

THREE DEVELOPMENTS OF THEMES IN SHUSTERMAN'S SOMAESTHETICS

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Richard Shusterman gets right to the heart of things in his somaesthetics project (we focus here on Shusterman 2007). 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 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 (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman 2007, 1). Somaesthetics has three registers. First, 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). The second register of somaesthetics is pragmatic somaesthetics, which "has a normative, prescriptive character by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement" (23-4). Here we find three sub-categories: a) representational (roughly speaking, how the body looks); b) experiential (how you feel); and c) performative (what you can do) (80). Finally, the third register is practical somaesthetics, 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 is 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.

Now that we have seen some of the outline of somaesthetics, this essay will address three issues. First, we will examine the social and corporeal intertwining in the development of moral intuition, using the Greeks as an example. Second, we will discuss some aspects of "political affect" in contemporary life. Third, we will examine the intertwining of representation, experience, and performing in the sports / military / commercial "fitness" areas.

THE SOCIAL AND CORPOREAL ROOTS OF MORAL INTUITION FOR THE GREEKS

Shusterman has some interesting reflections on the social and corporeal roots of moral intuitions:

Clearer awareness of one's somatic reactions can also improve one's behavior toward others in much wider social and political contexts. Much ethnic and racial hostility is not the product of logical thought but of deep prejudices that are somatically expressed or embodied in vague but disagreeable feelings that typically lie below the level of explicit consciousness. Such prejudices and feelings thus resist correction by mere discursive arguments for tolerance, which can be accepted on the rational level without changing the visceral grip of the prejudice. (Shusterman 2007, 25)

While this notion that one needs to consider corporeal training and emotional reactions in order to have a complete view of moral intuitions and moral judgments as they occur in flesh-and-blood humans has venerable philosophical proponents, most prominently Nietzsche, it is also a position in contemporary moral psychology (Haidt 2001) and moral philosophy (Prinz 2007). But there are also ancient philosophers who propose close links between emotions, bodies, and moral intuitions, and here we will briefly discuss Aristotle and Plato.

Following analyses from Protevi 2009, let me posit that for Aristotle ethical behavior is not simply a matter of having controlled appetites; ethical excellence is not simply the psychic control of the corporeal. The intuitive faculty of the soul is understanding, nous, which can be both practical and theoretical; nous involves the perception, the immediate seeing (aisthesis) of particulars (Nicomachean Ethics 1143b5). The undemonstrated practical intuition of the properly trained person, his immediate grasp of the right course of action, is the standard in ethics, for experience has given them the eye with which to see correctly (b14). While intuition is a faculty of the soul, developing practical intuition is a matter of the body politic. While it may look like simply natural development (b6), the development

of practical intuition depends on embodied political experience, the enmeshing of the social and the somatic, for the quality of practical nous achieved by the body politic is appropriate to one's age (b8).

So now we have thematized infant, child, and adolescent development. This brings us to one of the most interesting moves in recent cognitive science, the attention paid to infant development studies. Among other topics, researchers have paid special attention to the work on "primary intersubjectivity" by Andrew Meltzoff, Daniel Stern, and Colwyn Trevarthen. Shaun Gallagher often cites Meltzoff's work on neonatal facial imitation in developing the notion of an infantile body schema – which makes individuation a process of modulating a relation rather than breaking free of a fusion with the mother (Gallagher and Meltzoff 1996; Gallagher 2004). Stern's recent Forms of Vitality has some concise descriptions of "affective attunement," in which a caretaker matches the affective dynamics of the infant, but in another modality (e.g., voice rather than gesture), so that there is no mere imitation, but a "signature" indicating the matching of internal states (Stern 2010, 41; 113). But it is Trevarthen's (1999) interest in "musicality," in the rhythmic interaction of caretaker and infant that makes the connection with Plato, specifically with his discussion of law, custom, and the skill of nurses in administering lullabies in the *Laws*.

Book 7 of the *Laws* begins with the Athenian saying that despite its importance the nurture and education of children can only be a matter of advice to heads of household rather than law (788b-c), even though habits of transgression from petty misdeeds can ripple up to bad effect in a polity (790b; 793c). So it can be hoped that citizens will take the advice to them on these matters as a law to them and to their households (790b). Political affect is of the utmost importance to Plato, and the lynchpin of the system described in the *Laws* (that is, a city that relies on the philosophic direction of custom, rather than the *tabula rasa* of the *Republic*) is the guesswork of slave women.

Now the concern with reproduction begins before pregnancy. The matrons engaged by the State supervisors can investigate marital sexual relations – presumably frequency, timing, and so on – and what tips them off is the denunciation of a married but childless couple who is "paying regard to aught else than the injunctions imposed amid the sacrifices and rites of matrimony" (784a-d). Once pregnancy occurs, the Athenian recommends that pregnant women take walks so that the external shaking of the fetus help its body grow into robust health (789b-790b). And with regard to the soul we must pay the same sort of attention to imposed movement; analogous to the way dancing prescribed by priestesses will help those afflicted with "Corybantic troubles" (see Dodds 1951, 78-80, for a social and somatic functionalist / cathartic reading of this passage), so too will rocking and singing calm an infant (790d).

Continuing the discussion, the Athenian explains that "fright is due to some morbid condition of soul. Hence, when such disorders are treated by rocking movements the external motion thus exhibited dominates [kratei] the internal, which is the source of the fright or frenzy" (790e). The lawgivers must rely on custom for the most efficacious selection of these songs and on the caregiver's sensitivity and skill in delivering them at the proper time, with proper intensity, and with proper rhythm. The lawgiver can set the

context for their use, but cannot discuss the details of the lullaby or its somatic/psychic effects. Now why is the Athenian so concerned here? It's because temper (the proper relation to fear) and moral excellence are so closely connected (791b-c). But then comes the admission at 792a that the harmonizing of the soul of the infant with regard to the placidity of its temper must rely on the "guesswork [tekmaírontai]" of nurses, who are able to discern the proper course of action -- the right rocking motion, the right lullaby -- in placating a screaming child.

Once children are born, there is also supervision of the collective games of children in the public setting of the "local sanctuary" between the ages of three and six (794b-c). But note the difference between recommendations to citizens for *them* to oversee the nurses of infants at home and the direct supervision of nurses as they accompany the public games of children. The key point is that there's a singularity of bodily rapport between nurse and infant that is resistant to rational supervision, so that the nurses must resort to guesswork. But that guesswork is of fundamental importance to the corporeal development of proper emotional balance and hence moral intuition.

POLITICAL AFFECT

Continuing with our exploration of the links of social and somatic formation as they relate to emotional and cognitive dispositions, I would like to examine a case of "political affect" as that which connects the social, somatic, and subjective scales (Protevi 2009). The link with Shusterman occurs via his reading of Merleau-Ponty, where Shusterman (2007) questions his predecessor's emphasis on the silent body, and recommends that periodic reflection and attention to somatic feelings should play a role in our somaesthetic practices. Of course we have to acknowledge Merleau-Ponty's great breakthrough in thematizing corporeal subjectivity, Shusterman reminds us, but reflective body consciousness is not always a misplaced intellectualism trapping us in an objectifying stance that misses the lived body. 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 is here in the Merleau-Ponty chapter of Shusterman 2007 that he 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). And it is this attention to individual differences and contingencies of somatic patterning that brings us to political affect.

As we know, anxiety is classically distinguished from fear by its "free-floating" character; while fear has an object, anxiety is alertness without an object. It is a potentiality, a

tendency toward fear. We can say that anxiety is metastable and pre-individual, like a super-saturated liquid, needing only a slight disturbance to start its crystallization. We should note that crystallization centers on the putting into connection of different orders of magnitude; we can use the notion of "political events as geo-bio-social crystallizations" to investigate case studies in terms of political affect (Protevi 2013).

Consider a piece in the *New York Times* on a high-profile racial incident in Florida that resulted in the death of an unarmed African-American teenager at the hands of an untrained but armed "neighborhood watch" volunteer, the Trayvon Martin case (Benjamin 2012). Benjamin puts some different orders of magnitude on the table (these are small scale "geopolitical" factors, such as home, yard, street, and neighborhood), but his piece suffers by not getting below the personal and subjective to the neural and affective. The term "mentality" in his title indicates that personal or psychological subjectivity is his lower bound.

[Benjamin observed] a bunker mentality. Residents often expressed a fear of crime that was exaggerated beyond the actual criminal threat, as documented by their police department's statistics.... the product is the same: self-contained, conservative and overzealous in its demands for "safety." Gated communities churn a vicious cycle by attracting like-minded residents who seek shelter from outsiders and whose physical seclusion then worsens paranoid groupthink against outsiders. These bunker communities remind me of those Matryoshka wooden dolls. A similar-object-within-a-similar-object serves as shelter; from community to subdivision to house, each unit relies on staggered forms of security and comfort, including town authorities, zoning practices, private security systems and personal firearms. (Benjamin 2012)

These analyses are very insightful and important, but the piece suffers by not getting below the subjective level and looking at the putting into contact of the social and somatic: the presence of Trayvon Martin triggered not a "mentality" (if that is put solely in belief-desire psychological terms) but a political affective episode, linking the neural to those layered scales of civic, domestic, and personal securitization. To see where the neural comes in, consider that Correll et al (2006) show correlations between psychological-level racial prejudice, heightened firing in certain fear-related neural pathways, and behavior on a shoot / no-shoot test (greater false positives for African-American prompts). So, while Benjamin's piece puts us on the right track, there's a missing sub-personal level that would help us get a better handle on the crystallization of anxiety into fear by the sight of black men in securitized America. The Trayvon Martin case is thus a crystallization of such potentials, both on the spot -- above, below, and alongside the subjectivity of George Zimmerman -- and on the national scale, triggering the discussion involving so many of us, as we link not only synchronic scales of contemporary securitization, but their historical roots (Gooding-Williams 2012).

For another, even more horrible example of social and somatic experimentation, consider the case of Anders Breivik, whose perpetrating of a massacre at a Norwegian Labor Party youth camp shocked the world. Breivik's lawyer's statement that his client took drugs to be

"strong, efficient, and awake" was widely reported (Rayner 2011). In the same article, the lawyer conveys his impression that Breivik is "a very cold person," adding that "I can't describe him because he is not like anyone else." In describing the Columbine killers in *Political Affect* (Protevi 2009) I looked at their ability to handle the bodily intensity of their actions. The problem they faced was overcoming the wide-spread inhibition on cold-blooded killing (as opposed to berserker rage or fugue state killing) One of the problems in using the Columbine massacre for a case study was the suicide of killers, preventing us from hearing what they had to say about the experience.

Breivik's trial testimony (Orr and Blair 2012) provides fascinating insights into his preparation for and ability to withstand the intensity of his acts. I call this negotiation of intensity "political physiology" because it involves finding ways to allow a political action that normal physiology prevents by triggering inhibitions. Consider this portion of Breivik's testimony: "I thought about it for 1 minute. Whole body resisted. Felt like a year. 100 voices in head saying STOP" (Orr and Blair 2012). Note the resistance of the "body" as well as the psychological aspects of "voices in head." While political affect includes political physiology, it does not neglect consciousness, though it does not limit itself to it. Thus we would also want to examine Breivik's more traditionally "cognitive" training, using the Call of Duty first-person shooter game for practice in "target acquisition" (Prid 2012).

Breivik's trial testimony emphasized the dissociative and emotion-deadening political physiology practices he performed, both before and during the events. Under questioning from psychiatrists, Breivik admitted that he became completely "de-emotionalized" during the attacks, as if he was in a "state of shock." He consciously adopted this mental state, with the aid of trance music and daily meditation to deliberately dull his emotions (Orr and Blair 2012). The reporters go on to note that "when asked to show more empathy when giving evidence Breivik replies by saying he will break down if he removes the mental protection he has created for himself" (Orr and Blair 2012).

Emotional deadening was combined with the classic strategy of dehumanizing his targets. Breivik has disclosed that the difficulties with organising the attack were so great he very nearly abandoned the whole idea. He had to revise his plan between 20 and 30 times. "My original plan failed time after time after time," he said. "I almost got to the point where I was giving up because it was so difficult" (Orr and Blair 2012).

REPRESENTATION, EXPERIENCE, AND PERFORMANCE

With the invocation of different forms of embodiment in the political affect analyses, we can move to our last development, working from Shusterman's chapter (2007) 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, bodywork 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).

With this in mind, let us develop briefly some observations from the 2012 Summer Olympic Games on representation, experience, and performance. At *Republic* 454a-457c Plato has Socrates make the case that given equal training the very best women will outperform almost all men, so they should be afforded guardian status. The key point is the distinction between means and distributions. The "average man" may very well be stronger than the "average woman," but averages are abstractions; we only meet concrete men and women, and the best women will be better than all but a few of the men.

We see this principle instantiated in Olympic weightlifting. While the men's competitors lift more than the women (when adjusted for body weight, of course), the women's competitors can lift more than all but a tiny slice of the male population. This discrepancy in performance provokes lots of gender anxiety among men, with a common complaint being that women weightlifters (and more generally women athletes, with a conspicuous exception we'll consider below) "look like men." Many things are of interest here. One is that women weightlifters don't "look like men"; they look like weightlifters, as do men weightlifters. I would argue that the demands of the sport produce the characteristic body of top athletes in that sport. It is only because men have dominated elite sport for so long that we think of an athletic body as masculine. But it's not; it's just athletic.

Here is where Spinoza comes in. One famous line of his is *Ethics* III.p2.s1: "no-one has yet determined what a body can do." Taken out of the strict parallelism context in the original, this has become a slogan for an experimental attitude toward the construction of assemblages. So it is not just the individual body whose limits cannot be determined ahead of time, but also the coach-and-athlete compound body, and further, the body politic that enables a search through the population for people showing potentials for success in an endeavor. We do not know what women weightlifters can do because we haven't yet pushed our body politic to find out. Another point of interest is that the discrepancy between "ordinary" men and women at comparable levels of training is much less that between an ordinary man and an Olympic male weightlifter. Why should the vast majority of men have any identification with Olympic athletes when the latter are so far removed from them in terms of representation, experience, and performance? When I consider my own decidedly modest athletic look, experience, and performances as a baseline, what a male Olympic weightlifter can lift -- and in particular the fact that he lifts more than the best Olympic women -- does not predict what I can lift relative to any particular woman, and it certainly does not mean I am not totally outclassed by the lifts of women Olympic lifters.

To conclude, we can note that the International Olympic Committee made a big public relations push for their advances in gender equality at the London 2012 games. It is true that with the addition of women's boxing, all the sports are now open to men and women. But a glaring instance of gender inequality is with the sport that is usually said to get the best TV ratings, women's gymnastics. The difference is in the disciplines. The men do 6 disciplines: floor, vault, pommel horse, high bar, parallel bars, and rings. The women do floor (but with music, which the men do not have), vault (but with the horse placed horizontal to the runway, whereas it is longways for the men), uneven parallel bars, and balance beam. The resulting difference in demands produces a striking body dimorphism, with women gymnasts being very small and thin in the upper body compared to the men. Whereas in other sports with the same demands men and women athletes look the same: swimmers are shaped like swimmers, whether they are women or men, sprinters look like sprinters, distance runners like distance runners, rowers like rowers, weightlifters like weightlifters, boxers like boxers, etc.

We cannot help but ask, taking into account the complexities of the intertwining of representation, experience, and performance at the personal and social level, whether the marked body dimorphism we see helps to explain the popularity of women's gymnastics?

CONCLUSION

We have developed only a few lines from the fecund soil of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics project. It is a great testimony to Shusterman's work that the concerns of moral intuition, political violence, and gender formation we examine here are only a few of the potentials present in his work.

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