



Review - Body Consciousness

A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics

by Richard Shusterman

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Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. -- Henry David Thoreau, Walden, as quoted by Shusterman (p. 47)

Which foot do you use when taking your first step in walking; which of your legs bears the most weight in standing; on which buttock do you more heavily rest in sitting...?" (p. 198)

If *Body Consciousness* may be initially hard going to the non-philosopher, it's worth the effort, if only for how successfully it communicates the message that philosophy can be a practical, hands-on, in-the-world activity with lessons for all of us. For philosophers, especially those of an embodied or enactive mindset, it makes what I see as three bold claims: first, that philosophers need to be actively vigilant to ensure that philosophy is itself an embodied and situated endeavor, and not just one that talks a lot about embodiment and situatedness. "Concerned not with saying but with *doing*, this practical dimension is the most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the discursive *logos* typically ends in textualizing the body." (p. 29)

Second is that philosophers should practice their philosophy not just through their words but also through their (own) bodies. Shusterman writes from his experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner.

Third, and most radically, he seems inclined to deny any ultimate usefulness to the mind-body distinction. Here, I think he faces the hardest task. While I agree on the dangers of substance dualism, I'm not convinced that the mind-body dichotomy can be so easily dismissed. Fiction it may be, but it may be a conceptually *necessary* fiction, inherent in the very structure of conceptual thinking. William James, I suspect, would be inclined to agree.

Shusterman's approach to embodied philosophy he terms somaesthetics. "Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical meliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning." (p. 19) *Soma* refers to the lived body, more "than a mere physical corpus of flesh and bones." (p. vii), the body that is simultaneously object and subject. *Aesthetics* is the mindful attention and appreciation.

The current fashion, in certain circles of cognitive science and philosophy of mind, is to talk up the importance of embodiment and enshrine it in lots of well-considered theories without grasping the irony of pursuing what is, on the surface at least, a mainly cerebral activity. The increasing interest in robotics as a tool for advancing theory is one antidote to this. But if Shusterman is right, then if researchers are not careful, entrenched bad habits of their discipline -- just like the entrenched bodily habits that Matthias Alexander so effectively addressed through his Alexander Technique -- will push research inevitably back toward where it has unfruitfully gone before.

Alexander's, and Shusterman's, antidote to unreflective bad habits is to make them fully conscious and intentional -- not as a permanent condition (imagine for example how impossibly tedious life would be if *every* habitual action from breathing to blinking to swallowing had to be consciously stepped through!) but long enough for the habits to be modified. Once modified, they can be left to fade again into the unreflective background.

Body Consciousness is structured into six chapters, each presenting the somaesthetic insights and philosophical shortcomings of a different philosopher. Two -- Ludwig Wittgenstein and William James -- I'd have said I knew fairly well already. Another two -- Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michael Foucault -- I had at least passing acquaintance with. The last two -- Simone de Beauvoir and particularly John Dewey -- were new introductions. Although Shusterman often seems to wander around his topic, distracted by one or another tangent, nonetheless he succeeds in taking even the people one thought one knew well and giving them both a fresh philosophical accounting and a real sense of being flesh-and-blood human beings.

So we meet Foucault, the champion of violently sadomasochistic homosexual sex as means to transcendental bodily awareness -- something, Shusterman drily

notes, that cannot be appropriate for everyone! Wittgenstein's ideas are shaped by his own, largely repressed, homosexuality. Beauvoir is inspired but at the same time limited by her relationship with Jean Paul Sartre. James is the hypochondriac, incessantly restless, driven to absurd limits of physical exertion and unable to see any usefulness to quiet somaesthetic introspection. Initially a radical idealist (for whom the world *is* the mind), Dewey's ideas are radically transformed by James and Alexander, and yet, while he is able to take a critical view of the first -- notably James' peculiar insistence that the will is exclusively mental and prior to any involvement of the body -- he is naively uncritical of the latter.

But the most fascinating discussion, I find, is reserved for Merleau-Ponty: if we get less a feel for the person, we get quite a neat, almost concise, account of the philosophy, in particular its strong resistance to any form of representationalism. "Merleau-Ponty's arguments are... devoted to showing that the representational explanations offered by science and philosophy are neither necessary nor accurate accounts of how we perceive, act, and express ourselves in normal everyday behavior...". (p. 58) So far, so good. Further, "Merleau-Ponty rightly maintains that reflective consciousness and somatic representations are not only unnecessary but also ineffective for explaining our ordinary perception and behavior, which are usually unreflective." (p. 67) Representational descriptions are routinely employed by cognitivist accounts that explicitly or implicitly support mind-body dualism.

Merleau-Ponty's mistake, Shusterman believes -- and I believe this is a mistake made by many philosophers in the embodied and enactive traditions -- is to deny the usefulness or necessity of representations or representational language altogether. "The claim that we can do something effectively *without* explicit or representational consciousness does not imply that we cannot also do it *with* such consciousness and that such consciousness cannot improve our performance." (p. 68) ...May, in fact, be critical to being able to do so.

Non-reflective, non-representational (in the sense of *A* using *B* to represent *C* to *D*) cognition may take us a long way, but there are, arguably, places it cannot take us, particularly when it comes to reforming our thinking. By representing something, say a belief or a behavior, the agent makes it explicit; by making it explicit, it becomes re-programmable. Too much representation, and the agent has a hopelessly fragmented, inaccurate view of the world. Too little, and the agent is a slave to bad habits. Representation and reflection, it would seem, go hand in hand.

Or consider language, which is paradigmatically representational. Language is often focused on for its social role, but of course it plays a role as well in our private mental lives. "Linguistic tags or descriptions... can make a very vague feeling less difficult to discriminate by tying that feeling to words, which are much more easily differentiated." (p. 164)

The perfectly understandable complaint is made that representations are often used and rarely defined, and that many if not most uses of the term "representation" border on the incoherent. But if one keeps in mind *who* is doing the representing and *whom* is being represented to, and distinguishes mental representations from mental content that may be similarly structured but does not play a representational role, then many of the familiar arguments against representations seem to lose their teeth.

As a pragmatist, Shusterman is keen to argue that, although there are wrong answers, there need be no single correct one. Each philosophical method -- and here he would, I think, include his own -- has its insights and limitations. If there is one thing in this book that leaves me unsatisfied, it is the relationship between the human body and the social body, the habits that arise within the individual and the habits that are passed on to an individual by her society. But this is not really a criticism, only a suggestion for further work.

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