

BOOK REVIEWS

BODY CONSCIOUSNESS: A PHILOSOPHY OF MINDFULNESS AND SOMAESTHETICS, by Richard Shusterman. Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 239 pages. ISBN: 978-0-521-67587-1. £14.99; \$24.99.

Richard Shusterman gets right to the heart of things in his excellent new book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Two of the most important of all questions are addressed in particular: what is the relation of body and mind? And what is the goal of philosophy?

With regard to the first question, the ancients thought that the body gets in the way of the mind; among Shusterman's targets are those moderns, like Merleau-Ponty, who think the mind gets in the way of the body. With regard to the second question, Shusterman recalls us to the ancient conception of philosophy as the call to live a good life. What unites the two is Shusterman's call to examine practices that develop a reflective body consciousness as a means of improving one's life in philosophically relevant ways: knowing yourself and knowing the world. What's absolutely crucial, and is thus something Shusterman repeats several times, is that knowing your body entails knowing its relation to the world: you simply cannot feel your body by itself; at the minimum, even with your eyes closed in a quiet place, you will feel its contact with the earth, feel its exchange of air and heat.

Shusterman calls his philosophical approach "somaesthetics," which he glosses as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (1). Somaesthetics has three registers: Analytic somaesthetics is the study of "bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of the world" (23). Shusterman notes that these studies can be genealogical, as practiced by Foucault, and they can also engage the biological and cognitive sciences (23); one of the real strengths of Shusterman's book is his own engagement with the work of Antonio Damasio, Shaun Gallagher, Gerald Edelman, Benjamin Libet and others in these fields. The second register of somaesthetics is pragmatic somaesthetics, which "has a normative, prescriptive character by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement" (23-4). Finally, we find practical somaesthetics, which is the real-life engagement in such somatic practices.

For the most part, Shusterman works from a pragmatic-phenomenological perspective. The pragmatism is labeled as such: "the pragmatism I advocate puts experience at the heart of philosophy and celebrates the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience" (xii), while the phenomenological language is clear enough: "the body expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in the world" (3). It's this phenomenologically revealed ambiguity that sets up the difficulty of reflective body consciousness, for it seems that active subjectivity can never be grasped as such by an objectifying consciousness. The classic solution is, of course, to posit a pre-reflective, non-objectifying, self-consciousness that accompanies active subjectivity. What role can there be then for a reflective body consciousness? Can it be anything

other than an alienating, reifying, assault on the active corporeal subject, that hard-fought victory of phenomenology? The brief answer from Shusterman's point of view is that such arguments neglect a dynamic and pragmatic self-relation. That is, reflective body consciousness is not a series of reifications, but can be part of a project of improving one's corporeal subjectivity by bringing bad habits to the surface and reformulating them. That one's everyday corporeal subjectivity is for the most part pre-reflective does not mean that it cannot be critically examined and made the object of concentrated work.

The book has six chapters, each devoted to a major twentieth-century philosopher: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, Wittgenstein, James, and Dewey. Through his examination of each philosopher Shusterman is able to bring out his own philosophy by contrast.

After a brief Introduction, we begin with the Foucault chapter, which lays out the three registers of somaesthetics, and then poses the critical question: why did Foucault's pragmatic and practical somaesthetics focus on extreme body practices? Eschewing the vulgar psychoanalysis of some accounts, Shusterman looks at Foucault's extreme practices in relation to "anhedonia," the difficulty in feeling pleasure. Well-attested in Foucault's remarks about himself, such anhedonia is seen by Shusterman in terms of a cultural overload: the need for ever more extreme stimulation to overcome a dulled sensibility. What about quieter pleasures? This is not a matter of taste: "de gustibus . . ." has earned its place as much more than a cliché. Rather, Shusterman lays out "the crucial issue: conceived as an art of living, philosophy should attend more closely to cultivating the sentient body through which we live . . . Foucault errs in presuming that such [reflective body] consciousness is best heightened through maximized intensity of stimulation, whose violence ultimately will only dull our sensibility and deaden our pleasure" (48).

With Merleau-Ponty, Shusterman asks why the emphasis on the silent body? Can't periodic reflection/attention to somatic feelings play a role? Of course we have to acknowledge Merleau-Ponty's great breakthrough in thematizing corporeal subjectivity. But reflective body consciousness is not always a misplaced intellectualism trapping us in an objectifying stance that misses the lived body. Shusterman insists. Rather, it can help us critically examine the sedimented "habit-body" that underlies our momentary spontaneity (62). Not all pre-reflective body subjectivity patterns deserve to continue functioning, and bringing them to consciousness as part of a meliorative practical somaesthetic program can help us live better lives. The basic problem in Shusterman's view is Merleau-Ponty's "polarization of 'lived experience' versus abstract 'representation'"; this "neglects the deployment of a fruitful third option . . . 'lived somaesthetic reflection,' that is, concrete but representational and reflective body consciousness" (63).

It's here in the Merleau-Ponty chapter that Shusterman reveals his preference for a pragmatist approach to a purely phenomenological one. "Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a fixed, universal phenomenological ontology based on primordial perception" is contrasted with the "concern with individual differences and contingencies, with future-looking change and reconstruction" of pragmatism (66).

With the invocation of different forms of embodiment, we can move to Shusterman's chapter on Beauvoir. While appropriately lauding Beauvoir's great achievements in analytic somaesthetics – very few can compare with her in this field, after all – Shusterman focuses on her pragmatic somaesthetics, that is, on what she advises women to do with their bodies. In essence, Shusterman will set out to prove that practical engagement in body practices for women need not simply be representational, nor be

only a distraction from politics. In other words, Shusterman feels that Beauvoir too often underplays the experiential aspect of body practice: improving one's strength, flexibility, balance, and so on does not simply and solely play into the patriarchal focus on the outward appearance of women. It does not simply make you an object, but makes you a more competent and confident subject. Similarly, body work need not only be a personal lifestyle distraction from politics, but can enter into an empowering feedback relation with political action. Crudely put, marching in a demonstration is physical work, and the more fit you are, the better marcher you can be. In other words, individual strength and confidence supports and is supported by collective power and solidarity (99). Of course the issue is much more sophisticated than this review can relay – the relation of class privilege to somaesthetic work, for instance, needs careful attention – but sometimes simple truths put crudely have a place in philosophy.

In the Wittgenstein chapter Shusterman touches on what we can call a "political physiology," that is, the analysis of the visceral, emotional reactions to different forms of embodiment. Tackling head on the constitution of the Jews as a "cancer" or "tumor" on the European body politic, Shusterman here brings us to the core of moral philosophy: can one rationally argue with a panicked or disgusted person? I'm reminded of Klaus Theweleit's mocking of the Frankfurt School in his *Male Fantasies*, in which a hapless Critical Theory advocate tries to discuss the fallacy of naturalization with his proto-Nazi interlocutor: "can't you see, Colonel, that you've mixed categories in calling the Communists a flood?" We can all anticipate the response: "Oh my God you're right, we're all going to be drowned!" It seems to me that Shusterman is exactly right here: only a reconstitution of corporeal reactions, a re-working via a practical somaesthetics, can be effective here. That the specter of *Clockwork Orange*-like reprogramming cannot be gainsaid only points to the delicacy of the issue.

With James and Dewey, Shusterman displays his mastery of the pragmatist tradition. As rich as the analyses are, and as important as the phenomenology-pragmatism relation is to the future of philosophy, I hope the readers of this review will forgive me for not entering the details of Shusterman's argument. I hope it is clear by now that *Body Consciousness* is an important book deserving of a wide readership and careful attention. Should it receive both I am confident it will be praised by others as much as I praise it here.

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HEIDEGGER'S BEING AND TIME, William Large, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, pp 148, ISBN 978 0 7486 2734 9

What are we to expect from a general introduction to a key philosophical text, particularly one that is aimed at an audience new to philosophy? Certainly not one that is so general in its outline it fails to engage critically with the chief concepts to be found in the text. Nor would we expect to find ourselves sinking under the weight of an overwrought exegesis of the technical minutiae on offer. If we add to this the fact that the text in question is one of the most difficult that the tradition has to offer (at least in its English translation), then clarity and concision in explication, alongside a certain patience towards the reader, would seem to be the order of the day. Thankfully, William Large's *Heidegger's Being and Time* has these qualities and more.

As a commentary – one of a series being published by Edinburgh UP – *Heidegger's Being and Time* sets itself a fourfold task, a general summary of the text, a guide to its