate, desiring form of self-development.

TR: So when you talk about an aestheticized care of the self, that's part of advocating philosophy's return to the questions of "what is the good life?", "how do we approach the question of the good life?", "how do we integrate our conclusions into lived experience?": you do give an aesthetic answer, or you look to aesthetics to provide a model for the kind of answers we want. Do you mean that we should think about the project of self-creation as basically resulting in something, call it an ego or a persona or a soul or whatever, that is more like a work of art than anything else? Or do you mean that the aestheticization of the self involves more of a ritualized or stylized approach to all of our activities, whatever they might be and however they might have issued from independent conclusions, ethical or political conclusions, non-aesthetic conclusions? Sorry, that's sort of a

roundabout question.

RS: When I advocate an aesthetic model of philosophy's way of creating a self, I recognize that there are other models out there. The main one that most people are drawn to is a therapy model. It's about healing yourself, where the philosopher is a physician who heals the soul. Pierre Hadot developed that ancient line. Martha Nussbaum sort of went that way.

TR: Well, it comes out of Wittgenstein.

RS: Yeah, but I think Wittgenstein has both models in his writings, and with him it's more a matter of insight and epigram than of extensive argumentation. I recognize the value of both models and don't think they're inconsistent. But the therapy model is an illness model—it has negativity built into it. Philosophy's goal is to treat problems and heal diseases of the mind. I want to highlight a more positive aim than removing disease, the goal of a life of beauty, and joy in the creation and sharing of beauty.

TR: While the dominant model sort of presumes at the outset that there's something originally wrong with us. Maybe that's a hangover from Christianity.

RS: The model of therapy, of course predates the Christian era. It is already very prominent in Plato, who employs the analogy of the philosopher as the physician of the soul. Before the Christian burden of original sin, we were burdened with physical mortality as a limitation of something "wrong with us" that philosophical theories of the soul's immortality aimed to rectify. The philosopher as healer of the immortal soul, Plato argued, thus surpassed the physician of the mortal body. But Plato also, in *The Symposium*, depicts the philosopher's life as

concentrated on the quest for beauty. That's where philosophy is linked with *eros*. The philosopher is in this continuing quest for greater beauty that culminates in a giving-birth to beauty, after experiencing the form of beauty, and I find that a more positive orientation. We're striving to increase the production of the beautiful in the world and our appreciation of it, rather than just healing ourselves.

TR: But for Plato wasn't the Beautiful an intermediate stage on an ascent to the Good? The Good was comprehensive of the beautiful, but it wasn't just the same thing.

RS: There was a basic, underlying identification of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. And in *The Symposium*, Beauty is the highest vision that the philosopher sees. The highest achievement and most blissful life was to give birth to Beauty. That is the model of philosophical practice that speaks to me most, and how I see that model is not narrowly focussed on making your life a work of art in the elite artworld sense of work of art. I don't think a beautiful life has to be a museum-piece; I don't think it has to be entirely idiosyncratic or uniquely original, so beyond the norm, so revolutionary that it is monstrous and unable to fit into normal social worlds. There are other ways, less dominated by modernist ideas of genius, for thinking about artworks and understanding our lives as works of art.

TR: I have a question about this idea in general, about thinking of the created self as a work of art. However you define it.

RS: Go ahead.

TR: Okay, it seems like an artwork has its power in its differences from its creator, and in its difference from its audience. In the subtle transactions that go on between the work of art and its perceiver and the space between what

the creator knows, understands, and intends in his creative act and what the work actually ends up achieving on its own—those differences make the achievement possible. That's why we see the artwork's autonomy, its strangeness or otherness, as really crucial. So when we create a self using the model of a work of art, we necessarily create all these sort of uncontrolled transactional differences between the self and the agency that shapes it, and the world in which it lives, namely the world of other people. These hidden differences are a source of real despair for people: the autonomy or strangeness of the work becomes, maybe, the self-alienation of the person, because they can't even access their own otherness. At least it threatens to become like that. As opposed to say a more natural or spontaneous idea of selfhood, one that isn't crafted or created or designed to be looked at, you know, reified in that aesthetic way.

RS: I see what you mean but I guess I'd have to start by saying that that autonomous, Aristotelian vision of an artwork is something that I have an incomplete acceptance of. Aristotle makes a sharp distinction between *poesis* and *praxis*. Art is *poesis* (a making): the work is totally different from the artist who creates it and it doesn't affect the artist's being. In *praxis* or ethics, the act comes from the person's character and affects the person's character. I don't think that distinction fully works. Great artists not only put themselves fully into their artwork, they are affected by their work. There is a lot more transaction between one's artistic acts and oneself than impersonal theories of art (from Aristotle to T.S. Eliot) acknowledge. And there are two kinds of reification. The reification you're talking about is when an object that someone makes is then taken for the self that the person is. The other reification is when it's assumed that there is one essential permanent self of the artist who is making these things. In contrast, my view is that the self is an ongoing, malleable transactional field that is somehow reshaped by what it does and what it makes and what it experiences. This helps me address a question I'm frequently asked about the aesthetic model of philosophy, of making

your life more beautiful and more meaningful and more attractive. Doesn't this mean forsaking your self because you are living essentially for others, by how you're going to look as an artwork judged by others? But here it's crucial to realize that in such project of critical self-cultivation, one's own next self is always going to be the significant, judging other. Since one is always changing, one always examines oneself from the point of view of a next self. We will always be performing for that next self through which we're going to be examining ourselves. Besides, the essentially social shaping of the self that is emphasized in many Western thinkers as well as in Asian traditions means that one's self is always some synthesis of the voices of others. Your own definition of who you are is one given in terms of the expectations of your parents, peers, and teachers, even in your act of rebelling against them. The voices you think with are always a synthesis of the internalized voices of others, even if it's your own synthesis. So the criticism that an aesthetically ordered self is one that is inauthentic because concern for attractiveness implies living only for others doesn't take into account the way our self-concepts and personal aesthetic tastes are always filtered through other people. The field is too fluid and transactional for me to accept a sort of essential, static self that's independent from those relationships and contains its own entirely intrinsic and autonomous properties.

John Bova: There seems, in what you were just describing, a kind of celebration of the subject as identified with the movement of reflection, as always in this position of being both a self and an other for itself, an "other" in a way that can easily be extended to its relationships with others. Without denying the centrality of that phenomenon, I want to ask about its limit. By "limit" I mean, for example, what separates Epicurus from Heidegger? It's this concern with the limit. In the emotional subject, is there a place where this play of reflection collapses, where it is not possible to take this line of difference or distance from ourselves and consider ourselves as sort of objects of self-cultivation? If there

were, it wouldn't challenge the centrality of your kind of reflection, but it might (and I think it does for Heidegger) fundamentally transform it. The subject encounters and recognizes the limit, bites down on it: that's the passage into authenticity for Heidegger. Being-towards-death.

RS: Yes, I think that the limit is very important. You can't get total transparency of self, especially with the body and its fleeting nameless affects that influence our consciousness. Those feelings that are shaping the focus of consciousness at a particular moment escape attentive consciousness in the moment. They can't be part of the object of consciousness, part of the figure, because they're the background against which the figure emerges. This is one reason philosophers have denigrated the body. Since philosophers had this cognitive ideal of transparency to consciousness, and since the body was hidden, interior, and you can't scope its innards mentally, it represented a tremendous limit to one's ability to know oneself, and so it was excluded from the essential self that philosophy should care for or work on. I disagree with the premise and ideal of total transparency, and I would insist that the idea of a reflective life demands a cognizance of the limits of reflection. In my work on somaesthetics, I emphasize the value of somatic experience and practical bodily intelligence that are unreflective. There are lots of things that philosophy can learn from the body. One of them is the value of knowledge that is not self-reflective, knowledge that is habitual and practical and functional, that we can learn and perform—and this goes back to *askesis*—through simply the discipline or training of living. Action precedes our knowing in the speculative way, and we come to know by practice. This primacy of action is basic to Pragmatism. So I'm a big believer in the limits of reflection and what the body can teach us about intentionality and knowledge that isn't driven by hyper-self-consciousness. But I'm also sceptical of the Romantic idolizing of the non-reflective body that you find in Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche, where you should just accept the primordial mystery of the body and marvel at its immediate powers

rather than realizing that somatic reflection can often improve our bodily skills and thus our self-use, since every way we use ourselves involves use of the body. Somatic reflection can show how bodily sensations color, in often unexamined ways, the way we think and respond, for instance how unrecognized visceral reactions generate ethnic and racial distrust or tension. Somatic consciousness and bodily discipline help focus our awareness on gesture, on body-language, on all the subtle ways we communicate with each other and respond and interact, and ultimately how we discover ourselves, like I said before, through this interaction.

TR: Bodily experience, learning to think from the body, is really important in your work. But what about other, you know, matrices of thought and practice. Like religion. You lived in Israel for many years. You haven't written much about religion, but I'd think that living in Israel would force the question at some point.

RS: It has. Like many secular Israelis I have both an appreciation of and a quarrel with Israel's religious expression. I am not a practicing Jew but don't regard myself as anti-religious in principle. I prefer not to define the essence of religion in theological terms. If you focus on the theological idea of God, the Lord, our Father, you just really miss what I think is most important: the sense of the sacred, transcendence, spirituality. In this sense, you can't stamp out religion. There will always be a need for transcendence, you can't get away from it really; it almost seems built into the rhythm of life, of going on, going beyond. William James, so astute in understanding religion's power, explains part of the power of theological faith. In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life", he talks about the idea of God as an "infinite demander", you know, something that can make infinite claims on us that transcend ordinary worldly claims and matters of convenience, something that has transcendent power.

TR: Like the "Absolute Other" in Levinas?

RS: In some way. But James's point is that such an infinite, powerful demander has incredible pragmatic power to inspire people to make the highest sacrifices, to devote themselves to striving for more than a higher salary, a nicer vacation, a pat on the back for being bright or moral or civic minded. But such absolute faith in the infinite demander also has negative dimensions. You see it in the victory of fanaticism over liberal regimes in the Middle East, and maybe in the last election here. It's scary.

TR: It seems like the twin to the pursuit of wealth to the whole appetitive machine in America. I mean, it's true of nuclear weapons and it's true of money: that nobody knows the meaning of "enough". And the notion of an infinite demander, when not thought in specific kinds of ways, can simply be the pseudo-moral twin to that.

RS: And you see it in art and the art of living. Faithful to the modern theology of high art (where art is seen as replacing religion as our culture's new locus of spirituality), artists assume they have to go for the infinite. In my idea of *askesis* is the reminder that one doesn't need to be a genius of infinity to lead an aesthetic life; you can do it by being a good Dad, a good member of the community, a good teacher. And the beautiful harmonies you embody can be rewarding to yourself and also appreciated, even posthumously remembered by others. This is what Kundera calls "minor immortality". In my view, there's nothing wrong with that. We don't need to be godly in our perfectionism to have lived a good life. But there is so much power in the idea of infinite demander (God or genius), it is always going to drive people to the extreme and get the most out of them. Whereas the liberal model...it's harder to get people to risk their lives. But, of course, secular, liberal people in Israel did and do risk their lives. I was an intelligence officer in the

Israeli Army from 1973-1976, and most of the heroes I knew were secular and liberal in outlook.

TR: And look what's happened there.

RS: Perhaps patriotism can constitute an infinite demander. Many Israelis fought and died for the ideal of a just, civil society, an ethnically Jewish but secular state. But the zealots of patriotism and religion seem increasingly strong, despite their setback in the evacuation of the Gaza settlements. Religion seems to bring out zealotry, especially when it comes to fighting for something. It raises a big philosophical/political question: is there anything you can substitute for that infinite ideological demander that'll have comparable inspirational power, and yet not be so close-minded and absolutist and inflexible?

TR: Maybe it's not a question of substitution, but of transforming the relationship. Thinking of the religious obligation differently. The idea...okay, there's a particular idea of this infinite demander that is supported by, in the case of pathological zealotry, what might almost be an addiction-structure. Where a believer thinks he needs to keep consuming or grabbing parts of the world for God, in order to, you know, make more of God in the world. You see this in the settler movement in Israel. Their idea of religious obligation is completely backwards. So maybe it's not that we need to always substitute the idea of tolerance for the idea of God, but...I don't know, maybe transform the coordinates of belief?

JB: I'm not sure that's true. There seems to be the deepest possible discontinuity between a perfectionism where the point that we project is kept open, and one where that point is actually filled by a perfect being. And when we look at either totalitarian societies or fundamentalist societies, there isn't a sort of vital interest in the project of self-cultivation because this point is thought of as

able to be occupied, occupied by a *potestas* instead of a *potentia*. There's a sort of anthropological observation that can be made: if we want to cultivate...if we want a society where moral and aesthetic perfectionism revitalized, then part of what we want is to do critical work on the idea that shuts down the relation to the open good, namely the idea of a perfect being.

RS: I think you're right. And I think the perfect being is only one of these one-way streets. There are others: the one perfect life, the one perfect country, the one perfect society, or the one perfect way of being Jewish, or being Catholic. I think a lot of the problems with Israeli politics is through an inflexibly one-sided view of Jewish self-realization in terms of Zionism and an overly literal understanding of Zionism as a return to Zion, to Jerusalem, to the Holy Land, coupled with the idea that once you're in Israel, you still have keep the Zionist project going forward and that progress is measured in terms of occupying more land? The injunction to return to the land of Israel is displaced into the idea of controlling more of it, in geopolitical terms. So you need to have all of Jerusalem or all of the West Bank (because that's where the Patriarchs are buried); you have to control every area where there was some kind of biblical history. When you hear the testimony of the settlers in the occupied territories, a key motivation -- apart from religious faith and economic benefits -- is the patriotic idea of continuing the pioneer spirit, because this is a socially valorized form of self-perfection.

TR: Where fidelity to the idea requires turning the idea into, like, *geography*, into some real 3-D place that you can "perfect".

RS: The only way they can think of realizing this idea of the pioneer spirit is to go into hostile territory and claim it for Zionism.

TR: As opposed to pioneering thought, developing ideas.

RS: But you can honor the pioneering spirit not just in thought, but by going to other places as well, run-down communities. There's plenty of difficult wilderness to settle in Israel without going beyond its old 1966 borders. I went to teach in the new university of the Negev desert after getting my D.Phil. at Oxford, because of my attraction to the romance of pioneering in the desert. There was also the pioneering aspect of working with new communities and student populations that were socio-economically and culturally challenged compared to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, where students were largely upper middle-class or higher. When I moved to the States in 1986, I was attracted to Temple University in Philadelphia because of its mission as an inexpensive public university in a funky inner city environment (though the honour of filling in for Monroe Beardsley and joining the department that housed the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* was also an attraction). That overriding sense of social mission is sadly gone from Temple, which has thoroughly succumbed to the ascendant corporate spirit of academia and is primarily concerned with climbing up from its mediocre place in university rankings and boosting its financial capital -- both numerical measures of achievement. Nobody cares much in academia (or elsewhere) about unquantifiable public-service kinds of things that indefinably improve the quality of life. I hope this changes, but I don't see it happening.