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Shusterman on Somatic Experience



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Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness* aims at formulating a theory of somaesthetics and somatic experience. There has indeed been a growing interest in the role of the body in experience. Shusterman examines the arguments of six important writers who have been influential in this discussion. The emphasis on the body is natural for a pragmatist. The philosophical tradition since René Descartes has entertained the idea of the disembodied character of mental processes but pragmatism (originally introduced as an alternative to this tradition) lays stress on action which can hardly be disembodied.

There are, however, different versions of pragmatism. Shusterman advocates what he describes as post-Rortyan pragmatism; that is, pragmatism after the so-called “linguistic turn” (Shusterman 2000, 83 and 102). The “linguistic turn” refers to a change in the philosophical discussion during the first half of the 20th century. Philosophers began to concentrate on the analysis of formal languages after the invention of mathematical logic. Ordinary language philosophers analysed how people use natural languages (for example English as opposed to artificial formal languages) and so on. Language was seen to be the major (if not only) vehicle of thought and *the* tool for formulating and solving philosophical problems.

Shusterman has developed pragmatism in his own way, but language remains central to his theory. As we shall see below, he even claims that John Dewey had already taken the linguistic turn. This turns out to be a hasty conclusion.

Shusterman's somaesthetics takes the body as an object of aesthetic appreciation. He even has a special discipline dedicated to this. “Representational somaesthetics (such as cosmetics) is concerned more with the body's exterior or surface forms” (Shusterman 2008, 26). There is nothing wrong with that. What seems to me a limitation of his view is that this is the only role given to the body. Disciplines that Shusterman calls experiential (such as yoga) aim at making “the quality of our somatic experience more satisfyingly rich” and “more acutely perceptive” (26). The experiential dimension of different bodily practices aims at producing “inner feelings that are then sought for their own experiential sake” (26). What is

missing is the world. The body is an object of experience, not an instrument of experiencing the world. If the task is to examine the role of the body in experiencing works of art, then the latter aspect might turn out to be interesting. As we shall see below, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* does contain clues in this direction, but Shusterman ignores them completely.

Shusterman's reason for ignoring the role of the body in experiencing the world is apparently his emphasis on language. Language is for him the vehicle of knowledge and reflection, and "knowledge is largely based on sensory perception" (Shusterman 2008, 19). Assuming this, it is indeed reasonable to say that the body is an object of experience rather than an instrument with which the world is experienced, not only with sense organs but also via habitual bodily practices. On this ground the main task of somaesthetics is to correct the actual performance of our senses, for example when a person is "unable to turn her head to look behind her because of a stiff neck" (19). Somatic experience is, for Shusterman, experience about chronic muscular contractions (20), about the position of the head when swinging a golf club (64) and so on.

In order to see the positive role of the body as an instrument (rather than an object) of experience we must, in the first place, criticize Shusterman's notion of experience as "sensory perception," which is an empiricist, not a pragmatist, conception. As Charles Peirce put it, "the concept of experience is broader than that of perception, and includes much that is not, strictly speaking, an object of perception" (CP 1.336). Further, the notion of meaning is broader than that of linguistic meaning. For Peirce, habits of action are meanings (see, for example, CP 5.494). Habits as meanings can be associated with any objects of perception: "what a thing means is simply what habits it involves" (CP 5.400). John Dewey's way of putting these points will be discussed below.

By taking seriously Dewey's original insights about experience and meaning we can get further than Shusterman in understanding the role of the body in experience. This view can be outlined by examining what Shusterman (and the writers to which he refers) has to say about the object of knowledge, the character of experience in general, and the notion of meaning.

Shusterman and Dewey on the object of knowledge

In an earlier book Shusterman claims that "in insisting that only language constitutes qualities as objects of knowledge, Dewey has already taken the linguistic turn which requires that the

realm of cognitive justification be entirely linguistic” (Shusterman 1997, 161). In his recent book he refers to “Dewey’s linguistic requirement for mind” (Shusterman 2008, 186). But is this really what Dewey had in mind?

In his 1997 book Shusterman refers to *Experience and Nature* where Dewey indeed says that qualities are discriminated, identified and “objectified” with language (Dewey 1958, 258–259). Dewey talks about objectification in quotation marks, which means that the word is not to be understood literally. Still, Shusterman is correct in claiming that language is a requirement of human consciousness for Dewey. Dewey’s discussion on those pages, however, involves a comparison between human beings and other complex and active animals. These animals do have “feelings which vary abundantly in quality,” but they “do not know they have them” (Dewey 1958, 258; emphasis added). Shusterman is correct in maintaining that language is for Dewey a prerequisite of knowledge.

There are two points to make. First, in comparing human beings with other developed animals, Dewey maintains that language brings a radical change in the relation between living organisms and their environment. I don’t know of anyone who would deny this. If this is taken to be the criterion for the linguistic turn, then all writers have taken this turn and the whole notion becomes useless. Second, and more importantly, to maintain that language is a prerequisite of human mind does not entail that language is enough for the constitution of the object of knowledge.

In the pages of *Experience and Nature* to which Shusterman refers, Dewey is not discussing what is, properly speaking, the object of knowledge. But elsewhere in the same book Dewey has this to say about the topic: “Genuine science is impossible as long as the object esteemed for its own intrinsic qualities is taken as the object of knowledge” (130). Qualities as such are not objects of knowledge. What counts, then, as an object of knowledge for Dewey? “The objects of science, like the direct objects of art, are an order of *relations* which serve as tools to effect immediate havings and beings” (136, emphasis added). What kind of relations are they? According to Dewey “the *ultimate* objects of science are *guided* processes of change” (160, emphasis in the original). In other words, the object of knowledge is a relation between an object before an operation entailing it and the object after the operation that changes the object. Knowledge is about what changes in the world can be brought about with controlled operations.

As quoted above, Shusterman maintains that knowledge is based on sense perception. This is not Dewey's view. As David Hildebrand puts it:

The gambit of defining perception as knowledge commits two important errors: first, it misdescribes *knowledge* by claiming it can be simply had, in an instant. Knowledge, according to Dewey, is never had in this way; knowledge is an achievement, the eventual, alembicated product of inquiry. Knowledge... is the result of situated processes that were initiated to respond to specific problems. Second, this definition misdescribes *perception* by implying that it, too, can be had in an instant. (Hildebrand 2003, 24, emphasis in the original.)

Strictly speaking, simple qualities are not experienced at all: "Even on so-called scientific ground there are no experiences of 'pure' or 'simple' qualities, nor of qualities limited to the range of a single sense" (Dewey 1980, 121). The pragmatist notion of experience cannot be based on sensory perception alone. It must go beyond what is perceived. As Dewey explains in *Experience and Nature*, "Any object that is overt is charged with possible consequences that are hidden" (Dewey 1958, 21). This has to do with Dewey's notion of meaning, discussed below. But first there is more to say about Dewey's conception of the object of knowledge.

In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey sums up the basic errors during the history of philosophy in defining the object of knowledge: "There are four types of subject-matter whose rival claims to be the objects of true knowledge have to be either disposed of or in some way accommodated to one another" (Dewey 1984, 156). According to Dewey, all these rival claims and connected problems grow from a single root. They spring from the doctrine that "knowledge is a grasp or beholding of reality without anything being done to modify its antecedent state" (157). Dewey disagrees with this. According to him, knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator. For a participator "the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action" (157).

Now compare this view (the one with which Dewey explicitly disagrees: "knowledge is a grasp or beholding of reality without anything being done to modify its antecedent state") with the one that Shusterman attributes to Dewey, the one that according to Shusterman is evidence of Dewey's linguistic turn: "In insisting that only language constitutes qualities as objects of knowledge, Dewey has already taken the linguistic turn" (Shusterman 1997, 161).

Where is the difference in conceiving the object of knowledge? There must be a genuine difference if we are to avoid the conclusion that Shusterman puts in Dewey's mouth a definition of the object knowledge that Dewey actually considers the common root of all the

rivaling (erroneous) definitions. Perhaps Shusterman can give us some explanation. What is the difference between “language constitutes qualities as objects of knowledge” and “knowledge is grasping or beholding reality”?

The role of the body in experience

As we have already seen, Shusterman maintains that “knowledge is largely based on sensory perception” (Shusterman 2008, 19) and that qualities can be considered as objects of knowledge. The role of the body in experience is to be “a medium of perception” (3). The body is “a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation” (19). In bodily experience we use “the body’s perceptual equipment” (12). This kind of terminology is used throughout the book: somatic perception (53), bodily sensations (57), primary perceptual experience (65), bodily self-observation (73), embodied perception (77) and so on.

This terminology makes it clear that for Shusterman experience is perceptual experience, and this may be one of the reasons he fails to see the epistemic role of bodily action in performing the guided processes of change that ultimately are the objects of true knowledge. This is also probably the reason he underestimates the role of the body in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

When discussing the role of the body in Merleau-Ponty, Shusterman emphasizes the body’s limitations and essential weaknesses. The body inhabits a particular place and gives us a particular angle of perception or perspective. (Shusterman 2008, 52.) Perspective is thus a limitation. The question is: Compared to what is perspective a limitation?

One thing that comes to mind is the classical conception of *a priori* knowledge—knowledge that is prior to experience and thus immutable and eternal. Perspective corrupts such claims to the absolute objectivity and certainty of knowledge. This view still has its adherents, but Dewey was certainly not among them. In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey emphasizes constantly that the world is in continuous change and that the controlled operations necessary for acquiring knowledge change the world. As a result, there is no room for eternal truths about immutable objects. As quoted above, objects of knowledge are guided processes of change, and there are always some embodied beings with material instruments (bodily organs or other instruments like laboratory devices) that are controlling these operations. This involves a perspective, but this perspective is objective in the sense that

human bodies and other instruments of knowledge are real material objects in this material world. Davis Baird has coined the term *thing knowledge* to express this (Baird 2004).

Shusterman indicates that “the body is deficient in not being able to observe itself wholly and directly” (Shusterman 2008, 52). This is certainly a limitation, but it is one that restricts every observation of any object. We are not able to observe any object wholly and directly in the sense of seeing it from all perspectives at once. This traditional problem has been discussed in philosophy since Plato and in psychology since Herman Helmholtz, at least. According to David Marr, the visual system is limited in the sense that it has to make a specific assumption, a rigidity assumption, in order to interpret the visual field as containing rigid three-dimensional objects (Marr 1982). There is, of course, an important difference between observing external objects and one’s own body. Sense organs are parts of the body, but this limitation is actually the same as the previous one: the body determines a perspective.

Merleau-Ponty’s positive and constructive view of the body not as a source of limitations but as a means of suggesting new solutions to traditional problems is crystallized in the notion of motor intentionality. Motility is “basic intentionality” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 158–159). There is an “intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility” (157). Immanuel Kant solved the problem of how the experienced structure and unity of the world is formed by appealing to pure forms of sensibility, space and time, and the synthetic activity of pure understanding. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this is what motor intentionality brings about. “Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (159–160).

For Merleau-Ponty motor intentionality (motility) is not an aspect of perceptual experience. “Sight and movement are specific ways of entering into relationship with objects” (159). It is the body (not only its sense-organs) that is “our general medium of having the world” (169). Motor intentionality is Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the question, What is the *basis* of the intentionality of perceptual experience? This is similar to Jean Piaget’s answer to the same question. Sensorimotor schemes (the scheme of the permanent object) give ground for the cognitive structures that enable the child to categorize, for example, visual perceptions from different perspectives as perceptions of the same object. This is one way in which the epistemic role of bodily action can be considered: as a basis for the categorization of perceptual experience.

Motor intentionality is, thus, not an aspect or property of perceptual experience, and neither is it a property of reflective consciousness. “Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents” (170). The epistemic role of bodily action is here connected with meanings. The question is: What kind of meanings? As a linguistic turn pragmatist Shusterman does not take this question under consideration. Motor intentionality is not for him a tool for analyzing the epistemic role of bodily action. He refers to Merleau-Ponty’s motor intentionality, for example, when explaining why we are not suffocated by our pillows: if a pillow “comes to block our breathing, we will typically turn our heads” (Shusterman 2008, 54). In other words, motor intentionality, for Shusterman, appears to be some sort of reflex rather than a basis for the imposition of meanings.

Shusterman might have omitted the talk about “[t]he mysterious efficacy of our spontaneous intentionality” (Shusterman 2008, 61) and taken seriously the hints in Merleau-Ponty’s text that he himself quotes (62): “The acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 165). This line of thought takes habits of action to be vehicles of meaningful cognition, and this could (and should) be compared with Peirce’s conception according to which the locus of rationality lies in habits, as the readers of *ACT 4:1* (2005) might remember from the discussion of Erkki Kilpinen’s thesis about the concept of habit in Peirce and pragmatism generally.

In the middle of this quotation Shusterman adds, quite symptomatically, the phrase “including our habits of speech and thought,” (62) although Merleau-Ponty is not discussing speaking and writing. He writes, instead, about dancing and driving a car. Apparently any mention of signification creates for Shusterman the need of bringing up language. However, meanings can be understood in a wider sense, which leads us to the pragmatist notion of meaning.

The pragmatist notion of meaning

Shusterman focuses on linguistic meanings and for a linguistic turn philosopher there seem to be only linguistic meanings. However, in the pragmatist tradition the notion of meaning is broader, as Merleau-Ponty also suggests. Shusterman quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein, emphasizing that practice gives the words their sense, and that such practice involves

agreement in form of life (Shusterman 2008, 113). In short: meaning is use. To know what a word means is to know how it is used in the context of other practices. The question that Shusterman does *not* ask is the following: To what other things might practice give sense or meaning?

John Dewey did ask this question. In *Democracy and Education* we read: “In short, the sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing ‘hat’ gains it, by being used in a given way” (Dewey 1916, 18). And as we have already seen, Peirce writes that what a thing means is simply what habits it involves. Habits of using a thing surely belong to the habits it involves, but there may also be habits involved that are not ways of using the thing. Peirce’s definition that habits of action are meanings is therefore wider (for the relation between Peirce and Wittgenstein, see Määttänen 2005).

A habit of action is meaning in the sense that it enables one to get cognitive distance from the actual situation, to think about something that is not here and now but somewhere else at some other time. A habit makes it possible to anticipate what kind of situation will be realized if one acts according to the habit in question. “The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This *relationship* is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence” (Dewey 1980, 44, emphasis added). This wide definition of meaning results in a multilayered system of meanings through which we experience and interpret our natural and cultural environment (Määttänen 2007).

Any actual situation or object of perception provides several possibilities of habitual action (J.J. Gibson’s “affordance” is a useful term here), and the comparison of the possible outcomes of these ways of acting with present needs and goals leads to a decision of what to do. Habits of action are in this sense vehicles of non-linguistic cognition (Määttänen, forthcoming). Replace habitual action with controlled operation, and you get Dewey’s definition of the object of true knowledge.

Dewey points out that works of art as qualitative wholes contain (embody or incorporate) meanings that are not linguistic. After describing what he means by linguistic meanings he continues, “But there are other meanings that present themselves directly as possessions of objects which are experienced. Here there is no need for a code or convention of interpretation; the meaning is as inherent in immediate experience as is that of a flower garden” (Dewey 1980, 83). In contrast to general meanings of language “[t]he meaning of an expressive object... is individualized” (90). Dewey does not develop this notion of

nonlinguistic meaning further, leaving that to his followers. This legacy is completely ignored in Shusterman's linguistic version of pragmatist aesthetics in general and in his theory of somaesthetics in particular.

Conclusion

Shusterman is a linguistic turn philosopher who advocates post-Rortyan pragmatism. Rorty's emphasis on language is quite clear: "But nature undescribed in any human language is simply Kant's unknowable thing-in-itself—an utterly useless notion, the plaything of philosophical skeptics, a toy rather than a tool." A little later, Rorty concludes that "the more one thinks about language, the less need there is to think about nature" (Rorty 1997, 17). Shusterman surely wants to discuss the body as a biological organism and, therefore, as a natural object, but apparently (if he is consistent with his earlier statements) believes that the qualities observed by somatic perceptions are constituted by language.

This is a form of neo-Kantianism, where the pure forms of sensibility and the pure concepts and categories of understanding are simply replaced by language. The dualisms of classical philosophy, criticized by Dewey, are replaced by a dualism involving language on one hand and nature (as a thing-in-itself) on the other. This is far from Dewey's naturalistic pragmatism (Määttänen 2006). It is clear that this kind of orientation leads one to think about the body (and its habits) merely as an object of reflective consciousness and as a source of aesthetic experiences. But as I have tried to show, the alternative is to think about the body and habits as instruments of experiencing and interpreting the natural and cultural environment. Classical pragmatism tried to pose and solve traditional philosophical problems in a new way, and the role of the body and bodily (somatic) experience is crucial here. Shusterman's project of somaesthetics might have benefited significantly from such considerations.

In *Art and Experience* Dewey is quite clear and explicit in stating that besides linguistic meanings there are other meanings used in art (Dewey 1980, 83–86). The character of these meanings explains how works of art are emotionally expressive. "Art is the living and concrete proof that man [*sic*] is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of *meaning*, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature" (25, emphasis added). The examination of these non-linguistic meanings might give some insights into how they can be consciously used in making works of art (including music) emotionally

expressive. As developed in *Body Consciousness*, however, the main message of somaesthetics to musicians and music educators is that it is good to develop one's reflective bodily awareness and to keep one's body in condition by training it with, for example, the Alexander Technique. This is no doubt important, but perhaps there is more one could get from the consideration of the body and somatic experience.

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