HUMAN AFFAIRS *18*, 139–150, 2008 DOI: 10.2478/v10023-008-0014-4

THE GOOD LIFE, THE EXAMINED LIFE, AND THE EMBODIED LIFE

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

Abstract: The good life and the examined life have long been advocated as key philosophical goals, and they have often been closely linked together. My paper critically examines this linkage by considering arguments both for and against the value of self-examination for achieving the good life. Because somatic self-examination has been viewed as especially problematic for the philosophical project of achieving the good life, this form of self-examination will be given special attention in the paper, and its discussion will be situated within the larger issue of the extent to which the embodied life is central to the good life.
Keywords: somatic self-examination; somatic self-cultivation; embodied life; good life.

I

From its early beginnings, philosophy has not only made the good life a central element of its agenda but has also intimately linked the good life to another key theme that has been extremely formative of philosophy's self-conception: the idea of the examined life and its quest for self-knowledge. In this paper I critically explore this linkage of the good life and the examined life by considering some arguments that have been developed to explain or advocate the use of self-examination and self-knowledge for the pursuit of one's well-being. But I also will highlight arguments suggesting that there may be serious tensions between the good life and the quest for self-knowledge through self-examination. Some of these arguments are particularly directed against the idea of somatic self-examination, so we must consider the question of the body's role in the good life. Because the topics of this paper have received an enormous amount of attention in the history of philosophy, it is foolish to treat them in total isolation from the philosophical history that informs them. But it is also impossible to consider, in this brief paper, more than a handful of historically influential texts before discussing some recent findings of experimental psychology that bear on these issues.

In Plato's *Apology*, perhaps the key founding text of Western philosophy and certainly the one through which most American students are introduced to philosophy, we find Socrates' famous assertion that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and that "the greatest good of man" can be found in a life that involves a quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement pursued by "examining myself and others" through dialogical discourse (38a). This quest is explicitly linked by Socrates to his personal quest to test the alleged affirmation of the oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest of all men, and, through this same connection the philosophical quest is also linked to the famous Delphic maxim "know thyself." Elsewhere Socrates confirms

this linkage of self-knowledge with the philosophical quest for self-cultivation and the good life, claiming, for example in *Phaedrus* (229e-230a) that such self-examination is more basic and essential than apparently loftier topics of inquiry: "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that".[1]

For the Socrates of Plato, the self to be examined and known is only the immortal, immaterial soul rather than the body: "the soul is the man" and "nothing other than his soul" so "the command that we should know ourselves means that we should know our souls" and make them the object of our self-cultivation. The body may belong to us as an instrument, but it is not the self, only a tool that the self uses (*Alcibiades I*, 124b-d).

Despite affirming the value of bodily training in some other dialogues, Plato most influentially argued in his *Phaedo* that the philosopher should not concern himself "with the body" but rather turn attention away from it "as much as possible," "because the body confuses the soul," distorts perception, and distracts from the pursuit of truth (64e-67a). The neo-platonist Plotinus so despised the body that his biographer described him as so "ashamed of being in the body" and so keen to transcend it that he not only drastically restricted his diet but even "abstained from the use of the bath" (Plotinus 1991, cii.). The idea of self-examination and self-care was instead focused on the soul, especially its highest dimension of *nous*, which humans share with the divine. "Remove all stains from yourself and examine yourself, and you will have faith in your immortality," Plotinus explains, since "the self-knowledge of the *nous* of the soul consists in knowing itself no longer as man but as having become altogether different, in hastening to unite itself with the Higher alone" (Plotinus 1918, I.v.7; V. iii. 4). This Platonistic orientation to examine and care for the soul rather than the body was reinforced by trends of Christianity in which the body—through the central Pauline notion of the weakness and corruption of the flesh—was strongly associated with sin.

Renaissance thinkers like Montaigne, imbued with Christianity but recognizing the body's essential role in our being, became more aware of the dangers of self-examination in the pursuit of the good and happy life. In examining his own bodily being, he is forced not only to confront his tastes and pleasures but to expose his somatic foibles and ailments—including his unhappy struggles with kidney stones and bouts of impotence. Similarly, in examining his mind, he is also forced to discover error, folly, and varieties of mental and moral weakness. Though Montaigne still makes self-examination the core of his intellectual life and masterwork of *Essays*, he clearly suggests that there may be a serious tension between the quest for self-knowledge and the quest for self-care.

Asserting that Socrates, by seeking "to know himself… had come to despise himself", Montaigne argues more generally that the Delphic injunction to "know thyself" is "a paradoxical command" since Nature wisely directs us to look beyond ourselves. This not only helps us find resources and escape dangers from the outside, but also avoids predatory problems from within, since rigorous self-study must be a depressing, difficult, and dangerous exercise for creatures so full of folly, flaws, and misery. "This common attitude and habit of looking elsewhere than at ourselves has been very useful for our business. We are an object that fills us with discontent; we see nothing in us but misery and vanity. In order not to dishearten us, Nature has very appropriately

[1] I will give the Stephanus pagination in the text. For the *Apology*, I am using the Jowett translation (Plato 1992). For the *Phaedo, Crito, Phaedrus, Alcibiades*, and other dialogues, I use the translation in Plato (1997).

thrown the action of our vision outward." Hence Montaigne also insists on the essential restorative value of entertainment and pleasures of diversion that relieves the mind and also strengthens it by providing it alternative exercise and focus (Montaigne 1958, 766, 821).

Descartes' dualistic philosophy recognizes the importance of scientifically studying the human body as an object—of knowing it as our instrumental, material machine—but combines that recognition with an ardent insistence that the true self is instead located in an immaterial mind. Moreover, in his *Meditations*, he strikingly constructs the entire edifice of knowledge from the foundations of his mental introspection. By ontologically separating body from mind and locating the substance of self within mind alone (which, he believed, unlike the body could be known directly through introspection), Descartes furthers the platonistic trend of identifying self-study as knowing one's mind or soul with the aim to "acquire an absolute power over its passions" (Descartes 1985, 1: 314, 348).

The contrast of mind and body allows for two radically different approaches to the project of self-examination and self-knowledge: one including introspection of our bodily feelings, habits, and comportments; the other essentially confined to our distinctively mental life of thought. With few exceptions, modern Western philosophy has preferred the more narrowly mentalistic approach to the somatic, either ignoring or repudiating somatic introspection.[2] Kant is exemplary in this regard. In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, he claims "the First Command of All Duties to Oneself" is to "know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself, not in terms of your physical perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of…ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty." Recognizing that such moral self-examination "into the depths of one's heart" is not only cognitively difficult but could also generate self-loathing or self-contempt, Kant counters by arguing that the very effort to critically examine one's moral stature provides comforting evidence of the individual's "noble predisposition to the good" that is "worthy of respect" and can lead to self-improvement. "Only the descent into the hell of self-cognition can pave the way to godliness," Kant concludes, echoing the ancient Christian logic that purgational self-criticism provides the path to divine illumination and union (Kant 1991, 191).

In contrast to the duty to examine one's moral consciousness, Kant repudiates the project of reflecting on bodily feelings, claiming that it leads to the madness of hypochondria and morbid despondence. In *The Contest of the Faculties*, Kant describes hypochondria as a "sort of melancholia" (*Grillenkrankheit*) defined by "the weakness of abandoning oneself despondently to general morbid feelings" that do not point to a definite bodily malfunction but are usually associated with or produced by anxious attention to bodily sensations of unease or unhealthy discomfort. Noting constipation and flatulence as such somatic conditions of discomfort,

---

[2] I do not want to suggest that these two orientations are exhaustive of the ways that philosophy has advocated self-knowledge. There is a tradition, exemplified by Goethe, that says the way for humans to know themselves is not to closely examine their individual minds or their bodies but instead to know the world in which we live, a natural and social world that shapes us body and mind. "That great and important-sounding phrase *erkenne dich selbst*" he argues, seems the suspicious "device of secretly bound priests, who confused men with unattainable requirements and wanted to lead them away from the activities of the outer world to an inner false contemplation. Man knows himself only in so far as he knows the world, …and he becomes aware of himself only in it. Each new object, if looked at well, opens up in us a new way to see [ourselves]" (Goethe 1949-1960, vol. 13, 38). I have considerable sympathy with this approach, even with respect to one's somatic self-examination, because (as I argue in *Body Consciousness*) we cannot feel our bodies alone but always in a situational field. For elaboration of this theme of self and other, see Shusterman (2008).

he confesses his own "natural disposition to hypochondria because of [his] flat and narrow chest, which leaves little room for the movement of the heart and lungs," thus engendering an oppressive feeling in the chest. But insisting on the power of the mind "to master its morbid feelings merely by a firm resolution" of the will, Kant claims he was able to cure this morbidity by simply refusing to pay attention to the discomforting somatic feeling that promoted it, "by diverting [his] attention from this feeling." Somatic introspection, he elsewhere warns, "takes the mind's activity away from considering other things and is harmful to the head." "The inner sensibility that one generates through [such] reflections is harmful…This inner view and self-feeling weakens the body and diverts it from animal functions." Hence: "Turning reflection away from the body leads to health." In short, introspective somatic self-study is harmful to both mind and body, and the best way to treat one's body is to ignore, as much as possible, the self-knowledge of how it feels, while using it actively in work and exercise (Kant 1992, 177-189).

Thus, in the economy of mind/body dualism, the mind could signify a soul of immortal power and divine purity, while the body—already deeply associated with vulnerability, sin, and limitation (not only by its ageing and mortality but by its very spatial boundaries and personal particularities) —could be deprecated or ignored as bearing all the negative connotations of self-knowledge and self-examination. This logic of neglecting or negating the value of somatic self-examination—the reflection on one's bodily feelings and bodily means of action—persists in recent times. We even find it in philosophers who celebrate the body and its importance for cognition, action, and the good life.

William James, one of the most body-friendly of modern philosophers and one of the great masters of somatic introspection in psychology, similarly warned against somatic self-examination in practical and moral life because, like Kant, he thought it led to hypochondria and depression.[3] But James also introduced a further argument: that "the inhibitive influence of reflection" on bodily action and its attendant feelings actually interferes with that action. Do not examine what you do in bodily performance. "Trust your spontaneity and fling away all further care" is James's contrary maxim for successful sensorimotor action (James 1962, 99, 109). "We fail of accuracy and certainty in our attainment of the end whenever we are preoccupied with much ideal consciousness of the [bodily] means" and the internal (or "resident") feelings they involve. "We walk a beam the better the less we think of the position of our feet upon it. We pitch or catch, we shoot or chop the better the less tactile and muscular (the less resident), and the more exclusively optical (the more remote), our consciousness is. Keep your eye on the place aimed at, and your hand will fetch it; think of your hand and you will very likely miss your aim" (James 1983, 1128).

Merleau-Ponty is another philosophical champion of the body who nonetheless rejects the value of examining one's somatic feelings and performance. Like James, he contends that spontaneity and unreflective perceptual awareness will always serve us best in everyday life, while somatic reflection and representational images are (for normal people) unnecessary and even get in the way of smooth functioning. Our body, he insists, wonderfully guides us, but "only on condition that we stop analyzing it" and its feelings in reflective consciousness, only "on the condition that I do not reflect expressly on it" (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 97, 111). Not only in bodily locomotion but in the variety of our actions, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly insists that successful performance depends on the efficacy of spontaneous bodily intentionality beneath

[3] One could also argue that it leads to immoral self-absorption. I respond to these charges in Shusterman (2008).

the level of thematized awareness rather than any conscious representations or reflective awareness that tend instead to hinder efficient action, even in speech: "like the functioning of the body, that of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, lines, and colors which express me…are torn from me by what I want to say as my gestures are by what I want to do …[with] a spontaneity which will not tolerate any commands, not even those which I would like to give to myself" (*ibid.*, 75).

Merleau-Ponty even suggests we cannot really observe the body in a proper way. Unlike ordinary objects, the body "defies exploration and is always presented to me from the same angle … To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me." I cannot change my perspective with respect to my body as I can with external objects. "I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe; in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 90-91). "I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148).

In *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, I challenge these claims against somatic self-examination by refuting their specific arguments and by enlisting the insights of theorists (including philosophers like John Dewey but also somatic education and therapy theorists) who recognize the value of somaesthetic reflection for improving the quality and efficacy of our self-use, including our capacities for greater pleasure. The book makes a case for the importance of somatic self-examination as a means for realizing the good life as the examined life. I cannot try to summarize here the main arguments of that book. Instead I will use the remaining space of this paper to briefly discuss three matters concerning the body, self-examination, and the good life. First, I would like to indicate some helpful examples (from the Western and Asian philosophical traditions) that suggest the importance of somatic cultivation for the good life. Second, I wish to suggest the irresistible use of somatic means for the good life even in philosophies that negate the body for the good life. Third, I will address the persistent worry that somatic self-examination inevitably yields depression and hypochondria.

II

Plato's dialogues (especially in such influential works as *Phaedo*) portray Socrates as advocating a philosophical life that negates the body. However, it is worth pointing out that the testimony of Xenophon (another close student of Socrates) gives a very different picture of Socrates' attitude to somatic cultivation. If we look beyond Platonic sources, we will be reminded that Socrates "took care to exercise his body and kept it in good condition" by regular dance training. "The body," he declared, "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" (Diogenes Laertius 1991, vol.1, 153). "Besides," Socrates adds, "it is a shame to let yourself grow old through neglect before seeing how you can develop the maximum beauty and strength of body; and you can't have this experience if you are negligent, because these things don't normally happen by themselves" (Xenophon 1990, 172). Similarly, we cannot properly develop the body without paying careful attention to its actual condition, feelings, orientations, and habits of action. Such attention is of course a matter of somatic self-examination.

Socrates was not the only ancient philosopher to celebrate physical health and advocate somatic training and refinement. Aristippus (hedonistic pupil of Socrates and founder of the Cyrenaic school) claimed "that bodily training contributes to the acquisition of virtue," while Zeno, founder of the Stoics likewise urged regular bodily exercise, claiming that "proper care of health and one's organs of sense" are "unconditional duties." Though rating mental pleasures above mere bodily ones, Epicurus still affirmed "health of body and tranquillity of mind" as the twin goals of philosophy's quest for "a blessed life" (Diogenes Laertius, 1991, vol. 2, 215, 653). Diogenes, founder of the Cynics, was still more outspoken in advocating bodily training as a necessary key to developing virtue and the good life: "And he would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue" (*ibid.*, 71). Practicing the somatic discipline he preached, he experimented with a variety of body practices to test and toughen himself: from limiting his diet and walking barefoot in the snow, to masturbating in public and accepting the blows of drunken revelers.

From its very beginnings, East–Asian philosophy has insisted on the bodily dimension of self-knowledge and self-cultivation. When the Confucian Analects advocate daily examining one's person in the quest for self-improvement, the word translated as "person" is actually the Chinese word for body ("shen" 身) (Confucius 1999, 72). Arguing that care of the body is the basic task and responsibility without which we cannot successfully perform all our other tasks and duties, Mencius claims, "The body's functions are the endowment of nature, but it is only the Sage who can properly manipulate them" (Mencius in Dobson 1963, 138, 144 (4A.20; 6A.14). The classic Daoist thinkers Laozi and Zhuangzi similarly urge the special importance of somatic care: "He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire" (Laozi in Lau 1963, 17 (Book XIII). "You have only to take care and guard your own body … [and] other things will of themselves grow sturdy;" "the sage is concerned … [with] the means by which to keep the body whole and to care for life"; "being complete in body, he is complete in spirit; and to be complete in spirit is the Way of the sage" (Zhuangzi in Watson 1968, 120, 135, 313). The Indian philosophical tradition that integrates yoga as an essential discipline of body-mind to promote enlightenment makes similar points.

When Montaigne, at the threshold of modern Western thought, comes to contemplate the self, he recognizes that its bodily dimension, however fragile and weak, is crucial to the self and thus to self-knowledge. Suspicious of the medical doctors of his time (who he thought more often killed than cured their patients), he urged that we could take better care of our health and well-being by more carefully monitoring our somatic selves. Montaigne even looks back to ancient philosophy to argue that ultimately bodily health ("the finest and richest present that nature can give us") is even more desirable than wisdom; indeed that it is not "by our reason, our intelligence, and our soul that we are superior to the beasts; it is rather by our beauty, our fair complexion, and the fine symmetry of our limbs, for which we should abandon our intelligence, our wisdom, and all the rest" (Montaigne 1958, 357-358). We thus need to examine and cultivate our bodies as well as our minds.

Nietzsche provides another distinctive example of Western philosophy advocating somatic self-cultivation and examination. He makes a vigorous critique of the traditional ideal of self-knowledge by attacking self-examining consciousness as unhealthy, futile, and delusional. This is partly because he prefers the goals of self-creation and self-transformation to the more conservative goal of self-knowledge, and partly because of what he regards to be the illusory nature of consciousness itself. But it is also because he thinks that intense self-probing into the depths of our minds and consciousness is psychologically dangerous. "This digging into one's self, this straight, violent descent into the pit of one's being, is a painful and dangerous

undertaking. A man who does it may easily take such hurt that no physician can heal him," Nietzsche writes in "Schopenhauer as Educator" (sec. 1).[4] "What indeed does a man know about himself?," he continues in his essay on "Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense."

> and woe to the fateful curiosity which might be able for a moment to look out and down through a crevice in the chamber of consciousness, and discover that man, indifferent to his own ignorance, is resting on the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable, the murderous, as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger (Nietzsche 1967-1999, vol. 1, 877).

On the other hand, Nietzsche recommends increasing our self-knowledge with respect to corporeal matters. Affirming the body as "an unknown sage" within you that has "more reason than in your best wisdom", he urges us to "listen…to the voice of the healthy body" (Nietzsche 1999, 146-7, 145. In paragraph 492 of *The Will to Power* he advocates the body as "the starting point" because it not only provides one's basic, spatiotemporal perspective toward the world but also one's basic drives toward pleasure, power, and life enhancement, thus underlying our derivative desire for knowledge. Inverting Plato, Nietzsche argues that the body, as source of all value, should be master rather than servant. The soul is a distracting, pernicious illusion whose shadowy life depends on the body it imprisons and persecutes. "All virtues" [are] physiological conditions"; moral judgements being but "symptoms...of physiological prosperity or failure". "Our most sacred convictions, the unchanging elements in our supreme values, are judgements of our muscles" (Nietzsche 1968, para. 255, 258, 314). The soul neither is nor should be the master of bodily activity, since consciousness is but its supervenient product, blind to most somatic behaviour and most often a thorn to the rest (*ibid.*, 674, 676)

Recalling but reversing Plato's image of the body as media, Nietzsche declares consciousness "is only a means of communication" with no real agency of its own (*ibid.*, 524, 526) Indeed, it is the body rather than the soul that generates the notion of subject by spatially awakening "the distinction between a deed and a doer" (*ibid.*, 547) The body should therefore be cherished not only for its life-enhancing pleasures, but "as our most personal possession, our most certain being, in short our ego" (*ibid.*, 659)

Likewise, John Dewey, though well aware of the dangers that introspection had for him, nevertheless avidly advocated and practiced the Alexander Technique of "conscious constructive control" that involves intense focusing on certain aspects of one's body posture and movement so as to understand more clearly our habitual modes of action (and thought), and thus provide a better cognitive basis for improving them (see Shusterman 2008, ch. 6; Shusterman 1997, chs. 1, 6).

III

One of Plato's key ways to discredit the body in contrast to the soul or mind was to characterize the body as a tool, instrument, or means. He could then argue that since there is an essential difference between the tool or means and its user, and between a means and its end or the person who enjoys that end, then we must be essentially different from our bodies because we use them. This reasoning, however, reflects a simplistic understanding of the body

[4] I translate from the authoritative 15 volume critical scholarly collection of Nietzsche's work (1967-1999). See "Schopenhauer als Erzieher" (section 1), vol. I, 340; "Ueber Wahrheit und Luege im aussermoralischen Sinne," vol. I, 877.

as mere means (for more on this, see Shusterman 2006, 2-8) but it also involves a simplistic understanding of the nature of means and media. It may be true that means and media connote a step or way toward the realization of ends and thus do not suggest the direct, immediate enjoyment of ends. It may also be true that by being *on the way* to the ends, means or media might be describable as also *in the way* of ends and thus potentially a distraction from them, as indeed Plato argues that our bodily medium or tool distracts us (through its needs and desires) from the ends of knowledge. But a means or medium is clearly as much a connector as an obstruction to the ends.

We can see how this conceptual doubleness or complementarity of the body as medium undermines Plato's attempt to negate the role of the body in the philosophical life. If, as he argues in *Phaedo*, the imperfections of our bodily senses distract us from the divine Forms, then conversely their imperfections are what remind us in the first place that such Forms should exist and be sought.[5] If this implies that the soul must be purified from bodily contamination, then paradoxically, the only medium for such purification is the body itself, through its monitoring and control. Indeed Plato's very word for purification here is the somatically evocative notion of *catharsis*. Purity of soul is not so much an immediate given, but a task to be realized through bodily means. Indeed, Socrates' most convincing argument for the soul's immortal privilege over the body is not his abstract doctrines and polemics but his embodied example of calm readiness to face somatic death. If the body proves such a necessary means, it cannot be scornfully neglected without harming the end.[6]

Christianity exploits the same mediatic doubleness. Though condemned as an obstacle to the soul's purity, the bodily medium still provided a prime instrument of salvation through purification—by serving as an ascetic altar of self-sacrifice. Clearly symbolized in the corporeal incarnation, temptation, and suffering passion of Jesus Christ, this ascetic usefulness of the body is even recognized by theologians who most fervently condemned the body's sensuality and urged its transcendence. Thus, Origen, who not only advocated virginal chastity but had himself castrated, still claimed "the body was necessary for the slow healing of the soul" and could provide a site of ascetic worship through which the material soma is transformed into what Origen called a "temple of God". Vividly portraying the baneful body as purificational medium, he wrote: "You have coals of fire, you will sit upon them, and they will be of help to you" (Brown 1988, 164-165).

Underlying Plato's specific attacks on the body as medium for truth is a more basic dissatisfaction with two of its metaphysical limitations. Since the body is always confined to a particular spatiotemporal location, embodied perception is always from a particular perspective or point of view. For Plato (as later for Descartes) such limitation of bodily perspective is unacceptable for scientific knowledge, which must provide an absolute, God's eye vision of the real, a view from nowhere. Secondly, the individual body is subject not only to limited location but also to considerable instability, change, and corruption. So if reality is taken to be permanent, unchanging, and independent of perspective, then it can only properly be grasped by an intelligence that was similarly perspectiveless and incorruptibly permanent. The mutable body could only distort the vision of the immutably real.

---

[5] Plato later asserts in the *Timaeus, 47*, that philosophy itself is derived from the sense of sight.

[6] It is also worth noting that in Plato's *Crito* where Socrates insists that "the most important thing is not life, but the good life," it is also said that denied that "life [is] worth living with a body that is corrupted and in bad condition" 47e, 48b.

However, it can be conversely argued that without the particular location of the body and the distinct and limited perspective that it gives we could have no knowledge of the world at all. Our experience would have no order, since our bodily position is what provides the essential ordering principle of our experience. To see the world, we must see from it some point of view, a position that determines our horizon and directional planes of observation, that sets the meaning of left and right, up and down, forward and backward, inside and outside, and eventually shapes also the metaphorical extensions of these notions in our conceptual thought. The body supplies that primordial point of view through its location both in the spatiotemporal field and the field of social interaction. As William James (1976, 86) remarks, "The body is the storm-center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in [our] experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view."

By the late 19th century, the old metaphysical vision of true reality as something essentially immutable had been largely abandoned, partly through Darwin's influence and other theoretical influences, but also through the industrial revolution and the great changes wrought by its new means of production, transportation, and communication. One could then argue that the body's plasticity, its susceptibility and sensitivity to change, would thus make it a better instrument for grasping and reacting to the real. Because, as a body, I am a thing among things in the world in which I am present, that world of things is also present and comprehensible to me. Because the body is thoroughly affected by the world's objects and energies, it incorporates their regularities and thus can grasp them in a direct, practical way without needing to engage in reflective thought. As both change and perspective were revalorized in our ontological and epistemological perspectives, so could the body be revalorized for these features. We see this quite clearly in the body-friendly perspectivism, pluralism, and constructionism of James and Nietzsche, where reality is identified as an interpretive construction and the body is privileged as the primary, basic constructor.

IV

Let me now turn from philosophical history to consider very briefly some ideas from contemporary psychological research. At first glance, this research seems to support the view that intense self-examination (and not merely somatic self-examination) is closely associated with depression. Current studies, which analyze self-examination under the notion of rumination point to its negative psychological affects, but also link it in particular to the morbidity of creative people. Findings have indicated that negative feelings lead to increased self-reflective rumination while inducing self-reflective rumination conversely leads to increased negative feelings. Studies also show that self-reflecting people tend to be both more creative and more prone to morbidity. Just as the causal link with depressive feelings is usually explained through the negative judgments of imperfections that rigorous self-examination typically yields, so increased creativity is explained as resulting from the fact that self-examiners take themselves more seriously and thus have greater motivation for distinctive creative expression and because their sustained practice of reflecting on themselves develops greater fluency of thought (such fluency measured in quantity of new ideas within a given time span) which in turn promotes creativity (for more details on this, see Shusterman 2008, ch. 5).

In *Body Consciousness*, I defend the value of self-reflection by suggesting that we need a more careful parsing of its modes and uses than its detractors (or its advocates) have provided. First, we should recognize, with Socrates, that any viable program of self-cultivation and transformation needs to start with some grasp of what one is so as to have some sense of what

one wants to change and whether or how one is changing. To get where one wants to go, it helps to know where one is. The first step to correcting a bad habit is to recognize what that habit actually is. Despite his critique of self-knowledge, Nietzsche admits a certain degree of it is implied in his ideal of self-cultivation. One must "survey all the strengths and weaknesses of [one's] nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime" (Nietzsche 1967-1999, vol 4., 290).

Second, since many advocates and practitioners of self-reflection have apparently not suffered from melancholia to any significant extent, there does not seem to be a necessary link between self-reflection and depression. So we need to inquire more precisely the conditions or modes in which self-examination becomes morbidly depressing. One such condition seems to be an unrelenting, uncontrollable focus on the negative—negative judgments, negative affects, hypochondriac fears of negative futures, and a general negativity of the meaningless of one's life. Positive dimensions and hopes are totally eclipsed or obliterated in the obsessive gloom radiating from melancholy's scorching black sun.

Kant defined the melancholia or hypochondria arising from self-examination in terms of the mind's lack of "power to master its pathological feelings" by willfully "diverting… attention" from its "brooding" about "fictitious disease" and imagined "ills" (Kant 1992, 187, 189). The core problem, then, is the weakness of mind whose will is powerless to stop us from "paying attention unwillingly to mental and bodily phenomena" (*ibid.*, 68). The inability to control one's direction of thought and stem its passive repetitive feeding on morbidity creates, in turn, a strong negative feeling of impotence that heightens one's already negative mood and passive inertia, thus making it ever harder to divert one's attention to positive thoughts and action that could remedy the situation.

Contemporary psychological literature underlines this passive, uncontrollable dimension of melancholic self-reflection by defining rumination in precisely such terms. But must self-reflection be passive and uncontrollable? Aren't there forms of self-observation that instead display and encourage active, disciplined, and heightened control of mental focus? Doesn't such sharpening of mental concentration, acuity, and will power constitute part of the traditional philosophical argument for self-examination and self-knowledge? Self-reflective meditative disciplines in both Eastern and Western traditions have long justified and sustained themselves by providing their diligent practitioners with enhanced mental focus, strength of will, spiritual peace, psychic happiness, and somatic well being (including great pleasure). Recent psychological research is also beginning to realize that self-examination or "personal self-consciousness" includes a wide variety of motives, styles, and foci, so that it should not be narrowly identified with passive, obsessive, depression-promoting rumination. One study shows a clear distinction between neurotic self-attentiveness, or *rumination*, and intellectually curious self-attentiveness or *reflection* that is linked not to depression but to "self control" and "conscientiousness" that imply will power and mental mastery. Other recent studies in experimental psychology and neurophysiology have demonstrated that meditation training (including disciplines of somatic self-examination) can effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and panic, thus generating more positive affect in the meditating subjects; and further experiments have established the neurological basis of this positive power (see Trapnell et al. 1999; Kabat-Zinn 1997; Davidson et al. 2003; for more details, see Shusterman 2008, ch. 5).

Identifying the obsessive, excessive feature of rumination as key to its morbidity should help us recognize that condemnations of self-knowledge as detrimental to mental health too often wrongly assimilate such knowledge with relentless, disproportionate, overuse of self-conscious self-examination. Too much of any good thing can be bad, and that is the case for self-reflection, whose value depends in using it in the appropriate circumstances and measure.7 Here we should recall that alongside "Know Thyself" (γνωθι σαυτον), Apollo's Delphic temple inscribed a second maxim, "nothing too much" (μηδεν αγαν), as if to insist on the need for appropriate moderation in applying the first maxim.

V

In conclusion, as I am writing this paper in the midst of the great, global financial crisis of September 2008—a crisis caused by unprincipled borrowing and debt-making, I feel compelled to recall here the third Delphic maxim, far less familiar than the two others. It warns: "Give a surety, get in trouble" (εγγυα παρα δ' ατα) (for more information, see Wilkins 1924). surety was a pledging of one's body, rather than a form of property, to secure a debt. If the debtor defaults, he or she became the slave of the creditor. This practice was abolished in Athens by Solon, though the term "surety" is still used (to indicate a financial guarantee) in Plato's Apology, where Socrates, after being declared guilty, proposes that his punishment be merely a fine of thirty minae for which "Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus….will be the sureties" (38c). This third maxim could be interpreted today as "debt means disaster," but its original idea underlines the importance of the body as the key to human happiness and freedom that we should never risk in debt.

The ancient Delphic maxims were probably originally intended not to stimulate philosophy or to encourage ambitious quests for the good life, but rather to caution man against acts and thoughts of hubris. "Know thyself" thus would have meant to know thy place as a mere mortal who is impotent when compared to the powers of Nature and the gods and thus should not think of defying them. "Nothing too much" could serve as a warning against the dangers of excess and of overweening pride and desire; while "debt means disaster" similarly could warn against confidently presuming that we are skillful, powerful, and clever enough to insure that our debts will get paid without our having to sacrifice our freedom. These three ancient maxims suggest that by avoiding such all-too human forms of overreaching we can avoid some likely dangers of a bad or tragic life, which seems at least a useful step toward achieving a good one.

References

Ames, R., Rosemont, H., Jr. (transl). *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation.* New York: Ballantine, 1999.

Brown, P. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Davidson, R. J. et al. Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 65 (2003), 564-570.

[7] As I argue in Shusterman (2008), somatic educational studies have shown the need for a certain measure of disciplined self-examination of our bodily self-use not only for learning a new form of behavior but especially to improve an established habit of action.

Descartes, R. *Philosophical Writings of Descartes.* J. Cottingham (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Dobson, W. A. C. H. (Ed.). *Mencius.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963.

Goethe, J. W., von. *Werke.* Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1949-1960.

James, W. *The Principles of Psychology.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

James, W. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals.* New York: Dover, 1962.

James, W. The Experience of Activity. In James, W. *Essays in Radical Empiricism.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Kabat-Zinn, J. The Relationship of Cognitive and Somatic Components of Anxiety to Patient Preference for Alternative relaxation Techniques, *Mind/Body Medicine* 2, 101-109, 1997.

Kant, I. *The Metaphysics of Morals.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Kant, I. *The Conflict of the Faculties.* London: Macmillan, 1992.

Kant, I. *Reflexionen Kants zur Kritischen Philosophie*. B. Erdmann (Hrsg.). Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1992.

Lau, D. C. (transl). *Tao Te Ching.* Baltimore: Penguin, 1963.

Merleau-Ponty, M. *Signes.* Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception.* London: Routledge, 1962.

Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Visible and the Invisible.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Montaigne, M. *Complete Essays of Montaigne.* D. Frame (Ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958.

Nietzsche, F. *Sämtliche Werke.* Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden.. Colli, G./Montinari, M. (Hrsg.). New York: Walter de Gruyter,1967-1999.

Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. New York: Dover Publications, 1999.

Nietszche, F. *The Will to Power.* New York: Vintage, 1968.

Plato. *The Trial and Death of Socrates. Four Dialogues.* Transl. by B. Jowett. New York: Dover Publications, 1992.

Plato. *Complete Works.* J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.). Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

Plotinus. *The Enneads.* Abridged Edition. J. Dillon (Ed.). London: Penguin, 1991.

Plotinus. *The Enneads.* Transl. by S. MacKenna. Boston: Branford, 1918.

Shusterman, R. *Practicing Philosophy.* New York: Routledge, 1997.

Shusterman, R. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Trapnell, P. et al. Private Self-Consciousness and the Five-Factor Model of Personality: Distinguishing Rumination from Reflection, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 2, 284-304, 1999.

Watson, B. (transl.). *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

Wilkins, E. G. *The Delphic Maxims in Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924.

Xenophon. *Conversations of Socrates.* Transl. by H. Tredennick and R. Waterfield. London: Penguin, 1990.

College of Arts and Letters
Florida Atlantic University
777 Glades Road
Boca Raton, Florida, USA
Tel.: 561-297-0851, Fax.: 561-297-2095
E-mail: shuster1@fau.edu