

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### SOMAESTHETICS AND THE CARE OF THE BODY

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**Abstract:** I pose a number of questions concerning Richard Shusterman's concepts of somaesthetics and body consciousness. How does it relate to the kind of forgetfulness of the body that can happen in expert performance? What is the nature of somatic reflection and how is it different from pre-reflective awareness of the body? I suggest that our immersed involvement and overt orientation towards things, and towards other people that concern us, involve bodily practices characterized by a performative forgetting of the body. Depending on the nature of the way that we become aware (or practice awareness) of the body, performance may be improved or disrupted.

**Keywords:** Somaesthetics, performative forgetfulness, body consciousness, action.

Studies of expertise and movement suggest that heightened body consciousness gets in the way of performance. If we become self-consciously aware of our body as we try to perform some task – for example, playing tennis – then our performance becomes worse. The exception to this seems to be when we are learning movement. I need to be conscious of how I am holding the tennis racket, or of how I'm placing my two left feet when I am learning to dance, etc. The aim, however, is to become so habitual in our bodily movement that we no longer have to monitor it. Proficiency and expertise, it is suggested, depend on just this habituation and forgetfulness of the body. For our purposes here, let me refer to this as *performative forgetfulness of the body*.

A number of philosophers take up this view. Richard Shusterman, in *Body Consciousness*, notes William James' warning that "heightened consciousness of the bodily means of action leads to failure in achieving our desired ends" (2008, xi). Phenomenologists have often characterized the body as "absent" (Leder 1990) or "absently available" (Gallagher 1986). I can think immediately of texts in Merleau-Ponty, some of which are cited by Shusterman. Merleau-Ponty states, for example: "I do not need to visualize external space and my own body in order to move one within the other. It is enough that they exist for me, and that they form a certain field of action spread out around me" (1962, 180). Much of my own work follows this same idea, and

again as Shusterman notes, I've referred to cases of deafferentation to make the point (Gallagher and Cole 1995; Gallagher 2005).

In the case of IW, who lost his sense of touch and proprioception from the neck down, his control of movement is far from automatic. He is required to consciously think about his movement and to guide it by visual perception. As a result, his movement is in some respects (walking, for example), robotic-like, and slower than normal. When IW walks across the room, for example, he has to monitor the movement of his feet – he has to think about moving in a way that does not throw him off balance. For IW this will not change with practice – he is unable to build up body-schematic habits that would allow him to “forget” about his body. The case of IW (and other deafferented subjects) motivates a question. Apparently, IW's body consciousness is not sufficient to allow him to move smoothly through the world and this insufficiency is also taking its toll on the physical condition of his body. That is, he has back and joint problems that ultimately means he will be confined to a wheelchair. So the question is whether a better practice or only certain types of body consciousness would help someone like IW to improve his performance and avoid the wheelchair. I return to this point below.

In contrast to claims about the virtues of the performative forgetfulness of the body, Shusterman sets out his own claim, which is just the opposite: more directed attention to the body – somatic reflection, a reflective consciousness of the body, may in fact improve performance. On the one hand, I must admit that as someone who has practiced Tai Chi, this claim resonates with me, despite my philosophical leanings toward the ideas that we have just reviewed. On the other hand, I wonder why in moving through the world the body should require a conscious monitor – is it really so dumb that it requires constant mental tutoring (and is this in some way a re-privileging of the mental)? So my enthusiasm for reading Shusterman's book was guided by two questions – one philosophical, and one practical. The first question: precisely what kind of evidence does Shusterman cite for the benefits of somatic reflection or body consciousness, and specifically in contrast to performative forgetfulness? Second question: precisely what sort of body consciousness are we talking about? What's the difference between “greater mindfulness” and a chauvinistic consciousness that involves the traditional hegemony of mind over body? Does the body just limp along without the intervention of self-improving reflection? These questions lead on to further questions, and especially the question of whether it is possible to have it both ways – to say, with Merleau-Ponty, for example, that normal movement requires forgetting the body, but that in some way somatic reflection can improve performance? I think, in fact, that Shusterman gives us good answers to these questions, and in the end allows us to have it both ways.

### **The evidence**

Shusterman explains his method: “I make the case for heightened somatic consciousness not simply by refuting influential philosophical arguments against the value of such consciousness, but also by outlining a systematic philosophical framework through which the different modes of somatic consciousness ... can better be integrated and thus more

affectively achieved” (2008, 1). What evidence does Shusterman appeal to in order to refute the philosophical arguments and establish a new framework? In some cases, he appeals to practice, e.g., his experience with Feldenkrais and with Zen. He also appeals to phenomenology (7). The new philosophical framework is somaesthetics, which he outlines in several points.

- (1) Sense perception (and knowledge about the world) can be improved if we improve our bodily performance.

I can certainly accept that improved bodily performance can improve our sensory processes, and there is good evidence for this (see Gallagher 2005 for some of the empirical studies). But this does not tell us why, or provide evidence for the claim that somatic reflection/body consciousness can lead to better sensory performance.

- (2) Somaesthetics just is this practice (or set of practices) that involves improved awareness of our bodily experiences.

The claim again is that improved awareness will lead to improved performance, and specifically by discovering a variety of things about our bodily experience. Two examples are given early in the analysis: by becoming aware of our breathing we may become aware of our emotional state, which then may be adjusted for the better. By becoming aware of certain muscle contractions we can modify them for the better. My sense is that Shusterman is not suggesting that we constantly need to be aware of our breathing and our muscle contractions, but that occasional somatic reflection on such things (and perhaps the real art is learning when to do this), may improve performance.

- (3) Somaesthetic awareness allows us to make better use of our effective will – to be better agents.

In some cases we seem simply to not know what we are doing – I want to swing my golf club in a precise way, and think that I am doing so, but in fact I am not. Again, to the extent that we may be able to correct our posture and movement and form better habits, we can improve our performance. But this doesn’t rule out habitual movement or performative forgetfulness – and it is not clear that constant monitoring of our golf swing will result in an improved game.

- (4) The pleasures we get from pure thought (mathematics?) “are influenced by somatic conditioning and require muscular contraction” (21).

As an embodied theorist I don’t need to be convinced of this – at least I know that if I feel sick, I have a hard time enjoying pure thought. But Shusterman draws forth a conclusion, immediately: “therefore” these pleasures can be “intensified or more acutely savored through improved somatic awareness and discipline” (21). But this doesn’t necessarily follow. Why should becoming aware of our muscular contractions intensify the pleasures I get from solving a math problem?

In all of these cases, the claim is that somatic consciousness will result in improved performance or pleasure. But in none of them do we rule out the virtue of performative forgetfulness. For Shusterman systematic intervention by somatic reflection can improve our performance by retraining our habits. We can also gain more pleasure in certain activities by properly focusing on certain bodily processes – in some cases by focusing on muscle contractions. There is empirical evidence that we can reduce stress, improve well-being, affect, and even immune function through meditation (Shusterman cites studies by Kabat-Zinn et al. and Rick Davidson [p. 174 n.51]). The science here is clear, but the mindfulness practice involved does not have to be a constant form of somatic consciousness throughout the day in order to have the stress-reduction effect. The practice doesn't rule out performative forgetfulness in most of our activities, even if during meditation we are focused on breathing, for example.

In contrast, here is some empirical evidence against the benefits of body consciousness, which suggests that we need guidelines about when to use body consciousness and when not to use it. Susan Goldin-Meadow (2001) at the University of Chicago has shown that we improve our mathematical performance by using hand gestures. If we sit on our hands and try to solve mathematical problems we do relatively worse than if we have free use of our hands and gesture. David McNeill, at the same school, has shown that consciousness of our hand gestures interferes with their timing, which is essential for their contribution to speaking or thinking (McNeill 1992). Gestures, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's statement about language, "accomplish thought." But they seem to do so only when they are performatively forgotten – i.e., when we are not explicitly conscious of forming them. So if we were to somatically reflect on our gestures, it would seem that our performance would decline, both in terms of gesturing and in terms of solving math problems.

It would seem that knowing when and how to use body consciousness is important for the argument presented by Shusterman.

### **Kinds of body consciousness**

Shusterman argues not for the kind of excessive attention that contemporary culture lavishes on the body – focused primarily on bodily appearance. Rather, the kind of refined reflective regard for the body that he does defend is one that improves our capacities for pleasure and performance (6). But precisely what sort of body consciousness are we talking about? He names several of the techniques for such body consciousness: Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique, yoga, t'ai chi, zazen, meditative awareness, as well as erotic techniques (Shusterman 2008, 7). But also breathing, sitting, lying, stretching, walking, eating, and various forms of athletics and exercise (35). He also suggests that what he has in mind is not a narrow conscious attention on the body out of context, but one that is also "*of more than the body itself*" (8). The question I'm posing here, however, is not answered by a listing of various methods. Rather, I want to know what sort of body consciousness is involved in these methods, what it does, and why that is better than performative forgetfulness or the online coping described by, e.g., Merleau-Ponty. One obviously gets different forms of body

consciousness through the various practices that Shusterman names. Is there a common element among them? Is any form of body consciousness better than none? Or are some better than others?

We may get closer to an answer when Shusterman suggests that the various methods can be differentiated in a variety of ways. He indicates that they can be holistic vs atomistic, self-directed or other-directed, representational (directed toward external appearance) or experiential (directed toward internal experience). But in specifying the differences between these approaches, Shusterman simply gives us another list of examples of practices that include dieting, weight-lifting, martial arts, aerobics, or more specifically, “consulting one’s image in the mirror, focusing one’s gaze on a body part like the tip of the nose or the navel, or simply visualizing a body form in one’s imagination” (26). Alternatively, one might employ “acute awareness of experiential clues (e.g., of optimal fatigue, body alignment, and full muscle extension ...” [26]). I assume that Shusterman is not suggesting that all of these practices involve the right kind of body consciousness. What he calls practical somaesthetics promises a more precise answer, since this involves actual engagement with the practices in question.

In rejecting Foucault’s overemphasis of erotic hyperstimulation and drug experiences, Shusterman opposes practices that would dull “our very capacity to feel our bodies with real clarity, precision, and power” (38). He recommends smaller and less intense experiences: attending to “the sound of our quietly beating hearts,” and cultivating “a heightened, explicit, somatic self-consciousness” (39-40). This certainly gets us closer to an answer. Body consciousness can involve the sense modalities, somatic sensations like hunger, pleasure, and pain (53) – ambiguous sensations where it is sometimes better to say that this is the body being conscious rather than this is a consciousness of the body. But also, Shusterman wants to include the latter – “conscious, explicit, experiential perceptions of our body [including] distinct feelings, observations, visualizations and other mental representations of our body and its parts, surfaces, and interiors .... Perceptions of bodily states that are more distinctively cognitive .... body-focused thoughts and representations” (53). This includes explicit (reflective) proprioceptive perceptions, which “can be regarded as somaesthetic perceptions par excellence” (53).

Can we tell whether auditory is better than visual, or visual better than proprioceptive, or thoughts about the body better (or worse) than any of these? Perhaps it depends on the precise details of what we are doing. In any case, the somatic consciousness that Shusterman champions is explicit, not pre-reflective, but reflective.

Shusterman goes on to identify four levels of consciousness involved here (54ff). The first level is actually unconscious, and is consistent with what Merleau-Ponty calls corporeal intentionality. A second level is “conscious perception without explicit awareness” or maybe we should say, without attention, but rather involving an awareness that stays marginal or recessive. Phenomenologists would call this pre-reflective consciousness; analytic philosophers would call it first-order, non-observational consciousness. Gibsonian psychologists would call this ecological consciousness that

provides information about both the environment and my bodily position. The third level is explicit awareness where we become mindfully aware of our bodies (visually, proprioceptively, etc.) – this is somatic perception or somaesthetic observation, and is representational (55). The fourth level is where we are not only mindfully aware of our body, but are reflectively (metacognitively) aware that we are aware of our body in a way that allows us to monitor our conscious attention “through its representation in our consciousness” (55). This is somaesthetic reflection per se. Both the third and fourth levels of body consciousness are downplayed by Merleau-Ponty, but Shusterman, in contrast, wants to play them up.<sup>i</sup> In this regard, however, it is clear that Shusterman’s critique of Merleau-Ponty is in parts and in a certain way misaligned. If we think of Merleau-Ponty as offering a descriptive phenomenology of how the body moves, which is critical of representational models, Shusterman is doing something of a different order – he’s offering a prescription – a therapy of consciously monitoring movement – which he takes to be a representational process. Merleau-Ponty is telling us how we form habits (some of which may in fact be bad); Shusterman is giving us the means to reform and cure them.<sup>ii</sup>

Shusterman tells us more about the therapy, and the idea of explicit sensory attending to bodily processes that “normally” remain tacit. Some forms of this kind of explicit sensory attending, however, are not necessarily liberating or productive. For example, the kind of hyperreflexive attending to sensory experience that one finds in the positive symptoms of schizophrenia (Sass). It may be productive to think about the difference between a therapeutic consciousness focused on tacit processes and its difference from a pathological consciousness focused on the same experiential aspects. Is the difference one of control, of knowing when to attend and when not to attend, or is there something else at stake? (see pp. 69-70).

Here we can return to IW and the case of deafferentation. Despite the fact that IW is constantly attending to his body for purposes of motor control, his consciousness is mostly in the visual modality. I mentioned that he is now using a wheelchair because of the damage this sort of visually controlled movement has done to his back and joints. What we learn from this case is that on its own, visual attention to movement is not sufficient to sustain good posture or motoric practices. What IW lacked was any ability for proprioceptive attention (or even proprioceptive inattention). It would be extremely good to know what proprioceptive consciousness can get at that vision on its own cannot. We would need more specification in this regard.<sup>iii</sup>

Shusterman cautions us that in regard to pleasurable body awareness, the practice should not necessarily narrow down consciousness to sensations. In playing tennis, for example, the pleasure one derives from the game is not reducible to “running feet, beating heart, or sweating racket hand” (42) – indeed, one could press Shusterman on this point and suggest that the pleasure of playing tennis is not a form of explicit body consciousness, but a form of consciousness that has something to do with being lost in the flow of the game. Isn’t the experience of being in the flow a form of pre-reflective self-awareness rather than a form of explicit somatic reflection?

## Care of the body

To conclude, let me turn things around in a way that I'm not sure Shusterman would object to<sup>iv</sup> -- especially in light of his final chapter on John Dewey where he expresses an extremely careful and balanced view of body consciousness and addresses some of the central questions that I have been considering here.

We may think about the phrase, the 'care of the body' as involving some form of attending to the body – not, of course, in an objectifying way, as Shusterman notes, but nonetheless in a way that directs our consciousness back onto the body in some fashion. From my own experiences of Tai Chi and mindfulness meditation (let me note that I am not proficient at either), and many other experiences, I don't doubt the benefits of this kind of practice, although I would like to know more details about why it is so beneficial. Perhaps even in everyday action, benefit can accrue. As Shusterman notes:

Even if a familiar action can be performed more quickly and reliably through unconscious habit than through somatically self-conscious attentiveness, such mindful consciousness is important for learning new skills and necessary for properly identifying, analyzing, and rectifying our problematic bodily habits ... (13)

Add to this the dimensions of pleasure, and surely it adds up to an important kind of care of the body.

But let me also suggest that we can take the phrase 'care of the body' in a different direction. Although Heidegger is not the best thinker in regard to embodied practices, his concept of Care (*Sorge*) as the structural feature of being-in-the-world has been interpreted by some to mean being oriented toward the world in an intentional fashion. In our immersed involvement and overt orientation towards things, and towards other people that concern us, might not our bodily practices (whether in playing tennis, or running, or walking, or communicating, or making music together, or gesturing our way through a difficult mathematical problem), as I have been suggesting, often be characterized by a performative forgetting of the body? And if our practice is excellent and we are proficient at what we are doing, might that diminished consciousness of the body be a *care of the body*, not in the sense of directing care toward the body, but in the sense of the body directing care towards the world, and towards others?

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> At one point I think Shusterman mistakes Merleau-Ponty's remark about "the inhuman secret of the bodily mechanisms" (1964, 66; cited in Shusterman 2008, 59) as a negative description of "representations of body parts and processes." I think the Merleau-Ponty means the subpersonal neural mechanisms rather than either the third or fourth levels of consciousness as Shusterman defines them. Merleau-Ponty simply wants to say that he can move without knowing anything about or being aware of the subpersonal processes of motor control.

<sup>ii</sup> I don't take Merleau-Ponty to be "advocating" poor posture or bad habits in his philosophical advocacy of the nonrepresentational nature of prereflective lived bodily movement (see Shusterman 2008, 63), or claiming that our motor performance is "flawless" (65); nor do I defend the idea that our body schematic performances are "without any need [of] improvement," as Shusterman suggests (p. 64n11).

<sup>iii</sup> Jonathan Cole, IW's neurophysiologist, writes: "I actually had some Alexander lessons years ago as a preliminary to [IW] having them, but he has said he has enough to think about without additional postural stuff. I then lectured at the AT world congress in Oxford on him and many people asked if they could give him some lessons. But as you [SG] say many do not realise that all proprioceptive information would need to be translated into visually dependent commands. This could be done, the real question is whether he has sufficient cognitive ability to change the way he moves, and think about posture when thinking about walking or standing. He has always maintained that the way he uses his body is the only way he has managed to find, so the answer may be no" (Personal e-mail, 9 Dec 2008).

<sup>iv</sup> Following his statement: "Somaesthetics connotes both the cognitive sharpening of our aesthesis or sensory perception *and* the artful reshaping of our somatic form and functioning, not simply to make us stronger and more perceptive for our own sensual satisfaction but also to render us more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action" (2008, 43).