



# Body Consciousness

A Philosophy  
of Mindfulness and  
Somaesthetics

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

This page intentionally left blank

## Body Consciousness

Contemporary culture increasingly suffers from problems of attention, overstimulation, and stress. We are plagued by a growing variety of personal and social discontents generated by deceptive body images. This book argues that improved body consciousness can relieve these problems and enhance one's knowledge, performance, and pleasure. The body is our basic medium of perception and action, but focused attention to its feelings and movements has long been criticized as a damaging distraction that also ethically corrupts through self-absorption. In *Body Consciousness*, Richard Shusterman eloquently refutes such charges by engaging the most influential twentieth-century somatic philosophers and incorporating insights from both Western and Asian disciplines of body-mind awareness. Rather than rehashing intractable ontological debates on the mind-body relation, Shusterman reorients study of this crucial nexus toward a more fruitful, pragmatic direction that reinforces important but neglected connections between philosophy of mind, ethics, politics, and the pervasive aesthetic dimensions of everyday life.

Richard Shusterman is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. Educated at Jerusalem and Oxford, he is internationally known for his contributions to philosophy and his pioneering work in somaesthetics, a field of theory and practice devoted to thinking through the body. A recipient of senior Fulbright and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, Dr. Shusterman has held academic positions in Paris, Berlin, and Hiroshima and is the author of several books, most recently *Surface and Depth* and *Performing Live*. His *Pragmatist Aesthetics* has been published in thirteen languages.



# Body Consciousness

*A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521858908](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521858908)

© Richard Shusterman 2008

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provision of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in print format 2008

ISBN-13 978-0-511-38906-1 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85890-8 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

*In memory of J.W.S.,  
whose body gave me life, love, and consciousness.*

*... her pure and eloquent blood,  
Spoke in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought,  
That one might almost say, her body thought.  
She, she, thus richly, and largely housed, is gone.*

*John Donne, "Of the Progress of the Soul:  
The Second Anniversary"*

“The human body is the best picture of the human soul.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

“The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

“Monks, one thing, if practiced and made much of, conduces to great thrill, great profit, great security after the toil, to mindfulness and self-possession, to the winning of knowledge and insight, to pleasant living in this very life, to the realization of the fruit of release by knowledge. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness centered on body.”

The Buddha, *Anguttara Nikāya*

“Besides, 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.”

Socrates, from Xenophon’s *Memoirs of Socrates*



# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction	1
1   Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault	15
2   The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy: Somatic Attention Deficit in Merleau-Ponty	49
3   Somatic Subjectivities and Somatic Subjugation: Simone de Beauvoir on Gender and Aging	77
4   Wittgenstein's Somaesthetics: Explanation and Melioration in Philosophy of Mind, Art, and Politics	112
5   Deeper into the Storm Center: The Somatic Philosophy of William James	135
6   Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey's Philosophy of Body-Mind	180
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	227



## Preface

Contemporary culture increasingly suffers from problems of attention, overstimulation, and stress. We are further plagued by a growing variety of personal and social discontents generated by deceptive body images. This book argues that improved body consciousness can help relieve these problems and enhance one's knowledge, performance, and pleasure. If body consciousness is a topic unlikely to comfort conventional philosophical tastes, this is not because philosophy has always ignored the body, as too many somatic advocates are fond of complaining. The body in fact exerts a very powerful (though generally negative) presence in philosophy's persistent privileging of mind and spirit. Its dominantly negative image – as a prison, distraction, source of error and corruption – is both reflected and reinforced by the idealistic bias and disregard for somatic cultivation that Western philosophers generally display.

We must not forget, however, that philosophy in ancient times was practiced as a distinctly embodied way of life in which somatic disciplines frequently formed an important part, even if such disciplines sometimes assumed a more body-punishing character in philosophies where mind and soul were thought to achieve more freedom and power through severe somatic asceticism. Plotinus, for example (according to his admiring biographer Porphyry), was so “ashamed of being in the body” and so keen to transcend it that he not only drastically limited his diet but even “abstained from the use of the bath.” Today, when philosophy has shrunk from a global art of living into a narrow field of academic discourse, the body retains a strong presence as a theoretical (and sometimes potently political) abstraction. However, the idea of using its cultivation for heightened consciousness and philosophical insight would probably strike most professional philosophers as an embarrassing aberration. I hope to change this prejudice.

Unlike philosophers, artists have generally devoted a very adoring, revering attention to the body. Realizing how powerfully and precisely our mental life is displayed through bodily expression, they have shown how the most subtle nuances of belief, desire, and feeling are reflected in the postural and gestural attitudes of our figures and facial countenance. However, in their idolizing love of the human body, artists have usually preferred to portray it as the attractive object of another person's consciousness rather than the radiating expression of the somatic subject's own probing consciousness of embodied self. Women, particularly young vulnerable women, are the frequent subjects of such objectification, portrayed as lusciously sensuous and obligingly passive flesh for the viewer's devouring delectation. The artistic yearning to glorify the body's beauty as desired object often results, moreover, in stylistic exaggerations that propagate deceptive images of bodily ease and grace.

Such problems can be detected in the illustration that adorns the cover of this book, the famous *Valpinçon Bather* (1808) of Ingres, one of his series of acclaimed Turkish bath and harem paintings portraying naked odalisques (female slaves or concubines of the harem). The young woman here, passively posed on a luxuriously bedded and curtained interior, is fresh and naked from her bath and thus ready for her required sexual service. She presents a deliciously lovely and luminous backside of flesh. But in her static pose, with her head turned away in darker shadow and her gaze and facial expression invisible, we get no sense of her having any active, thoughtful consciousness at all. She even seems unconscious of the close presence of the implied viewer, who sees her in almost total nakedness, apart from the turban on her bound hair and the sheet wrapped around her arm – both more suggestive of her bondage than of protective covering. Ingres, moreover, intensifies the woman's visual beauty and erotic charge by putting her in a postural constellation of legs, spine, and head that highlights her figure's graceful long limbs and curving lines but that in fact is anatomically far from a posture conducive to comfort, let alone effective action. What a shock to learn that the marketing department had selected this beautiful but painfully misleading image for the cover of my book on body consciousness! As a critic of media culture's deceptive objectifications of the body, but also as a Feldenkrais practitioner sensitive to the strain and suffering of the spine, I voiced my objections but was decisively told that the vast majority of my potential readers would only be attracted to the beauty of the Ingres and never notice its unsightly social and somatic import. If that indeed is true, then this book's arguments are all the more needed to open their eyes to other

forms and beauties of body consciousness. Do not judge this book by its cover.

We can easily appreciate, however, why artists would focus on beautifying the body's external form and why philosophers would find body consciousness a disconcerting matter and prefer to think of mind. As bodies are the clearest expression of human mortality, imperfection, and weakness (including moral frailties), so body consciousness, for most of us, primarily means feelings of inadequacy, our falling far short of the reigning ideals of beauty, health, and performance – a point that also indicates that body consciousness is always more than consciousness of one's own body alone. Moreover, despite its share of intense pleasures, body consciousness is perhaps most acutely and firmly focused in experiences of pain. Embodiment thus suggests a discomforting vulnerability or evil, epitomized in Saint Paul's declaration that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." Cultivation of body consciousness has thus been repeatedly attacked as a psychological, cognitive, and moral danger, even though philosophy's commitment to self-knowledge would surely seem to entail the exercise of heightened somatic awareness. Kant, for example, though affirming self-examination as a crucial duty (and despite his meticulous personal attention to details of diet and exercise), sharply condemns somatic introspection for generating melancholia and other corruptions. William James likewise warns that heightened consciousness of the bodily means of action leads to failure in achieving our desired ends.

Do our bodies really function best when we most ignore them rather than mindfully trying to guide their functioning? How should we reconcile this incentive for nonthinking with philosophy's ideal of critical reflection? Without critical somatic consciousness, how can we correct faulty habits and improve our somatic self-use? If philosophy remains committed to the maxim "know thyself," how, then, can we better know our somatic selves, feelings, and conduct? If philosophy is likewise committed to the goal of self-improvement and self-care, could enhanced skills of somatic awareness enable better ways of monitoring and directing our behavior, managing or diminishing our pain, and more fruitfully multiplying our pleasures? How to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful forms of body consciousness? How to combine critical body mindfulness with the demands for smooth spontaneity of action? Are there special principles or methods of somatic introspection for improving body consciousness and then using such enhanced awareness for better cognition and sensorimotor performance? How do these methods

relate to the struggles of individuals whose bodies serve to underline their subordinate social status? How does somatic proprioception expand our traditional picture of the senses and their role in cognition and coordinated action? Is body consciousness nothing more than an awkward term for denoting the mind's reflective consciousness of the body as an external object, or are there truly bodily forms of subjectivity, intentionality, and awareness?

Such questions, and many others related to body consciousness, will be addressed in this book, which is a product of at least a decade of struggling both theoretically and practically with this topic. Though the struggle continues, this book marks a significant measure of progress in my ongoing project of somaesthetics that grows out of earlier work in philosophical pragmatism as a philosophy of life. The pragmatism I advocate puts experience at the heart of philosophy and celebrates the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience. Underlining the body's formative role in the creation and appreciation of art, my *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) included the arts of self-styling. The body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness. In that context, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997) introduced the notion of somaesthetics as a field of theory and practice, which was later elaborated in *Performing Live* (2000). This book is a further extension of the somaesthetic project, with much more detailed attention to issues of body consciousness and to their problematic treatment by past masters of twentieth-century philosophy. I often prefer to speak of *soma* rather than body to emphasize that my concern is with the living, feeling, sentient, purposive body rather than a mere physical corpus of flesh and bones. In fact, were I not worried about burdening this book with an awkwardly technical title, I might have called it "somatic consciousness" or even "somaesthetic consciousness" to avoid the negative associations of the term "body."

\*\*\*

I gratefully acknowledge the munificent support of my research provided through Florida Atlantic University's Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar Chair in the Humanities that I am truly fortunate to hold. Three other institutions were also particularly supportive of my work on this book. The University of Oslo kindly invited me to spend the month of May 2006 sharing my somaesthetic research with their interdisciplinary

study group on literature and disease (special thanks here to Knut Stene-Johansen and Drude von der Fehr). In the fall semester of 2006, the Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne graciously hosted (through the good offices of Dominique Chateau, Marc Jimenez, and Jacinto Lageira) a series of lectures in which I could test the book's final arguments in a foreign language. Earlier, Hiroshima University (on the suggestion of Satoshi Higuchi) generously invited me to spend the entire academic year of 2002–2003 as a visiting professor (with no teaching duties) to pursue my research in somaesthetics, affording me a much closer view of Japan's extraordinary body-mind disciplines, from meditation to the martial arts. The highlight of that year was the time I lived and trained in a Zen cloister, the Shorinkutsu-dojo, set on a hill by the coastal village of Tadanoumi on the beautiful Inland Sea. I am extremely grateful to my Zen Master, Roshi Inoue Kido, for his superb instruction, which amazingly combined uncompromising discipline with affectionate kindness. It was not an easy time; there were moments of struggle, frustration, failure, shame, and pain. But I cannot remember a more perfect happiness or greater perceptual acuity than what I experienced through Roshi's guidance.

This experience of Zen practice reinforced my faith that despite the problems and risks of somatic consciousness, its disciplined cultivation (in the proper forms, foci, and contexts) can prove an invaluable tool for pursuing a philosophical life of self-discovery and self-improvement that also takes one beyond the self. I first acquired this conviction through my four-year training and subsequent professional work in the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education and therapy and through some earlier instruction in the Alexander Technique. These body-mind disciplines taught me other important lessons: that philosophical understanding of body consciousness can be enhanced through practical training in disciplines of reflective somaesthetic awareness; that our somatic consciousness is typically flawed in ways that systematically hamper our performance of habitual actions that should be easy to perform effectively but yet prove difficult, awkward, or painful; and that somaesthetic insight can provide us with creative strategies to overcome such faulty habits and other disorders involving somatic, psychological, and behavioral problems. Body consciousness is therefore not, as many have complained, something whose cultivation speaks only to the young, strong, and beautiful. Though aging and infirmity bring a disconcerting somatic consciousness we are tempted to shun, the older and weaker we get, the more we need to think through our bodies to improve our self-use and

performance for the effective pursuit of our daily activities and the goals we strive to realize. I know this not only from my Feldenkrais experience in caring for others but also from my personal experience of aging.

\*\*\*

I am grateful not only to my teachers in somatic disciplines of mindfulness but also to the many scholars who have helped refine, develop, and extend the field of somaesthetics through critical analysis and exploratory interpretations, in fields ranging from dance and performance art to feminism, drug education, sports, and spirituality. Confining myself to a sample of published English texts, I wish in particular to acknowledge the discussions of Jerold J. Abrams, Peter Arnold, Deanne Bogdan, Jon Borowicz, Liora Bressler, David Granger, Gustavo Guerra, Casey Haskins, Kathleen Higgins, Robert Innis, Martin Jay, James Scott Johnson, Thomas Leddy, Barbara Montero, Eric Mullis, Richard Rorty, Simo Säätelä, Shannon Sullivan, Ken Tupper, Bryan Turner, and Krystyna Wilkoszewska. I also acknowledge my debt to the talented philosophers whose work in translating my texts on somaesthetics often prompted me to refine and rethink my views: Jean-Pierre Cometti, Peng Feng, Wojciech Malecki, Fuminori Akiba, Nicolas Vieillescazes, Heidi Salaverria, Robin Celikates, Alina Mitek, József Kollár, Satoshi Higuchi, Emil Visnovsky, Ana-Maria Pascal, Jinyup Kim, K.-M. Kim, and Barbara Formis.

In testing out the book's ideas in preliminary papers, I was fortunate to receive helpful comments from too many colleagues to mention here. But I am happy to acknowledge those of Roger Ames, Takao Aoki, Richard Bernstein, Gernot Böhme, Peg Brand, Judith Butler, Taylor Carman, Vincent Colapietro, Arthur Danto, Mary Devereaux, Pradeep Dhillon, George Downing, Shaun Gallagher, Charlene Haddock-Seigfried, Mark Hansen, Cressida Heyes, Yvan Joly, Tsunemichi Kambayashi, Hans-Peter Krüger, Morten Kyndrup, José Medina, Christoph Menke, James Miller, Alexander Nehamas, Ryosuke Ohashi, James Pawelski, Naoko Saito, Manabu Sato, Stefan Snaevarr, Scott Stroud, John Stuhr, and Wolfgang Welsch. I am thankful that Chuck Dyke and Jerold J. Abrams read an early draft of this book and offered very valuable comments, as did two readers for Cambridge University Press (who were later identified to me as Robert Innis and Shannon Sullivan). Marla Bradford was helpful in preparing the bibliography, Giovanna Lecaros assisted with proofreading, and Wojciech Malecki very generously offered to work on the index.

Some of the book's arguments have already been rehearsed in articles published in *The Monist*, *Hyphatia*, *The Philosophical Forum*, *The Cambridge*



*Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, and *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and the Political* (Cornell University Press). I am grateful for the opportunity to use some of this material, which has been significantly revised and expanded, to help shape a much more developed, sustained, and unified book-length study. It is a privilege to have Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press as my editor, and I thank her for thoughtful advice and encouraging support. My wife Erica Ando and our daughter Talia Emi have continuously inspired my work through graceful intelligence in action and cheerful beauty in repose. This book could not have been written without them.

Richard Shusterman  
Boca Raton, May 2007



# Introduction

## I

Body consciousness (a term of multiple meanings with widely ranging applications) forms the central focus of this book. In exploring various forms and levels of body consciousness and the diverse issues and theories through which twentieth-century philosophy has tried to explain the body's role in our experience, the book also advocates greater attention to somatic self-consciousness both in theory and in practice. I make the case for heightened somatic consciousness not simply by refuting influential philosophical arguments against the value of such consciousness, but also by outlining a systematic philosophical framework through which the different modes of somatic consciousness, somatic cultivation, and somatic understanding can be better integrated and thus more effectively achieved.

That disciplinary framework, somaesthetics, is explained in the book's first chapter, and its concepts and principles continue to shape my subsequent arguments. For the moment, we can briefly describe somaesthetics as concerned with 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. Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice (the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). The term "soma" indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the "aesthetic" in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing the soma's perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the body/mind dichotomy) and its aesthetic

uses both in stylizing one's self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things.<sup>1</sup>

Before going any further, readers might already object: Why advocate any more attention to body consciousness and even develop a systematic discipline for it? Is not our culture already far too body conscious, excessively fixated on how our bodies look, how much they weigh, how alluringly they smell, how stylishly they are decorated, how powerfully they can be made to perform athletically through drugs and intensified disciplines of training? Are we not, then, suffering from a monstrously overgrown body consciousness whose irrepressible surge is even infecting fields like philosophy that are traditionally respected as devoted to mind in contrast to body? If so, this book would seem more the sad symptom of cultural and philosophical malaise than an instrument for improvement.

A further objection is likely. Our perceptual powers are already fully occupied with more pressing matters than cultivating somatic consciousness. Transformed by the continuing information revolution, inundated by increasing floods of signs, images, and factoids, we already have too much to attend to in the surrounding environments of our natural, social, and virtual worlds of experience. Why, then, devote a portion of our limited and overstretched capacities of attention to monitor our own somatic experience? How can we afford to do so? Besides, our bodies seem to perform perfectly well without any somatic reflection or heightened consciousness. Why not simply leave our bodily experience and performance entirely to the automatic mechanisms of instinct and unreflective somatic habits, so that we can focus our attention on matters that really call for and deserve full conscious attention – the ends we seek and the means, instruments, or media we need to deploy to achieve those ends?

Responding to such questions with one of this book's guiding principles, we should recall that the body constitutes an essential, fundamental dimension of our identity. It forms our primal perspective or mode of engagement with the world, determining (often unconsciously) our

<sup>1</sup> Although I introduced the term "somaesthetics" to propose a new interdisciplinary field for philosophical practice, "somaesthetic" (or as it is more frequently spelled, "somes-thetic") is a familiar term of neurophysiology, referring to sensory perception through the body itself rather than its particular sense organs. The somaesthetic senses are often divided into exteroceptive (relating to stimuli outside the body and felt on the skin), proprioceptive (initiated within the body and concerned with the orientation of body parts relative to one another and the orientation of the body in space), and visceral or interoceptive (deriving from internal organs and usually associated with pain).

choice of ends and means by structuring the very needs, habits, interests, pleasures, and capacities on which those ends and means rely for their significance. This, of course, includes the structuring of our mental life, which, in the stubbornly dominant dualism of our culture, is too often sharply contrasted to our bodily experience. If embodied experience is so formative of our being and connection to the world, if (in Husserl's words) "the Body is . . . the *medium of all perception*," then body consciousness surely warrants cultivating, not only to improve its perceptual acuity and savor the satisfactions it offers but also to address philosophy's core injunction to "know thyself," which Socrates adopted from Apollo's temple at Delphi to initiate and inspire his founding philosophical quest.<sup>2</sup>

The body expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world. A radiating subjectivity constituting "the very centre of our experience," the body cannot be properly understood as a mere object; yet, it inevitably also functions in our experience as an object of consciousness, even of one's own embodied consciousness.<sup>3</sup> When using my index finger to touch a bump on my knee, my bodily subjectivity is directed to feeling another body part as an object of exploration. I thus both *am* body and *have* a body. I usually experience my body as the transparent source of my perception or action, and not as an object of awareness. It is that *from which* and *through which* I grasp or manipulate the objects of the world on which I am focused, but I do not grasp it as an explicit object of consciousness, even if it is sometimes obscurely felt as a background condition of perception. But often, especially in situations of doubt or difficulty, I also perceive my body as something that I *have* and *use* rather than *am*, something I must command to perform what I will but that often fails in performance, something that distracts, disturbs, or makes me suffer. Such discord encourages somatic alienation and the familiar denigrating objectification of the body as just an instrument (lamentably

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schwer (Boston: Kluwer, 1989), 61. The italics are Husserl's. Hereafter my book will note only when I add italics to quotations.

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1986), 71. William James describes the body in the same terms of centrality, as "the storm centre" and "origin of coordinates" in our experience. "Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view." "The world experienced," he elaborates, "comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest." William James, "The Experience of Activity," in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 86.

weak and vulnerable) that merely belongs to the self rather than really constituting an essential expression of selfhood.

However, even if we objectify or instrumentalize the body (and to some extent we must for pragmatic purposes of somatic care), this is no reason to regard it as not needing or deserving our attentive consciousness. For even if construed as an instrument of the self, the body must be recognized as our most primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought. Just as skilled builders need expert knowledge of their tools, so we need better somatic knowledge to improve our understanding and performance in the diverse disciplines and practices that contribute to our mastery of the highest art of all – that of living better lives. A more discerning awareness of our somatic medium can improve its use in deploying all our other tools and media; for they all require some form of bodily performance, even if it is the mere pushing of a button or blinking of an eye.

The body's role as our primordial instrument or *ur*-medium has long been recognized; the basic somatic terms of "organ" and "organism" derive from the Greek word for tool, *organon*. Yet, Greek philosophy's aristocratic tendency to champion ideal ends while disparaging material means as mere menial necessity has resulted, with Plato and subsequent idealists, in condemning rather than celebrating the body as medium, while using its very instrumentality to exclude it from what is essential and valuable in human being. A medium or means (as etymology indicates) typically stands between two other things between which it mediates. Being in the middle, an interface with two faces, a medium connects the mediated terms, yet also separates them by standing between them. This double aspect is also present in the instrumental sense of medium as means to an end. While being a way to the end, it also stands *in* the way, a distance to be traveled between purpose and its fulfillment.

Plato's seminal condemnation of the body as medium in the *Phaedo* (65c–67a) concentrates on the negative interfering aspect. Prefiguring today's dominant lines of media critique, it argues that the body distracts us from reality and the search for true knowledge by interrupting our attention with all sorts of sensational commotion and diverting our minds with all sorts of passions, fancies, and nonsense. Moreover, our somatic sensorial medium distorts reality through its flawed perception. The body is even portrayed as a multimedia conglomerate of different sensory modalities and technologies (such as eyes, ears, feeling limbs, etc.),

and such plurality and divisibility of parts provide all the more reason for Plato to degrade it by contrast to the indivisible soul that seeks the truth despite its confinement in the body's distortive prison.<sup>4</sup>

These ancient lines of critique, adopted by Neoplatonism and integrated into Christian theology and modern philosophical idealism, have waxed enormously influential in our culture, as has another Platonic argument (from *Alcibiades* 129c–131d) to denigrate and alienate the body as instrument. We clearly distinguish between a tool and the user of the tool, between instrument and agent; so if the body is our tool or instrument (no matter how intimate and indispensable), then it must be altogether different from the self who uses it, for which it must therefore be a mere external means. It follows (so goes the argument) that the true self must be the mind or soul alone, and consequently that self-knowledge and self-cultivation have nothing to do with cultivating bodily knowledge and consciousness. More generally, the idea of the body as an external instrument used by the self is easily translated into the familiar image of body as servant or tool of the soul. This further promotes the disparaging identification of the somatic with the dominated serving classes (including women), an association that reciprocally reinforces the subordinate status and disrespect for all the associated terms.

Yet Plato's reasoning can surely be challenged, even by extending its basic argument, with its dichotomizing objectifications, into a *reductio ad absurdum*. We clearly use more of ourselves than our bodies alone. We use our minds to think and our souls to will, hope, pray, decide, or exercise virtue. Does the use of one's mind or soul likewise entail its being a mere external instrument rather than an essential part of one's identity? If we strip everything that the self uses from belonging to the real self, we are left with nothing at all; for we indeed use our selves, whenever we use other things and even when we do not. Self-use is not a contradiction in terms but a necessity for living, and to show why heightened somatic consciousness can improve one's use of the self is a major aim of this book. Nor does this express a joyless instrumentalism, because improved self-use surely includes a greater ability to enjoy oneself, with the soma clearly a key experiential site (rather than a mere means) of pleasure.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed critical discussion of Plato's argument and its reflection in contemporary debate concerning the body's relationship to the new media, see my chapter on "Somaesthetics and the Body-Media Issue," in Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 7.

## II

Contemporary culture undeniably lavishes enormous and, in some ways, excessive attention to the body. But it is not the sort of attention that this book is most keen to advance. Social theorists and feminist critics have convincingly exposed how the dominant forms in which our culture heightens body awareness serve largely to maximize corporate profits (for the massive cosmetics, dieting, fashion, and other “body-look” industries) while reinforcing social domination and inflicting multitudes with self-aversion. Ideals of bodily appearance impossible for most people to achieve are cunningly promoted as the necessary norm, thus condemning vast populations to oppressive feelings of inadequacy that spur their buying of marketed remedies.<sup>5</sup> Distracting us from our actual bodily feelings, pleasures, and capacities, such relentlessly advertised ideals also blind us to the diversity of ways of improving our embodied experience. Somatic self-consciousness in our culture is excessively directed toward a consciousness of how one’s body appears to others in terms of entrenched societal norms of attractive appearance and how one’s appearance can be rendered more attractive in terms of these conventional models. (And these same conformist standards likewise impoverish our appreciation of the richly aesthetic diversity of other bodies than our own.) Virtually no attention is directed toward examining and sharpening the consciousness of one’s actual bodily feelings and actions so that we can deploy such somatic reflection to know ourselves better and achieve a more perceptive somatic self-consciousness to guide us toward better self-use.

Such improved self-use, I should reiterate, is not confined to mere practical, functional matters but includes improving our capacities for pleasure, which can be significantly enhanced by more perceptive self-awareness of our somatic experience. We can then enjoy our pleasures “twice as much,” insists Montaigne, “for the measure of enjoyment depends on the greater or lesser attention that we lend it.”<sup>6</sup> Too many of our ordinary somatic pleasures are taken hurriedly, distractedly, and almost as unconsciously as the pleasures of sleep. If this dearth of somaesthetic sensitivity helps explain our culture’s growing dependence on increasing stimulation through the sensationalism of mass-media entertainments and far more radical means of thrill taking, then such a diet

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 853.



of artificial excitements can conversely explain how our habits of perception (and even our sensorimotor nervous system) are transformed in ways that elevate the stimulus threshold for perceptibility and satisfaction while diminishing our capacities for tranquil, steady, and sustained attention. Somatic reflection's cultivation of more refined somatic self-consciousness can address these problems by providing more rapid and reliable awareness of when we are overstimulated by a surfeit of sensory excitements so that we know when to turn them down or switch them off to avoid their damage. Such heightened, attentive awareness can also teach us how to tune out disturbing stimulations by means of cultivated skills in redirecting control of conscious attention in one's own experience, as disciplines of mindfulness have clearly shown.

Our culture's general indifference to this cultivated form of somatic self-consciousness is also expressed in philosophy's continued disregard of its importance, even in philosophers who champion the body's essential role in experience and cognition. This book tries to trace and explain this omission in twentieth-century somatic philosophy and to make a case for the philosophical appreciation and cultivation of this neglected type of somatic self-awareness or reflection, whose value is contrastingly advocated by a wide variety of somatic theorists, educators, and practitioners outside the institutional framework of philosophy.

Though I write this book as an academic philosopher, I should confess from the outset that my perspective on body consciousness has been deeply influenced by my practical experience of various somaesthetic disciplines. Most instructive has been my training and professional experience as a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method, a form of somatic education for improved self-awareness and self-use that has inspiringly successful and wide-ranging therapeutic applications, but also an uncompromising integrity whose refusal of commercialized simplification has denied it the popularity and market share it deserves. I also acknowledge my debt to other disciplines that promote heightened somatic consciousness and body-mind attunement: from yoga and t'ai chi ch'uan to *zazen* and Alexander Technique.

While providing a critical study of contemporary philosophy's most influential arguments against the heightened consciousness of somatic reflection, this book also makes a case for somaesthetics as a general framework in which the cultivation of such consciousness (as well as other forms of somatic training) can best be understood and pursued. This project involves a phenomenological study of body consciousness that probes the different kinds, levels, and values of somatic

self-awareness – from essentially unconscious motor intentionality and unfocused automatic reactions involving unreflective somatic habits or body schemata to explicitly thematized body images, somatic self-awareness, and reflective somatic introspection. It also means exploring the ways these different modes of somatic consciousness can be related and collaboratively deployed to improve our somaesthetic knowledge, performance, and enjoyment. A key argument in the condemnation of cultivating somatic self-consciousness is that any sustained focus on bodily feelings is both unnecessary and counterproductive for effective thought and action. Attentive self-consciousness of bodily feelings (or, for that matter, of bodily form or movement) is thus rejected as a distracting, corruptive obstacle to our essential cognitive, practical, and ethical concerns, a retreat into ineffectual self-absorption. Our attention, it is argued, must instead be directed exclusively outward for our engagement with the external world.

The book's defense of reflective or heightened somatic self-awareness will show, however, that such intensified body consciousness need not disrupt but rather can improve our perception of and engagement with the outside world by improving our use of the self that is the fundamental instrument of all perception and action. Indeed, I contend that *any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself*. To focus on feeling one's body is to foreground it against its environmental background, which must be somehow felt in order to constitute that experienced background. One cannot feel oneself sitting or standing without feeling that part of the environment upon which one sits or stands. Nor can one feel oneself breathing without feeling the surrounding air we inhale. Such lessons of somatic self-conscious eventually point toward the vision of an essentially situated, relational, and symbiotic self rather than the traditional concept of an autonomous self grounded in an individual, monadic, indestructible, and unchanging soul.

### III

For treating all these diverse and complex issues, six twentieth-century philosophers are especially important: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and two pragmatist philosophers whose writings also stretch back to the late nineteenth century, William James and John Dewey. These renowned thinkers are exemplary, not only for their influential somatic theorizing but also for the