

SOMAESTHETICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-CULTIVATION: AN INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND SPORT

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“Somaesthetics” is a philosophical method that involves a reconceptualization of the human body and philosophy as an academic discipline. This article provides an analysis of somaesthetics as it specifically relates to philosophy of sport. Body practices performed in the context of sport are rich sites for analyzing philosophical concepts of self-awareness, self-cultivation, and self-knowledge. The implications of the disciplinary connections between sport and philosophical self-cultivation are examined.

Keywords: Somaesthetics, human body, practice, self-knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of sport is, by nature, interdisciplinary. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, there are some questions about where and how sport fits into the academe, and hence, into philosophy. This paper offers something in the way of a solution, though perhaps a problematic one, by proposing an alternative way of conceptualizing the relationship between sport and philosophy. Much work in philosophy of sport has involved the application of philosophical tools to sporting issues, or using case studies from sport to challenge the efficacy of philosophical theories and concepts. While this work invariably expands the range of philosophy, this methodology does not challenge the foundational nature of the discipline of philosophy. These important issues prompt a rethinking of the body and its place in sport, and a reconceptualization of philosophy as process-oriented and transformative to the body as well as mind.

When it comes to the human body, the Western philosophical tradition is haunted by systematic misinterpretation. Nietzsche expressed this sentiment best in the Preface to the *gay science* where he writes: “The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloak of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes frighteningly far – and I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*” (5, emphasis in the original). This “misunderstanding” of the body ranges from outright dismissal and neglect to neurotic fixation on the body, often as an object or instrument. While this misunderstanding of the body has been challenged and addressed, a propensity to analyze the body as an object from a seemingly disembodied perspective continues to shape the disci-

pline of philosophy. In short, philosophy often fails to call attention to the fact that it, like everything else, is indeed an embodied endeavor.

In response to these concerns, pragmatist Richard Shusterman proposed a new philosophical project, which he names “somaesthetics”. First articulated as a “disciplinary proposal” in the Summer 1999 issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (and later elaborated upon in his 2000 book, *Pragmatist aesthetics*), somaesthetics is defined as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” (Pragmatist aesthetics). Somaesthetics is not merely the process of bringing the body to philosophy for analysis, but rather, somaesthetics is “devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure somatic care” (Shusterman, 2000). The uniqueness of somaesthetics lies precisely in its emphasis on body practices and actual bodily care, prompting us to rethink the dimensions of philosophy and the philosophical relevance of body practices such as those involved in sport.

Thus, I am concerned with three questions in this paper: (1) What is the relationship of somaesthetics to sport? (2) What does a sport-oriented somaesthetics offer to philosophical self-cultivation, or to the question of how we are to “shape our embodied selves”?, and (3) What are the disciplinary and pedagogical implications of a sport-oriented somaesthetics?

I will respond to each of these questions in turn, but first I would like to make a few distinctions to clarify my terms and subject matter.

First, at present, the academic sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics refers to theories and problems of art. This sub-discipline has been constructed as narrow

and esoteric and has departed from its original intended definition. The root word, *aisthesis*, refers to sensory perception. When Alexander Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics” in 1750, he advocated a “science of sensory perception” and an “entire program of philosophical self-perception in the art of living” (Shusterman, 2000). While Baumgarten ironically claimed that sensory perception is a “lower faculty” and he cautioned against engaging in such activities as “fierce athletics,” his original expanded definition of aesthetics is the one that informs somaesthetics. I adhere to this conception of the aesthetic throughout this paper. If you are looking for an argument on how sport is aesthetic because it is analogous to art, you will not find it here. Rather, the aesthetic is connected to sensory perception and awareness in bodily experience, thus expanding the realm of the aesthetic beyond art. I want to expunge the definition of the aesthetic of the negative connotations of vigorous body training that Baumgarten introduced.

Second, a definition of somaesthetics. The root word “soma” refers to the body of an organism, namely the human body. Thus, somaesthetics literally means “body aesthetics”. Coupled with Baumgarten’s use of the word “aesthetics”, somaesthetics refers to a critical study of the body and the role of the body in philosophical self-perception and self-reflection.

Third, it may not be immediately clear how somaesthetics connects to sport, especially because I refer to a general term “body practices” throughout this paper. “Body practices” refer to a wide range of tasks performed in the name of somatic care. A subset of body practices are those performed in sport. I take sport to denote a large cultural institution devoted to training for and competing in physical contests and games. It is my position that the fundamental body practice of sport is dynamic movement. Paul Schilder, in his 1950 work *The image and appearance of the human body*, organizes bodily movement in terms of static and dynamic movement. Static movements are those performed in primary positions of the body, or the habitual postures adopted by an individual body when performing everyday acts such as sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. Dynamic movements are those movements that depart from primary positions. Despite the repetition of dynamic movements, such as running for long periods of time, the body will return to its crystallized primary positions, though the primary position or posture changes and shifts according to the nature of dynamic movements performed. It is this act of systematically departing from primary postures and performing series of dynamic movements that forms the basis of body practice in sport. The main point that I want to make here is that sport, via the practice of dynamic movement, constitutes a form of somatic attention, and can sometimes qualify as a kind of somatic care.

Now, I will elaborate on somaesthetics. Somaesthetics is not a theory of the body, rather, it is a method for reorganizing bodily knowledge and practices with the goal of a better understanding of the body. Such a reorganization challenges disciplinary boundaries and expands existing knowledge in interesting directions. Somaesthetics has three dimensions, and the second dimension has three categories. The first dimension is “analytic somaesthetics”, which “describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and also of their function in our knowledge and construction of reality” (Shusterman, 2000). Analytic somaesthetics describes the body and its place in the world, namely how the body is reciprocally shaped and shaped by sociopolitical dimensions. Analytic somaesthetics is basically a term denoting the large historical and genealogical catalogue of body practices. This simple point about sport practices follows, then. Sporting practices and training methods would be included under analytic somaesthetics, along with their history and their bodily benefits and shortcomings.

Pragmatic somaesthetics is the normative evaluation of body practices. Pragmatic somaesthetics not only examines particular body practices, but compares and criticizes, and then proposes “various methods to improve certain facts by remaking one’s body and thus, society”. Shusterman notes that a “vast variety of pragmatic disciplines have been recommended to improve our experience and use of the body over time”; these practices include body piercing, yoga, body building, drug use, dieting, martial arts, etc. (Shusterman, 2000). The task for pragmatic somaesthetics is then to determine what practices are most beneficial, and prescribe how we ought to approach and practice them. For example, in order to induce a kind of euphoric bodily feeling, I could leave this room and run several miles or I could induce a dose of cocaine. This example, and the task of evaluation of the ever-expanding list of somatic practices raises a number of crucial questions. Perhaps one of the most crucial questions for those of us concerned with how we ought to care for our embodied selves is: What is the difference between somatic *care* and somatic *abuse*? And, on what grounds can we make such judgments? These are important questions for somaesthetics.

Pragmatic somaesthetics implicitly provides direction for answering these questions by organizing this vast variety of body practices into three categories: representational, experiential, and performative. Representational body practices, such as body piercing and tattooing, are primarily performed in western cultures in search of a particular appearance, while rock climbing, for example, is performed for an inner feeling of experiential benefit. This distinction is not hard and fast, however, because of the reciprocity between how we look and how we feel. Also, activities can be performed in

pursuit of both experiential and representational aims. In working out on the stair climber, I may primarily be seeking reduced weight and conformity to a particular beauty ideal, but come to enjoy the experiential benefits afforded as well. Shusterman recognizes this and then proposes a third category of pragmatic somaesthetics, called “performative somaesthetics” (Shusterman, 2000). This category includes the practices that are devoted to bodily strength, health, and performance. But, immediately after proposing this new category, Shusterman claims that activities such as weight-lifting and athletics can be subsumed into either of the first two categories.

This third category seems to be where most sporting activities would fall and I think Shusterman is mistaken in dissolving this category. What I call a “sport-oriented somaesthetics” could address many sporting issues, not just those concerned with experience and representation. By limiting the experiential aspects to inner bodily feeling and heightened bodily awareness, we are committed to a very narrow view of experience. Granted, heightened bodily awareness and the experiential aspects of embodiment are still largely unaccounted for in philosophy, but we ought not limit our philosophical perspective by adopting a narrow view of bodily experience. This is one area where I believe sport can greatly enrich our conceptions of self-cultivation. Sport-oriented experiences are not exhausted by representational or bodily awareness. For example, sport-oriented motive and intention cannot be accommodated by somaesthetics in its current state. I may like the representational aspects of long distance running, namely my bodily appearance, and I may enjoy the smooth functioning of my body. I may also enjoy the experiential aspects of running fast, but somaesthetics cannot account for the experiential social aspects of teamwork or my motives and strategies employed to succeed in competition. In short, performative somaesthetics is a site rich for sporting analysis. One gap that needs to be addressed is between the social aspects of sport and subjective somatic experience. The social elements of sport shape our bodily experiences in incalculable ways, and these need to be articulated at the level of the pragmatic, not just on the analytic level.

The third and final dimension of somaesthetics is “practical somaesthetics”, which involves actual bodily practices. Practical somaesthetics is “actually practicing such bodily care through intelligently disciplined body work aimed at self-improvement” (Shusterman, 2000). The terms “intelligently disciplined” and “aimed at self-improvement” are slippery and subjective terms that I find to be problematic (Shusterman, 2000). One could certainly argue that the body practices employed by an anorectic are indeed “intelligently disciplined” and “aimed at self-improvement”. I believe that we need to

carefully examine and better describe the means and ends of self-improvement as advocated by somaesthetics, and the ethical implications of such projects of self-awareness and self-improvement.

The not so implicit assumption of the project of somaesthetics is that greater somatic awareness and deep critical analyses of the body will produce self-knowledge and self-awareness. There is a basic distinction to be made between “sensing” and “awareness”. Our bodies are always sensing, but we are often oblivious to a great deal of sensory perceptions, until we encounter pain. Bodily awareness is conscious assessment and evaluation of the dimensions of sensory perceptions. It is assumed that such conscious assessment produces a kind of self-knowledge. This model of self-knowledge through the body challenges the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy in the present Western university system. However, the connections between self-knowledge and bodily awareness, and the ethical and normative claims that accompany them, need more careful attention.

In his article “The significance of human movement: A phenomenological approach”, Seymour Kleinman challenges disciplinary boundaries of physical education and proposes that we adopt objectives of physical education that foster self-knowledge. He first criticizes the discipline of physical education for moving toward a scientific model, concerned with biomechanics, physiology, and biology. He argues that in seeking legitimacy from the sciences, we are short-changing ourselves and students. Kleinman advances six new objectives of physical education:

1. To develop an awareness of bodily being in the world.
2. To gain understanding of self and consciousness.
3. To grasp the significations of movements.
4. To become sensitive of one’s encounters and acts.
5. To discover the heretofore hidden perspectives of acts and uncover the deeper meaning of one’s being as it explores movement experiences.
6. To enable one, ultimately, to create on his own an experience through movement which culminates in meaningful, purposeful realization of the self (179).

Kleinman readily acknowledges that these objectives are not the purpose of sports and games. He claims that sports and physical education are not the same, even though they both deal with movement.

CONCLUSION

I wish to build upon Kleinman’s points and encourage philosophers to consider adopting modified versions of these objectives. If we take these objectives seriously, our philosophy classrooms and our pedagogies would radically change. I became particularly interested in so-

maesthetics through this very question last spring. I will to teach a course titled *Philosophy of sport: Ethics, gender, and the body* in spring 2006. As I was proposing the course, I became concerned and began to ask myself: "How can I teach students about sport, and the complex issues that accompany sport, and the significance of the movements of their own bodies when many of them have likely had mediocre or bad experiences with their bodies?" Part of my answer to this question is that philosophy ought to encourage, if not require, students to engage in some body practices and reflect on them. A sport-oriented somaesthetics course is one framework for sport philosophers to engage philosophical objectives of self-knowledge. Such a course would include a survey of sporting body practices and their histories, their roles and objectives. It would also include critical evaluation and assessment of these practices and such concepts as health and strength. Most importantly, students would be required to engage in body practices and teamwork building exercises and reflect upon them. I am not sure how many university deans or administrators would endorse such a course, but I believe such a radical pedagogy is important for exposing students to a range of experiences upon they can then philosophically reflect.

In conclusion, somaesthetics offers philosophers of sport a structural framework to build upon. Philosophy of sport must integrate humanistic theory and practice with the goal of self-knowledge and self-awareness. If sport philosophers adopt some of the principles implicit in somaesthetics, then philosophy and sport can become responsible to one another in new ways.

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SOMESTETIKA A FILOSOFICKÉ SEBEROZVÍJENÍ: PRŮSEČÍK FILOSOFIE A SPORTU (Souhrn anglického textu)

„Somestetika“ je filosofická metoda, která vyžaduje rekonceptualizaci lidského těla a filosofie jako akademického oboru. Tento příspěvek přináší analýzu somestetiky, protože ta má zvláštní vztah k filosofii sportu. Tělesná cvičení vykonávaná v oblasti sportu jsou vhodnými oblastmi pro analýzu filosofických pojmů sebeuvědomění, seberozvíjení a sebepoznávání. Jsou zde zkoumány oborové souvislosti mezi sportovním a filosofickým seberozvíjením.

Klíčová slova: somestetika, lidské tělo, cvičení, sebepoznávání.

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