

Literary and  
Cultural Theory



Wojciech Małecki

# Embodying Pragmatism

Richard Shusterman's  
Philosophy and Literary Theory

PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

*Embodying Pragmatism* is the first monograph in English devoted to Richard Shusterman, an internationally renowned philosopher and one of today's most innovative thinkers in pragmatism and aesthetics. The book presents a comprehensive account of Shusterman's principal philosophical ideas concerning pragmatism, aesthetics, and literary theory (including such themes as interpretation, aesthetic experience, popular art, and human embodiment – culminating in his proposal of a new discipline called "somaesthetics"). As Shusterman's philosophical writings involve a dialogue with both analytic and continental traditions, this monograph not only offers a critical vision of contemporary pragmatist thought but also situates Shusterman and pragmatism within the current state of theory.

Wojciech Małecki is assistant professor at the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Wrocław (Poland). His research interests include pragmatism, literary theory, aesthetics, popular culture, and continental philosophy. He is the editor/co-editor of two books and has published numerous book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals.

## Embodying Pragmatism

# Literary and Cultural Theory

General Editor: Wojciech H. Kalaga

Vol. 34



**PETER LANG**

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

Wojciech Małecki

# Embodying Pragmatism

Richard Shusterman's  
Philosophy and Literary Theory



PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

**Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the  
Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is  
available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover Design:  
Olaf Glöckler, Atelier Platen, Friedberg

ISSN 1434-0313  
ISBN 978-3-653-00107-5

© Peter Lang GmbH  
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften  
Frankfurt am Main 2010  
All rights reserved.

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright. Any  
utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without  
the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to  
prosecution. This applies in particular to reproductions,  
translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in  
electronic retrieval systems.

[www.peterlang.de](http://www.peterlang.de)

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
List of Abbreviations	9
Introduction	11
Chapter 1: The Varieties of (Aesthetic) Experience	23
1.1. Zarathustra and the Paradoxes of Contemporary Pragmatism	23
1.2. Two Deweys, Two Deweyans, and the Problem of Nondiscursivity	25
1.3. Art as (Aesthetic) Experience	37
1.4. Conclusions	55
Chapter 2: Interpretation and Beyond	63
2.1. No Gods Before Interpretation	63
2.2. Shusterman's Critique of Hermeneutic Universalism	65
2.3. Interpretation and Literature	74
2.4. Conclusions	99
Chapter 3: On Rap and Other Dangerous Things: In Defense of Popular Art	109
3.1. Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, and Theodor W. Adorno	109
3.2. The Theory and Practice of Meliorism	112
3.3. Conclusions	135
Chapter 4: Body Consciousness, Body Surfaces, and Somaesthetics	141
4.1. The Somatic Turn and Its Discontents	141
4.2. Somaesthetics	143
4.3. Conclusions	167
Afterword	173
Bibliography	179





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is based on a dissertation written, in Polish, under the supervision of Professor Wojciech Głowala at the Institute of Polish Philology, University of Wrocław. Therefore, I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Professor Głowala for his advice, and also to the Institute for providing me with excellent research conditions. Moreover, I feel obliged to thank the reviewers of the dissertation, Professor Adam Chmielewski and Professor Andrzej Szahaj, for their valuable remarks, which allowed me to improve the quality of the text in many ways. No less important for the shaping of the ideas contained in the book were my discussions with Professor Richard Shusterman, who has been always willing to respond to my interpretations (and criticisms) of his work, something for which I am particularly grateful. I also owe a great debt to David Wall, who generously read the entire manuscript and offered numerous insightful comments and suggestions. Thanks also to Jarosław Furmaniak for helping me with the final typesetting of the text.

Significant portions of this book were written during my research fellowship at The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (The University of Edinburgh), in September-November 2008, and during my stay as a visiting researcher at the John F. Kennedy Institut für Nordamerikastudien (Freie Universität Berlin), in April-May, 2009. I would therefore like to thank these institutions – especially Professor Susan Manning, the Director of IASH; Professor Winfried Fluck, Chair of American Studies at the Kennedy Institute; Anthea Taylor, IASH's Administrator; and Donald Ferguson, IASH's Secretary – for their support.

Some of the material contained in the book was previously published in a slightly different form in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*; *Er(r)go*; *Filozofia i etyka interpretacji* [The Philosophy and Ethics of Interpretation], ed. Adam Kola and Andrzej Szahaj (Kraków: Universitas 2007); *Utopien, Jugendkulturen und Lebens-wirklichkeiten*, ed. Eva Kimminich (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009); and *Wizje i re-wizje* [Visions and Re-Visions], ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Kraków: Universitas 2007),<sup>1</sup> and is used here with permission.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Karolina for her support during the writing of this book and for her constant encouragement in all my endeavors.

---

1 See Bibliography for details.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**BC** – Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

**PA** – Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

**PL** – Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

**PP** – Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

**SD** – Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).



## INTRODUCTION

“Philosophy’s ultimate aim is to benefit human life, rather than serving pure truth for its own sake.”<sup>1</sup>

Richard Shusterman

“When I am asked (as, alas, I often am) what I take contemporary philosophy’s ‘mission’ or ‘task’ to be, I get tongue-tied.”<sup>2</sup>

Richard Rorty

Scholars in the humanities are probably the most self-reflective of all creatures, and thus it should come as no real surprise that in their drive to reflect on everything they do, some of them have been led to begin introductions, prefaces, forewords, and prologues to their books with investigations on what introductions, prefaces, forewords, and prologues are. Thus we have Hegel’s famous reflections in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben’s bold remarks which open the “Preface” to his *Infancy and History*,<sup>4</sup> or, to move closer to the philosophical context in which the present work is situated, Joseph Margolis’s prologue to his *Pragmatism without Foundations*, which begins with the following words: “Prologues are a form of magic, mixing bias with tact. How to begin what is already finished? How not to answer what has not yet been asked?”<sup>5</sup>

- 
- 1 Richard Shusterman, “Popular Art and Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 13 (1995), p. 39.
  - 2 Richard Rorty, “Trotzky and Wild Orchids,” in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 19.
  - 3 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. and ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 63-198; cf., for instance, Jacques Derrida, “Outwork,” in: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), especially pp. 1-65.
  - 4 “Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because latter works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks.” Giorgio Agamben, “Preface: Experimentum Linguae,” in: *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London-New York: Verso, 2007), p. 3.
  - 5 Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. xiii. Cf. another pragmatist on the list, John J. Stuhr, who begins the preface to his book by asking: “Can a book have a preface? Can it, unlike life and thought, begin before its start? And, is its start really a beginning? Isn’t it always a rebeginning, a redirection, a reconstruction?” John J. Stuhr, *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community* (New York: SUNY University Press, 1997), p. ix.

I, too, would like to join this tradition (and perhaps I have already done so) and say that introductions are a way of limiting the promise of the title. That particular feature of introductions is related to the fact that titles are very specific proper names; and they are specific because they perform not only an identificational function – indicating this and no other text – but also a descriptive one – saying something about that text’s properties.<sup>6</sup> In fact, assuming the perspective of ethical criticism, we could say that if the title does not match the promised content of the book, then we are dealing with a certain moral fault, with impersonating somebody else, with appropriating the name of the other. The problem, however, is that the title, just as any other linguistic utterance for that matter, lends itself to multiple interpretations, and it is exactly the interpretive context that determines whether we will find a given title adequate or not. Once, as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, literary decorum allowed authors to equip their texts with titles long enough (sometimes of monstrous length indeed) to narrow this context and to specify the promise one makes to the readers at least a bit. Today one needs to do that in an introduction.

The title of the present work is thus *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman’s Philosophy and Literary Theory*, and what I mean by it, among other things, is that the book is not intended to be a monograph of the *entire* oeuvre of that author. For Shusterman concerns me here exclusively as a representative of contemporary pragmatism – of which he is one of the most interesting voices – and this is why I leave aside the works from his earlier, analytic period. Moreover, even that scope is further narrowed by my focusing on some particular elements which, in my view,<sup>7</sup> are key to Shusterman’s neopragmatism, at the expense of those that may be worth attention, yet which I see as not belonging to the core of it.<sup>8</sup> Let me also clarify that even though the present book aims at discussing Shusterman’s approach to some specific issues (to be exact: aesthetic experience, interpretation, popular art, and embodiment), it shall invariably revolve around one particular aspect of his pragmatism. But before I say anything more on that topic, I would like to allow myself to make a few introductory remarks that will concern the rather vexed question of the identity of contemporary pragmatism, or neopragmatism.

---

6 I shall not get into the details of the investigations into the nature of titles presented by philosophers and literary theorists alike. Let me note, however, that on some accounts the title is understood as an autonomous literary genre; see, e.g., Harry Levin, “The Title as a Literary Genre,” *The Modern Language Review*, 72, No. 4 (1977), pp. xxii-xxxvi; cf. Jacques Derrida, “Title (to be specified),” *SubStance*, No. 2 (1981), pp. 5-22; and his “Before the Law,” trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in: *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 181-220.

7 Slanted as it is by the disciplinary matrix of literary theory, which I belong to.

8 Generally, I focus on Shusterman’s works that have been written after 1988, while considering the earlier texts only to the extent that they have been incorporated into the former or constitute a significant background for his subsequent development.

When Stanley Fish asserts that pragmatism's "amorphous and omnivorous" nature is something quite advantageous – namely, because it contributes to pragmatist philosophy's being "a very bad substitute for the absolutes it tilts against"<sup>9</sup> – one can even agree with the reasoning itself, yet at the same time must stress that this feature has the unfortunate consequence of almost entirely stripping the term "pragmatism," along with its derivatives, of any concrete meaning. Let us take, for instance, the word "neopragmatism," which has been mentioned above. It is often used to denote the contemporary intellectual current that draws from classical pragmatism – the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, or George Herbert Mead.<sup>10</sup> Yet there also exists quite strong a tendency to narrow the circle of "neopragmatists" to philosophers of linguistic inclination who are distinguished from the founding fathers of the movement in that they abjure the category of experience and substitute it with that of language.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever our terminological preference would be here, the very fact of there being a possibility to choose in this regard indicates that contemporary pragmatism (or neopragmatism) is hardly monolithic, which, after all, should not be surprising given that classical pragmatism itself can be understood in a gamut of ways, some of which differ significantly in tracing its genealogy<sup>12</sup> and in the level of homogeneity they attribute to it.<sup>13</sup> All of this leads to a situation where some

---

9 Stanley Fish, "Truth and Toilets," in: *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 424; the essay was subsequently republished, in a slightly modified version, as Chapter 16 of Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2001).

10 And this is how I myself deploy the term in the present book.

11 Cf. Richard Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality," in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 24-7; see also footnote 15 in Chapter 1 of this book.

12 Let us take, for instance, the controversy over whether Emerson can be considered, as Shusterman and others would like to have it, a protopragmatist (see Stanley Cavell, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?," in: *The Revival of Pragmatism*, pp. 72-80; cf. Richard Shusterman, "Emerson's Pragmatist Aesthetics," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, No. 207 (1999), pp. 87-99). Consider also two recent hypotheses concerning the sociocultural genesis of pragmatism and the responses generated by each: see (a) *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000); cf. Scott L. Pratt's review of the book in *The Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 39, No. 2 (2003), pp. 334-41; or Michael Eldridge's review in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 16, No. 4 (2002), pp. 300-3; (b) Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); cf. the symposium on the book in *The Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 39, No. 4 (2003), pp. 557-616.

13 Cf. Shusterman's own remarks on the subject: "Far from a uniform school, pragmatism has always displayed different views and interests, while regarding plurality as an advantage more than a weakness" (PP 7). See also Michael Eldridge, "Adjectival and Generic Pragmatism: Problems and Possibilities," *Human Affairs*, 19, No. 1 (2009), pp. 10-8. As is well known, in order to palpably distinguish himself from other pragmatists, C.S. Peirce

philosophers are called “pragmatists” against their will, while others, who often desire to be so labeled, are denied that privilege, and no one is able to settle such disputes in a decisive way. I must also add that quite often the person responsible for the confusion in this regard is Richard Rorty (the key figure in recent pragmatist philosophy and a thinker whose name will appear very frequently in this book), who has the inclination to indulge in claims such as “we pragmatists think x, or y,” where under that “we” he subsumes the philosophers who subsequently respond to such a dictum by insisting that they have never thought x, or y, and, moreover, do not know at all what they could have in common with Rorty himself.<sup>14</sup>

To complicate the picture even further, let me draw the reader’s attention to the problem of the philosophical affiliations of the most prominent literary scholars associated with pragmatism, i.e., Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels, especially that later I will refer extensively to their works. Now, in pinpointing various ways in which the “Rortyesque neo-pragmatism” deviates from the ideas of Peirce, James, and Dewey, Susan Haack adds that “[this] style of neo-Pragmatism has been warmly received by some literary scholars; one consequence [of which] has been yet further distortion of the message of the classical

---

“changed the name of his philosophy from ‘pragmatism’ to ‘pragmaticism,’” believing the latter to be a name so ugly that nobody would want to steal it from him. Hilary Putnam, “Comment on Robert Brandom’s Paper,” in: *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, ed. James Conant and Urszula M. Żegleń (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 64. Cf. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), p. 351. It should also be stressed that there are significant disparities to be found between James and Dewey – see, e.g., Richard M. Gale, “William James and John Dewey: The Odd Couple,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 28 (2004), pp. 149-67. On the other hand, some readings point to the basic “consistency” of the perspective of classical pragmatism. See, e.g., Sandra B. Rosenthal, “Pragmatism and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics,” in: *Anti-Foundationalism Old and New*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Beth J. Singer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 165-88; and her *Speculative Pragmatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

- 14 This has happened, e.g., in the case of Donald Davidson. Others, like Nietzsche, have, of course, never had any chance to respond. A perfect example of Rorty’s alleged allies explaining that they are not so is a collection entitled *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). Cf. a review thereof by Simon Blackburn, in which he emphasizes that “it is nicely ironic to see [these authors] making their excuses, like nervous guests fearing that a revel has got out of hand,” while “Rorty, a gentlemanly host, is wonderfully polite and patient with these excuses, while not concealing his conviction that they are basically worthless.” Simon Blackburn, “The Professor of Complacence,” *New Republic* (20 August 2001), p. 40. Cf. Stanley Fish, “Almost Pragmatism: The Jurisprudence of Richard Posner, Richard Rorty, and Ronald Dworkin,” in: *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech... and It’s a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 224.



pragmatist tradition.”<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Haack refers here to Fish, Knapp, and Michaels, whom she does not even label “neopragmatists” but “neo-neo-Pragmatists” instead!<sup>16</sup>

Well aware of all the above problems, I want to stress that I take Shusterman to be a representative of neopragmatism in the sense that even though the sources he draws from include a dizzying array of authors (ranging from Confucius through Alexander Baumgarten, T. S. Eliot, Pierre Bourdieu, Ludwig Wittgenstein to Michel Foucault), classical pragmatism remains the most important point of reference to him – it constitutes his basic reservoir of ideas, concepts, and methods. I must immediately add, however, that as far as classical pragmatist thinkers are concerned, Shusterman is inspired mainly by the philosophy of John Dewey, particularly Dewey’s conception of art presented in *Art as Experience*.<sup>17</sup> In other words, as a neopragmatist Shusterman should be deemed mainly a continuator of Dewey’s aesthetic theory – something which will become apparent as this study unfolds. The pragmatist affiliations of Shusterman’s thought are confirmed by such of its features as antiessentialism, antifoundationalism, and the tendency to dissolve dualisms, which features also connect him to most other neopragmatist authors. But given that, as I have noted above, neopragmatism is anything but monolithic, I should now try to determine Shusterman’s position within it, and one handy way of addressing that issue is to consider which tendencies expressed by contemporary pragmatism he opposes most. There are two of them, basically, and both are hinted at in the main title of the present book: i.e., *Embodying Pragmatism*.

Firstly, then, Shusterman is bothered with what I have described above as the linguistic strain of neopragmatism, which he sees as significantly and unfortunately diverging, in its textualization of human subjects, from James’s and Dewey’s emphasis on corporeality (including somatic experience), and as particularly dangerous because of the popularity it enjoys thanks to the impact of Richard Rorty. Whether his assessment of Rorty’s thought as a radical textualism is entirely accurate remains to be seen in Chapter 1, yet even at this point one can well understand Shusterman’s contention that Rorty’s pragmatism, which indeed focuses almost exclusively on the linguistic dimension of human existence, demands to be opposed with a more embodied pragmatist approach. One that would fully recognize our rootedness in corporeality and embrace all the forms of somatic expe-

---

15 Susan Haack, “Pragmatism Old and New,” *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 1, No. 1 (June 2004), pp. 30-3.

16 In referring to the views of Louis Menand, another author whom she includes into that current, she has expressed the fear that this is not even a “vulgar pragmatism” but rather a “vulgar Rortyism.” Haack, p. 33.

17 See John Dewey, *Art as Experience: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 10*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

rience that evade the prison-house of language, which is exactly the stance Shusterman purports to develop.<sup>18</sup>

Yet there is another sense in which Shusterman wants to “embody” pragmatism. It is strictly related to one of the metaphilosophical postulates he inherits from John Dewey, and as this aspect of Shusterman’s thought will concern me most in this book, I would like to elaborate on it here. What I mean is that, unlike some other neopragmatists, such as Fish, Shusterman believes that philosophy (and pragmatism in particular) needs to take up questions that are directly related to social life since its vocation is rather reforming the world than searching the truth for itself, and that, moreover, philosophers cannot confine themselves to concocting ideas, but must try to implement them with their own hands, too. This belief finds its explicit expression in many places in his oeuvre, but the following passage seems particularly instructive:

Philosophy’s standard posture of lofty disinterestedness must be questioned. Rather than disinterested, it seems to reflect the interest of a bland conservatism which is either happy to reinforce the status quo by representing it in philosophical definition, or is simply too timid and effete to risk dirtying its hands in the messy shaping over art and culture. More dangerously, the fetishism of disinterested neutrality obscures the fact that philosophy’s ultimate aim is to benefit human life, rather than serving pure truth for its own sake.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, even a philosophically uneducated ear will be able to spot in that rhetoric an analogy with Marx’s “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach” (for some it may even sound ominous),<sup>20</sup> yet it should be clear that the inspiration here comes rather from Dewey than from the sage of Trier.<sup>21</sup> There are, however, much more important things to clarify in this citation than its intertextual ties. Let us ask, for instance, isn’t it demagogic to oppose “benefitting human life” to “truth for its own sake”? Pure theory and messy practice? Doesn’t Shusterman know about the

---

18 See, e.g., *PA* (Chapters 5 and 10), *PP* (Chapter 6), and *BC* (*passim*). This is, of course, not to say that Shusterman is alone in celebrating the role of the somatic in pragmatism, see, e.g., Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), especially Chapter 4; and Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). I would like to thank Don Morse for his comments on this issue.

19 Shusterman, “Popular Art and Education,” p. 207; cf. *PA* 45.

20 Cf., e.g., one Polish philosopher’s sour remarks on the affinity between pragmatism and “The Eleventh Thesis” (or even Stalinism and Leninism) – Andrzej Grzegorzczuk, “Discussion,” in: Jürgen Habermas, Leszek Kołakowski, and Richard Rorty, *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kołakowski*, ed. Józef Niżnik and John T. Sanders (Westport: Praeger Paperback, 1996), p. 120.

21 Cf. *PA* 20 for Shusterman’s remarks on the relation between Dewey’s activistic approach and that of Marx.

myriads of historical instances where the disinterested search for “the truth in itself” resulted in overwhelming practical results (for better or for worse)? Doesn’t he realize that, as Heidegger once commented on Marx, in order to change the world one must give it a philosophical interpretation first?<sup>22</sup> Or that – as Adorno and his contemporary readers such as Žižek remind us – in the present “ungodly reality” every action must mean the perpetuation of the structure that had generated the evil we are fighting against, and henceforth there can be nothing more radical than high theory?<sup>23</sup> To address these questions properly, it must be stressed that Shusterman is too much a gradualist and contextualist in his pragmatism to swallow the truth/practice or theory/practice dichotomy. His point is rather that in philosophy, and anywhere else for that matter, we must “start from where we are.” That is, philosophers must neither ignore the pressing problems of the reality they inhabit (while doing their job in the hope that its results may, someday, somewhere, be of use to society) nor respond to them in the usual abstracting manner, turning them into another academic topic (“Are these problems real in a deeper ontological sense?” “Are we epistemologically entitled to discern them as problems?”). Both of these options are impractical, with the second one being dangerous to boot, as it may lead to the conclusions in the vein of Heidegger’s musings on there being no “metaphysical” difference between the Stalinist Russia and contemporary America.<sup>24</sup> This is why what philosophers should do instead is try to use, right here and right now, their theoretical tools to improve very concrete, mundane social problems in whatever way possible and however piecemeal and unspectacular the results might be.

Yet exactly at this place does Shusterman expose himself to an objection that is probably best exemplified by an old remark of Nicolai Hartmann’s that those who “make it a condition of their occupation with philosophical matters that they be led on as straight a way possible to the solution of pressing problems of their own present situation” in fact turn philosophy upside down. Or, to be more exact, by refusing to address basic philosophical questions as too otherworldly and turning their attention to social realities, they start from “the end” and “[t]hus with the very first step they unwittingly divorce themselves from philosophy.”<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, however, Shusterman’s position might be also accused of something quite

---

22 See Martin Heidegger, “Über Karl Marx und die Weltveränderung,” TV Interview conducted by Richard Wisser (1969).

23 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Vermischte Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 404; cited in: Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, the 1917 Writings* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 170.

24 See Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 37.

25 Nicolai Hartmann, *New Ways of Ontology*, trans. Reinhard C. Kuhn (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 3.

the contrary, namely, that it is divorced not from philosophy but from reality itself.

To explain that point, let me emphasize that for neopragmatists such as Fish, Hartmann and Shusterman must look very much alike in the sense that each believes that philosophy can solve practical social problems, and the only difference between them is really a cosmetic one: i.e., the former is convinced that philosophy should address fundamental questions first, while the latter thinks it can forget about such “detours” and proceed directly to saving the world. Yet irrespective of where we begin, Fish thinks, there is no way (either straight or a winding one) that leads from philosophy to solving concrete, pressing problems of humanity. And this is because – as he has succinctly put it – the “successes and failures [in philosophy] do not entail or even make more likely successes and failures in activities other than the activity of doing philosophy.”<sup>26</sup> To be sure, Fish de facto reiterates here (albeit in a slightly different form) Aristotle’s famous question posed in *The Nicomachean Ethics*: “What advantage in his art will a weaver or a joiner get from knowledge of [the] good-itself? Or how will one who has had a vision of the idea itself become thereby a better doctor in general?”<sup>27</sup> But the argument goes further: one needs to remember that as far as practical actions are concerned, the idea of the good-itself is equally useless as the idea that that latter idea is a metaphysical chimera. Therefore, Fish shares Rorty’s opinion that pragmatism, being basically a kind of antifoundationism and antiessentialism, is suited merely for “toppling” certain metaphysical “towers” erected in the academia and should remain “a medicine which dissolves the old medicines but doesn’t in fact leave its own trace in the bloodstream.”<sup>28</sup> But besides its efficiently performing this antifoundationalist job, pragmatism “will not take you either to heaven or hell,” “pulls us in no direction,” “does not tell you what to do,” “delivers

---

26 Fish, “Truth and Toilets,” p. 418. Although Richard Rorty has many times expressed a similar skepticism vis-à-vis the efficiency of philosophy in improving the world, he has also made it clear that: “Nobody can set any a priori limits to what change in philosophical opinion can do, any more than to what change in scientific or political opinion can do. To think that one can know such limits is just as bad as thinking that, now that we have learned that the ontotheological tradition has exhausted its possibilities, we must hasten to reshape everything, make all things new. Change in philosophical outlook is neither intrinsically central nor intrinsically marginal – its results are just as unpredictable as change in any other area of culture.” Richard Rorty, “Introduction: Pragmatism and Post-Nietzschean Philosophy,” in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6. Cf. Rorty, “Trosky and Wild Orchids,” p. 19-20.

27 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. James Alexander Kerr Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 13 [1096b].

28 Richard Rorty and E. P. Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?: The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002), p. 374.

no method.” And the better for it, since also for this reason it is a “bad substitute for the absolutes it tilts against.”<sup>29</sup>

So is Shusterman’s pragmatism a betrayal of philosophy or a betrayal of practice?

Actually, it is none of them, and let us try to see why. As far as the former objection is concerned, Shusterman could reply that it is not him but rather Hartmann and like-minded thinkers who are in fact divorcing themselves from philosophy since, as he correctly observes, “philosophy’s major achievements were never really governed by ... the wholly disinterested pursuit of truth,” as “[i]ts theories and chosen problems [e.g., “Plato’s philosophy of art”] were rather an intellectual response to the socio-cultural conditions and perplexities of the day” (*PA* 45). And that is not all, as they were also, at least in the ancient times, part and parcel of a way of life that philosophy then constituted for its acolytes. In fact, Shusterman’s plea for the practicality of philosophy should be seen not only as an attempt at reinvigorating the spirit that permeated the thought of his hero John Dewey, but also as an explicit return to the long forgotten ancient conception of *bios philosophicos*, which has been recently excavated by a host of authors, including Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, Martha Nussbaum, and Stanley Cavell. We may admit, then, that there is a sense in which Shusterman, rather than being false to philosophy, is at least more faithful to it than thinkers like Hartmann. Yet there still remains the question whether in his philosophical activism he is not divorcing himself from the reality he wants so much to ameliorate. Doing full justice to it, however, requires not only a good dose of metaphilosophical reflection but also a careful assessment of Shusterman’s own attempts at addressing various social conditions and problems, something which cannot be realized in an introduction to a book, as it needs a whole volume instead. What follows is exactly such a book, but before I proceed to its substance, let me address one possible objection to the perspective I want to assume.

There is no doubt that the issues I have been talking about belong to the discourse on the end of philosophy, or to the so-called “theory wars.” Let me note, then, that there are scholars, particularly in continental philosophy, who claim that this discourse belongs in turn to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than to our times, and that it has been already laid to rest on the dusty shelves of libraries in favor of the freshly rejuvenated, unswerving and progressive belief in the power of philosophy to intervene in the world.<sup>30</sup> Yet is this certainly true? Have we really gone past the theory wars? The answer is two times “no,” and that it cannot be otherwise is suggested by the very fact that the main heroes of contemporary continental philoso-

---

29 Fish, “Truth and Toilets,” p. 420, 424-5.

30 See, for instance, Nina Power, “Review of Alain Badiou’s *Conditions*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (July 25, 2009), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=16706> (accessed August 7, 2009).