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Shusterman, Merleau-Ponty, and Dewey: The Role of Pragmatism in the Conversation of Embodiment

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Richard Shusterman advises us that the 20th century scholarly community has not just ignored the value that can come to one's life as a function of paying close attention to the body and its immediate sensual qualities, it has trained us to eschew its character-enhancing sensual natures in favor of more lofty, intellectual pursuits. Given that the Western scholarly tradition has conceptualized individual and cultural development in terms of rationalism, it comes as no surprise to find evidence of such an approach to the body in 20th century scholarship. But while Shusterman believes such pursuits have led us astray, one can also ask if the issues at stake for Shusterman are the same as those of the scholars he critiques. Specifically, Shusterman's pragmatic approach to body sensuality is clearly intertwined with the practices of developing body awareness often referred to in his work. From this perspective he projects a position on embodiment that asserts a practical philosophy committed to enhancing one's quality of life through enhanced soma awareness. From this practical vantage point Shusterman's arguments work: if this was the objective, he has achieved it with honors.

There is the possibility however, that one might confuse this practical success for philosophical success, in general. For while one cannot deny that the scholars critiqued by Shusterman did in fact make practical claims about the nature of human living and the most effective means to address it, it is not clear that, in the end, their scholarly efforts were intended to be solely or primarily practical.

Shusterman asserts that Merleau-Ponty, for example, rightly claimed that a philosophy of experience should begin with the primordial intentionality of the pre-reflective body: "Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily intentionality defies philosophical tradition by granting the body a kind of subjectivity instead of treating it as mere object or mechanism" (60). Shusterman also points out that in his zeal to establish the ontological primacy of lived experience via the body, Merleau-Ponty implicitly eschewed the utilization of higher-level

representations of the body. Shusterman challenges this division in Merleau-Ponty's position by making a case for the practical utility of higher-level somatic awareness,

In advocating the unreflective lived body and its motor schema in opposition to the conceptual representations of scientific explanation, Merleau-Ponty creates a polarization of "lived experience" versus abstract "representations" that neglects the deployment of a fruitful third option—what could be called "lived somaesthetic reflection," that, concrete but representational and reflective body consciousness (63).

While from a pragmatic perspective, Shusterman's arguments work, it is not clear Merleau-Ponty would have actually disagreed. One could argue that Merleau-Ponty's agenda was ontological, not practical. From this perspective, there is no real philosophical point of dissent between Merleau-Ponty and Shusterman. The former is in search of a fundamental, ontological explanation of experience, and the latter, a practical, informed view of the body that allows one to work toward better somatic awareness. The fact that both describe their positions as philosophical does not, in and of itself, necessarily reveal a conflict. One could argue that Merleau-Ponty proposes a philosophy of experience, and Shusterman, a philosophy of somatic practice.

One way to clarify the difference between the two is to examine the criteria for "truth" in both philosophies. In Merleau-Ponty's search for a bodily-based explanation of experience, the "truthfulness" of a given argument derives from its universality—its ability to apply in all cases in non-contradictory fashion. The "truthfulness" of Shusterman's somatic philosophy derives not from its universality but from its ability to help individuals enhance and refine their own somatic sense.

Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a fixed, universal phenomenological ontology based on primordial perception thus provides further reason for dismissing the value of explicit somatic consciousness. Being more concerned with individual differences and contingencies, with future-looking change and reconstruction, with pluralities of practice that can be used by individuals and groups for improving on primary experience, pragmatism is more receptive to reflective somatic consciousness and its disciplinary uses for philosophy (66).

This difference in truth criteria in ontological versus practical philosophy constitutes the bedrock of the distinction between "scientific" and "practical" truth made by Michael Oakeshott (1962) in his classic essay, "The Role of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." In this essay, Oakeshott makes the case that different modes of experience (e.g., scientific, daily practice, history, and poetry) entail different truth criteria. In the scientific mode, "truth" is determined in terms of convergence toward universality, the highest form of which is

mathematics. In daily practice, “truth” is not based on universality and convergence but rather on the degree to which the practices by which members of a group organize and manage their desires is applied to the group members in non-contradictory ways. As a result, statements regarding whether or not a given practice or behavior is “correct” are not based on the practice’s degree of variation from a universal, context-independent system of moral absolutes. Rather, the “rightness” and or “goodness” of behavior derives from its degree of variation from systems of behavioral expectations that emerge within groups as they work to sustain various forms of social organization.

Oakeshott distinguished the truth criteria at work in the modes of “science” and “practice” in order to save a space, as it were, for the modes of practice, history, and poetry in the conversation of civilized culture. That is, for him, culture was a conversation among voices (i.e., modes), in which

“facts” appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; “certainties” are shown to be combustible, not by being brought in contact with other “certainties” or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions (198).

Saving such a space was important to Oakeshott because he believed the philosophical naturalism at the core of the scientific mode was dominating the cultural conversation regarding truth. As a result, the ‘truth’ criteria of daily practice (i.e., politics) came to be dominated by the truth criteria of “science,” and the truth status of political debate came to be based on assertions regarding the “right” and “correct” way to run a society, as if there existed a universal, culture-independent system of axioms against which one could measure a political system’s deviation from correctness. By distinguishing different forms of truth criteria, Oakeshott created a conceptual framework that allowed each mode to be its own arbiter. In short, while science cannot tell us the “right” way to live, politics cannot tell us the ontological “truth” about reality.

Oakeshott’s framework proves relevant to the present task because it is consistent with the assertion that ontology and practice are not of the same kind, and utilizing the truth criteria for one mode as the truth criteria for the other constitutes a category mistake. Many of Shusterman’s critiques of Merleau-Ponty are based on the assertion that his ontological approach to the body implicitly prevents readers from examining the practical value of paying

attention to body consciousness. While this may be true, it does not lead to the conclusion that what Merleau-Ponty had to say about the body was “wrong.” He was speaking ontologically, not practically.

I am not claiming that Shusterman has committed a category mistake. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the possibility that Merleau-Ponty would not deny the practical value of enhanced soma awareness. Thus, what really seems to be at stake for Shusterman is not the ontological status of the body but rather the type of philosophy we should apply to it. As a result, Shusterman’s critique of Merleau-Ponty comes across as a debate about ontology versus pragmatism. Perhaps this explains Shusterman’s affinity for Dewey’s pragmatism. Having begun his philosophical career as an idealist, Dewey later turned away from metaphysics and attempted to move philosophy toward a more scientifically-informed, practically-oriented philosophical agenda. This coupling of naturalism and practicality allowed him to retain his idealist belief in the existence of purpose and value in experience while simultaneously asserting the scientific method as a means of perpetually enhancing such value. Gardner (2007) however, questions Dewey’s belief in the ability of naturalism to provide sound footing for value:

Dewey’s claim is that it is in the very nature of experience to form ever higher “unities,” which, simply in virtue of being unities, possess value, in the strongest sense. Yet the ground of this tendency to unity and value is, on Dewey’s account, baldly Darwinian—biological functions take the place of the idealists’ a priori metaphysics. Dewey talks as if it is in no surprise to discover in nature the very same kind of purposiveness that we claim for human activity. We think, however, that he ought to be surprised at this fact, if it is one. This is why the generation of American naturalists to which Dewey belongs, and for whom Dewey was the leading figure, looks to us now a mere phase in the development of Anglophone naturalism, in which the naturalistic impulse had announced but not yet clarified itself (p. 29).

Gardner further argues that since Dewey’s time, naturalism has moved to a point from which it now argues there is nothing in the world of natural facts from which to build value (i.e., goodness):

By the time we get to Freud ... let alone Quine, naturalism is conceived as resting exclusively on theoretical reason and as immune to non-theoretical attack—it is assumed that nothing could be shown regarding the axiological implications of naturalism that would give us reason to reconsider our commitment to it: we have ceased to think that naturalism is essential for the realization of our interest in value, and do not believe that it would be an option for us to reject naturalism even if it were to prove thoroughly inimical to our value-interests (24).

This relates to Shusterman's critique of Merleau-Ponty, for since the critique seems to reduce to the relative merits of ontology and practice, one might claim Shusterman is recapitulating in the field of embodiment philosophy Dewey's efforts to move philosophy, in general, away from metaphysics. That is, Shusterman seems to be saying that if we are going to talk about the body philosophically, it is 'better' to do so pragmatically versus ontologically.

One might deny this and assert that he is only making the smaller claim that there is room enough in embodiment philosophy for those of both ontological and pragmatic bents. If this were the case however, there would be no real tension between Merleau-Ponty and Shusterman. Tension is only introduced if Shusterman is taken as advancing the stronger claim that the pragmatic position is the 'better' position—that it is more worthwhile for embodiment philosophers to focus on practice more than ontology. While such a position is rather Dewey-esque in its flair, it is not clear that the time is right for proposing the higher 'value' of pragmatism. For while Dewey implicitly believed in naturalism's ability to make us 'better', due to his early idealism, current naturalism, as described above, entails no such commitment to value. Thus, modern pragmatism has a decision to make about 'value'. One option is to perpetuate Dewey's enthusiasm for naturalism (i.e., the scientific method) as a means of increasing the value in reality. To ally itself with naturalism however, such a position would have to find a way to ground its use of 'value' in its naturalism—a project most modern naturalists have even abandoned.

Without such grounding, modern pragmatism might avoid ontology altogether and make its case for value by invoking Oakeshott's distinction between ontological and practical truth criteria. The value judgment that the pragmatic approach is the 'better' approach (versus ontology) could then be based on the assertion that people 'want' to live more satisfactory lives, and the pragmatic approach is the more useful way to get there. Having secured its status as "better" via the truth criteria of practice however (i.e., the realm of human desire), the pragmatic approach to the body will not have defeated ontology. Rather, as Oakeshott hoped, it will have found its voice in the current conversation on embodiment.

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About the Author

J. Scott Jordan studied cognitive psychology and the neurophysiological basis of perception at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. He received his PhD in psychology in 1991. His research focus is directed toward volition and its relationship to consciousness. His dissertation addressed the relationship between voluntary eye-movements and spatial perception. In 1992 he was awarded an Alexander von Humboldt Post-doctoral Fellowship and spent a year in Prof. Dr. Hans Kornhuber's neurophysiology lab at the University of Ulm studying the relationship between event-related brain potentials and memory and attention. In 1998-1999 he spent a year at the Max Planck Institute for Psychological Research studying the relationship between action planning and spatial perception, and in 2006, he spent a semester as a Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Bielefeld working in a research group entitled, "Embodied Communication in Humans and Machines." He is currently a professor in the Department of Psychology at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois where he recently founded the Institute for Prospective Cognition ([http://my.ilstu.edu/~jsjorda/Institute for Prospective Cognition.html](http://my.ilstu.edu/~jsjorda/Institute_for_Prospective_Cognition.html)).