

SOMAESTHETICS AND SOCIAL THEORY

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After introducing the interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics by outlining its various branches and its connections to central aims of philosophy and social theory, this paper then shows how somaesthetics can deal more specifically with problems of multicultural enmity and racial hostility that are not adequately solved by discursive arguments for the rationality of tolerance. Since these problems are rooted in the body's visceral reactions, which most often go unnoticed, somaesthetic attention enables one to notice these visceral feelings and thus enables us to manage or transform them.

I

In our present time of increasing social complexity, intensified by the rapid transformations of globalization and technological innovation, social theory needs to open to new approaches. In this paper, I propose an approach through somaesthetics, a field I have been developing for several years and that takes our human condition of embodiment very seriously. After briefly introducing its structure, I will suggest how it can contribute to problematic social issues such as multicultural understanding and the overcoming of racial and ethnic hostilities that have led to continuing intolerable horrors of genocide, even in the heart of a European civilization whose rich traditions of philosophical thought and social theory highlight tolerance and respect for individual human life. Before going any further, I must, however, emphasize that my somaesthetic approach is not proposed as a panacea that can replace all other approaches and solve all of our problems. My underlying pragmatist pluralist perspective (from which somaesthetics is derived) would insist that we need a multiplicity of approaches to deal with the complexities of our contemporary social world and its countless problematic contexts. Our theoretical toolbox is best when it includes a variety of tools.

Somaesthetics can be roughly defined as a discipline devoted to the critical, ameliorative study of the experience and use of the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it. When Alexander

Baumgarten founded the field of aesthetics as a theoretical but also practical discipline aimed at “the perfection of sensory cognition, this implying beauty”, he excluded somatic study and exercise from this enterprise, probably because of religious and rationalist influences (for details see Shusterman 2000a, chapter 10). But if we simply recall philosophy’s central aims of knowledge, self-knowledge, right action, justice, and the quest for the good life, then the crucial value of somaesthetics should be clear.

1. Since knowledge is largely based on sensory perception whose reliability often proves questionable, philosophy has always been concerned with the critique of the senses, but this critique has been essentially confined to the discursive analysis and critique of sensory propositional judgments that constitutes standard epistemology. The complementary route offered by somaesthetics is instead to correct the actual functional performance of our senses by an improved direction of one’s body, since the senses belong to and are conditioned by the soma. Socrates long ago insisted that the body be kept fit and healthy in order to augment the accuracy and range of our perceptions.

The body is valuable for all human activities, and in all its uses it is very important that it should be as fit as possible. Even in the act of thinking, which is supposed to require least assistance from the body, everyone knows that serious mistakes often happen through physical ill-health (Xenophon 1970, 172).

Similarly, a person will be able to perceive less of his environment if a stiff neck or rigid rib cage prevents him from rotating the head to look behind him.

2. If self-knowledge is a central aim of philosophy, then knowledge of one’s bodily dimension must not be ignored. Concerned not simply with the body’s external form or representation but with its lived experience, somaesthetics works toward improved awareness of our feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes. It can therefore reveal and improve somatic malfunctionings that normally go undetected even though they impair our well-being and performance.

Consider two examples. We rarely notice our breathing, but its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state. Consciousness of breathing can therefore make us aware that we are angry or anxious when we might otherwise remain unaware of these feelings and thus vulnerable to their misdirection. Similarly, a chronic contraction of certain muscles that constrains movement and causes tension and pain may nonetheless go unnoticed because it has become habitual. As unnoticed this chronic contraction cannot be relieved, nor can its resultant disability and discomfort. Yet once such somatic functioning is brought to clear attention, there is the possibility of modifying it and avoiding its unpleasant consequences.

3. A third central aim of philosophy is right action, which requires both knowledge and effective will. Since we can only act by means of our bodies, our

power of will—the ability to act as we will to act—depends on somatic efficacy. By exploring and refining our bodily experience, we can gain a better grasp of how our will works and a better mastery of its concrete application in behavior. Knowing and desiring the right action will not avail if we cannot will our bodies to perform it; and our surprising inability to perform the most simple bodily tasks is matched only by our astounding blindness to this inability, these failures resulting from inadequate somaesthetic awareness.

Consider the deficient golfer who tries with all his might to keep his head down and his eyes on the ball and who is completely convinced that he is doing so, even though he in fact miserably fails to. His conscious will is unsuccessful because deeply ingrained somatic habits override it, and he does not even notice this failure because his habitual sense perception is so inadequate and distorted that it feels as if the action intended is indeed performed as willed. In too much of our action we are like the golfer, whose “strong” will remains impotent, since lacking the somatic sensibility to make it effective. For such reasons, Diogenes the Cynic (1931, 71) advocated rigorous body training as “that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds.”

4. If philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and better living, then somaesthetics’ concern with the body as the locus and medium of our pleasures clearly deserves more philosophical attention. Even the pleasures of pure thought are (for us humans) embodied, and thus can be intensified or more acutely savored through improved somatic awareness and discipline. Thinking, like all consciousness, involves affect, as several Asian cultures recognize by their speaking of its organ as the unity of heart and mind, while affect clearly involves the body’s physiological reactions, just as concentrated thought and efforts of attention involve muscular contractions.

5. Since the body is a malleable site for inscribing social power, somaesthetics can also contribute to political philosophy’s interest in justice. It offers a way of understanding how social norms, ethical values, and complex hierarchies of power can be sustained without any need to make them explicit in laws; they are implicitly observed and enforced through our bodily habits, including habits of feeling (which have bodily roots). While Confucius (2003, 16:5, and see 4:1, 4:17, 12:24) insists that exemplary virtue is somatically formed through “the rhythms of ritual propriety and music” and wields its harmonizing power not by laws, threats, and punishments but by inspiring emulation and love, Wilhelm Reich (1973), Michel Foucault (1979), and Pierre Bourdieu (1990), in contrast, highlight the oppressive aspects of social embodiment. Entire ideologies of domination can be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, get typically taken for granted and so escape critical consciousness. The norms that women of a given culture should only speak softly, eat daintily, sit with their legs close together, walk keeping head and eyes down, assume the bottom role in copulation, etc. However, just as repressive power relations are encoded in our

bodies, so they can be challenged by alternative somatic practices. Foucault joins Reich and other body therapists in advocating this message, though the recommended somatic methods often differ greatly. Even if we are not interested in large-scale social reforms but simply one's own personal liberation from damaging habits and attitudes, a systematic attention to and modification of one's body practices can be a path to greater freedom.¹

Though there is much contemporary discussion of the body, somaesthetics offers a structuring architectonic to integrate these very different, seemingly incommensurable discourses into a more productively systematic field. It also offers a clear pragmatic orientation, something that the individual can directly translate into a discipline of improved somatic practice.

II

Somaesthetics has three fundamental dimensions. *Analytic somaesthetics* describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality. This theoretical dimension involves ontological and epistemological issues concerning the body, but also includes the sort of sociopolitical inquiries that Foucault made central: how the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health and beauty and even the most basic categories of sex and gender are constructions sustained by and serving social forces. Foucault's approach to these somatic issues was typically genealogical, portraying the historical emergence of various body doctrines, norms, and practices. But analytic somaesthetics can also compare the body ideologies and practices of two or more synchronic cultures.

Pragmatic somaesthetics is the dimension concerned with methods of somatic improvement and their comparative critique. Over the course of human history, many kinds of methods have been recommended to improve our experience and use of the body: diverse diets, forms of dress, gymnastic training, dance and martial arts, cosmetics, body piercing or scarification, yoga, massage, aerobics, body-building, erotic arts, and disciplines of psychosomatic improvement like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method. We can distinguish between holistic or more

¹ Judith Butler has adapted some of Foucault's insights to advocate transfigurative somatic performances of gender parody (such as drag and cross-dressing) for purposes of feminist emancipation. Iris Marion Young has also argued for the somatic dimension of woman's liberation by drawing on ideas from Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty. Their approaches are useful but fail to see the full spectrum of possibilities that somaesthetics encompasses, and they seem especially blind to the value and uses of experiential somaesthetics and its heightening of explicit, reflective body awareness. For a detailed discussion of these points, see Shusterman (2003a, 2003b).

atomistic methods. While the latter focus on individual body parts or surfaces—styling the hair, painting the nails, shortening the nose through surgery, the former techniques—such as Hatha yoga, *t'ai chi ch'uan* and Feldenkrais Method—comprise systems of somatic postures and movements to develop the harmonious functioning and energy of the person as an integrated whole. Penetrating beneath skin surfaces and muscle fiber to realign our bones and better organize the neural pathways through which we move, feel, and think, these practices insist that improved somatic harmony is both a contributory instrument and a beneficial by-product of heightened mental awareness and psychic balance. Such disciplines refuse to divide body from mind in seeking to improve the entire person.

Somatic practices can also be classified in terms of being directed primarily at the individual practitioner herself or instead primarily at others. A massage therapist or a surgeon standardly works on others but in doing *t'ai chi ch'uan* or bodybuilding one is working more on oneself. The distinction between self-directed and other-directed somatic practices cannot be rigidly exclusive, since many practices are both. Applying cosmetic makeup is frequently done to oneself and to others; and erotic arts display a simultaneous interest in both one's own experiential pleasures and one's partner's by maneuvering the bodies of both self and other. Moreover, just as self-directed disciplines (like dieting or bodybuilding) often seem motivated by a desire to please others, so other-directed practices like massage may have their own self-oriented pleasures.

Despite these complexities (which stem in part from the interdependence of self and other), the distinction between self-directed and other-directed body disciplines is useful for resisting the common presumption that to focus on the body implies a retreat from the social. Experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner has taught me the importance of caring for one's own somatic state in order to pay proper attention to one's client. In giving a Feldenkrais lesson of Functional Integration, I need to be aware of my own body positioning and breathing, the tension in my hands and other body parts, and the quality of contact my feet have with the floor in order to be in the best condition to assess the client's body tension, muscle tonus, and ease of movement and to move him in the most effective way.² I need to make myself somatically very comfortable in order not to be distracted by my own body tensions and in order to communicate the right message to the client. Otherwise, when I touch him, I will be passing on to him my feelings of somatic tension and unease. Because we often fail to realize when and why we are in a state of slight somatic

² Feldenkrais Method deploys an educational rather than therapeutic-pathological model. Practitioners thus work with clients who are treated as "students" rather than "patients", and we speak of our work as giving "lessons" rather than "therapy sessions". I describe the Feldenkrais Method in greater detail in chapter 8 of *Performing Live* (Shusterman 2000a). "Functional Integration" is only one of the two central modes of the Method, the other being "Awareness Through Movement." The latter is best described in Feldenkrais's introductory text (1972).

discomfort, part of the Feldenkrais training is devoted to teaching how to discern such states and distinguish their causes.

Somatic disciplines can further be classified as to whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience. Representational somaesthetics (such as cosmetics) is concerned more with the body's surface forms while experiential disciplines (such as yoga) aim more at making us feel better in both senses of that ambiguous phrase: to make the quality of our somatic experience more satisfying and also to make it more acutely perceptive. The distinction between *representational* and *experiential* somaesthetics is one of dominant tendency rather than rigid dichotomy. Most somatic practices have both representational and experiential dimensions (and rewards), because there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner. How we look influences how we feel, and vice versa. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for representational ends often produce inner feelings that are then sought for their own experiential sake. Just as somatic disciplines of inner experience often use representational cues (such as focusing attention on a body part or using imaginative visualizations), so a representational discipline like bodybuilding deploys experiential clues to serve its ends of external form, using feelings to distinguish, for example, the kind of pain that builds muscle from the pain that indicates injury.

Another category of pragmatic somaesthetics—"performative somaesthetics"—may be distinguished for disciplines that focus primarily on building strength, health, or skill and that would include practices like weightlifting, athletics, and martial arts. But to the extent that these disciplines aim either at the external exhibition of performance or at one's inner feeling of power and skill, they might be associated with or assimilated into the representational or experiential categories.

The methodologies of pragmatic somaesthetics need to be distinguished from their actual practice. I call this third dimension *practical somaesthetics*. It is not a matter of producing texts about the body, not even those offering pragmatic programs of somatic care; it is rather about physically engaging in such care—through reflective, disciplined, demanding corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement (whether representational, experiential, or performative). This dimension, not of saying but of doing, is the most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the *logos* of discourse typically treats the body in mere textual terms. But actual bodily performance is crucial to the idea that somaesthetics is practice as well as theory.

III

Let me now apply the somaesthetic perspective more specifically to social issues. We need to recognize how our condition of embodiment underlies our basic ethical,

social, and political values. Our concepts of human rights and dignity, the sanctity of life, duties and ideals of virtue all depend on forms of life that involve the ways we experience our bodies and the ways that others treat them. Consider this strikingly brutal passage from Wittgenstein's Cambridge Notebooks (1997, 139-140):

Mutilate completely a man, cut off his arms & legs, nose & ears, & then see what remains of his self-respect and his dignity, and to what point his concepts of these things are still the same. We don't suspect at all, how these concepts depend on the habitual, normal state of our bodies. What would happen to them if we were led by leash attached to a ring through our tongues? How much then still remains of humanity in him? Into what state does such a man sink? We don't know that we are standing on a high narrow rock & surrounded by precipices, in which everything looks different.

If the familiar forms and normal feelings of our body ground our form of life, which in turn grounds our ethical concepts and attitudes toward others, then we can perhaps better understand some of our irrational political enmities. The fanatical kind of hatred or fear that some people have for certain foreign races, cultures, classes, and nations does display a deep visceral quality, which suggests that such enmity may reflect profound concerns about the integrity and purity of the familiar body in a given culture. Such anxieties can be unconsciously translated into hostility towards foreigners who challenge that familiar body and threaten its corruption through ethnic and cultural mixing that can alter the body in both external appearance and behavior.

Wittgenstein elsewhere suggests something like this as an explanation for the stubborn persistence of antisemitism in the apparently most rational countries of Europe. This seemingly irrational hatred of the Jews may in fact have a deep compelling logic of its own that seems to operate on a visceral model or analogy. The Jews, in this unhappily familiar analogy, are a diseased tumor (*Beule*) in Europe.

Look on this tumor as a perfectly normal part of your body! Can one do that, to order? Do I have the power to decide at will to have, or not to have, an ideal conception of my body?

Within the history of the peoples of Europe the history of the Jews is not treated as circumstantially as their intervention in European affairs would actually merit, because within this history they are experienced as a sort of disease, and anomaly, and no one wants to put a disease on the same level as normal life [and no one wants to speak of a disease as if it had the same rights as healthy bodily processes (even painful ones)]. We may say: people can only regard this tumor as a natural part of the body if their whole feeling for the body changes (or if the whole nation feeling for the body changes). Otherwise the best they can do is *put up with it*.

You can expect an individual man to display this sort of tolerance, or else to disregard such things; but you cannot expect this of a nation, because it is precisely not disregarding such things that make it a nation. I.e. there is a contradiction in expecting someone *both* to retain his former aesthetic feeling for his body [*aesthetische Gefühl für seinen Körper*] and *also* to make the tumor welcome (Wittgenstein 1980, 20-21).

Wittgenstein's remarks on the politics of aesthetic bodily feelings suggest the role of somaesthetics in social theory and social praxis. It is a commonplace of anthropology that maintaining the intact boundaries and purity of the body are essential symbols of preserving the unity, strength, and survival of the social group. Thus, for example, in trying to ensure the social identity of the young Hebrew nation, the early books of the Old Testament are full of meticulous injunctions for the Hebrews about body purity with respect to diet, sexual behavior, and the cleanliness of intact body boundaries. Bodily "issues" like bleeding, pus, spit, semen, vomit, and menstrual discharge defile all those who come in contact with them and the unclean need to be separated and cleansed. "Thus shall ye separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness" (Leviticus 15). Incest, bestiality, homosexuality, adultery, and the eating of foods declared unclean are similar defilements "Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you" (Leviticus 18). Foreign nations are portrayed as unclean dangers of contamination that threaten the purity and health of the Hebrew people. As Wittgenstein's tumor analogy suggests, the same metaphorical logic of unclean disease has been turned *against* the Jews in the symbolic unconsciousness of Europe. Jews are stereotyped as dark, hairy, malodorous, unclean and unhealthy, yet nonetheless mysteriously thriving in their filthy darkness like a tumor, while the true nation or folk is idealized as essentially pure or unmixed. And the ugly tumor of antisemitism similarly thrives through the dark power of such symbolism rather than through the critical light of rational analysis.

It is precisely because antisemitism (like other forms of ethnic hatred) has this compellingly sinister symbolism—a picture that holds whole nations captive—that rational arguments for multicultural tolerance always seem to fail, since the hatred is acquired not by rational means but by the captivating aesthetic power of images. Yet, as Friedrich Schiller long ago claimed, aesthetic education may be able to achieve ethical-political transformation where rational arguments still find no purchase. So if Wittgenstein is right that it is contradictory to expect a person to welcome a tumor while retaining his former aesthetic feeling for the body, this does not mean that the tumor must be exterminated. An alternative would be to modify that person's aesthetic feeling for the body and the body politic.

In such ethical and political matters, the discipline of somaesthetics can offer once again a productive pragmatic step. If much racial and ethnic enmity resists resolution through logical means of verbal persuasion because it has a visceral basis of discomfiting unfamiliarity, then as long as we do not consciously attend to these deep visceral feelings we can neither overcome them nor the enmity they generate and foster. So somaesthetic discipline, involving a focused, systematic scanning of our bodily feelings, is first helpful in identifying these disturbing somatic sensations so that we can better control, neutralize, or overcome them. If we can do no more than merely "put up with" them, in Wittgenstein's words, we

have at least the ability to identify and isolate them in our consciousness, which better enables us to take a critical distance from them and avert their infecting our political judgments.

But somaesthetic efforts could go further than the remedy of diagnosis and isolation by actually transforming the undesirable, “intolerant” bodily feelings. Somatic feelings can be transformed through training because they are already the product of training. One’s normal feelings and tastes are almost entirely the results of learning rather than innate instinct; as habits derived from our experience and sociocultural formation, they are malleable to efforts of reformation.³ Disciplines of somaesthetic training can therefore reconstruct our attitudes or habits of feeling and also give us greater flexibility and tolerance to different kinds of feeling and bodily behavior. This is a commonplace of gastronomy, athletics, and somatic therapies; but modern philosophical ethics and political theory have not given it enough attention.

Part of the problem may be that philosophers who do suggest that greater tolerance can be achieved through disciplines of somatic transformation—figures like Reich or Foucault (and many of Foucault’s followers in queer theory)—focus their socio-political advocacy of somatic discipline on the radical transformation of sexual practice. However useful and needed their reformatory proposals may be, their concentration on the sensitive issue of sex and transgression creates a cloud of controversy and polemics that distracts most mainstream philosophers (and the general public) from the general notion and value of transformative somaesthetic discipline. The whole promise of improving social tolerance and political understanding through somaesthetic means should not be so narrowly tied to the sensationally charged but still rather limited issue of sexual behavior.⁴ For all the joys of sex (and despite the brilliant insights of Freud), there is a great deal more of interest and of value in our bodily life than our experience of sexual activity and desire.

If the seductive image of body-ethnic-political purity lurks as the deep prejudice that incites fear and hatred toward alien groups, then one strategy for overcoming the problem would be to make vividly clear and visible the impure and mixed nature of all human bodies, including our own. Somaesthetic disciplines can give

³ It is a common experience in negotiations between hostile groups that mutual understanding is greatly improved once the negotiators actually spend enough agreeable time together to get somaesthetically comfortable with each other, which is why the sharing of meals and entertainment is considered a fruitful part of the negotiating process.

⁴ Though Foucault sometimes promisingly advocates a creative “desexualization of pleasure” to achieve “a general economy of pleasure that would not be sexually normed”, the program he actually elaborates is narrowly focused on “intensifying sexual relations” rather than enlarging our range of pleasures beyond the sexual. See Michel Foucault’s interviews in Lotringer (1996, 212-219, 330-331). For more detailed critique of this problem, see Shusterman (200b, 530-551), and (1997, 25-28).

us such a heightened, lived awareness of the impure mixture of bodily constitution and remind us that our body boundaries are never absolute but rather porous. The body is a messy container of all sorts of solids, liquids, and gases; it is always being penetrated by things coming from the outside in the air we breathe and the food we eat, just as we continuously expel materials from within our bodies. The somaesthetic strategy of focussing on our impure bodily mixture can already be found in the Buddha's sermon advocating heightened mindfulness of body: "a *bhikkhu* reflects on this very body enveloped by the skin and full of manifold impurity, from the sole up and the hair down, thinking thus:

There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, seat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine.'... Thus, he lives observing the body (Koller and Koller 1991, 206).

Asian philosophies, I note in conclusion, are rich in insights about embodiment, not only in theoretical doctrines but in disciplines of somatic training and attunement, so in pursuing somaesthetics, Western theory may be profitably led to greater consideration of Asian thought, which deeply informs the socio-political life of Asian nations and thus is a crucial resource for international understanding in our new century (see Shusterman 2005).

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