Somaesthetics and Education

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This paper explains the discipline I call somaesthetics, which is devoted to studying the experience and use of one's body as a site of sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning. It is a critical, meliorative discipline that aims to improve the experience and use of oneself and thus also improve the larger communities or environments in which the self is actively situated. After noting some underlying philosophical goals and roots of somaesthetics, I outline its main branches: analytic, pragmatic, and practical somaesthetics, and I distinguish between its representational, experiential, and performative modes. I then defend the somaesthetic approach against philosophical arguments that challenge the value of reflective body consciousness, and I elaborate the special contributions that somaesthetics can make to education. After offering a brief example of an exercise of somaesthetic reflection, the paper concludes by considering the practical problems of introducing somaesthetic education into the standard frameworks of current educational institutions.

Key words: somaesthetics, education, body awareness, habit

I

In the pragmatist tradition of William James and John Dewey, I regard experience as a central concept of philosophy and affirm the body as an organizing core of experience. So in developing a pragmatist aesthetics and a theory of philosophy as an art of living, I proposed a more constructive and systematic philosophical approach to the body which I call "somaesthetics" and which I conceive as a discipline of theory and practice.1 Somaesthetics is deeply concerned with important educational aims and may offer some interesting new perspectives and techniques with respect to learning. But it also presents some particular problems with respect to its teaching in the standard university curriculum. In this paper, after briefly outlining the aims and structure of somaesthetics, I examine its educational potential and problems, considering both historical sources and the contemporary situation.

Somaesthetics can be roughly defined as a discipline devoted to the critical, ameliorative study of the experience and use of the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it. When Alexander Baumgarten founded the field of aesthetics as a theoretical but also practical discipline aimed at "the perfection of sensory cognition, this implying beauty", he excluded somatic study and exercise from this enterprise, probably because of religious and rationalist influences.8 But while ancient Platonism and modern Western philosophy have been mostly critical of the body, if we simply recall philosophy's central aims of knowledge, self-knowledge, right action, justice, and the quest for the good life, then the crucial value of somaesthetics should be clear.

1. Since knowledge is largely based on sensory perception whose reliability often proves questionable, philosophy has always been concerned with the critique of the senses, but this critique has been essentially confined to the discursive analysis and critique of sensory propositional judgements that constitutes standard epistemology. The complemen-
tary route offered by somaesthetics is instead to correct the actual functional performance of our senses by an improved direction of one’s body, since the senses belong to and are conditioned by the soma. Socrates long ago insisted that the body be kept fit and healthy in order to augment the accuracy and range of our perceptions. “The body is valuable for all human activities, and in all its uses it is very important that it should be as fit as possible. Even in the act of thinking, which is supposed to require least assistance from the body, everyone knows that serious mistakes often happen through physical ill-health.” Similarly, a person will be able to perceive less of his environment if a stiff neck or rigid rib cage prevents him from rotating the head to look behind him.

2. If self-knowledge is a central aim of philosophy, then knowledge of one’s bodily dimension must not be ignored. Concerned not simply with the body’s external form or representation but with its lived experience, somaesthetics works toward improved awareness of our feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes. It can therefore reveal and improve somatic malfunctionings that normally go undetected even though they impair our well-being and performance.

Consider two examples. We rarely notice our breathing, but its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state. Consciousness of breathing can therefore make us aware that we are angry or anxious when we might otherwise remain unaware of these feelings and thus vulnerable to their misdirection. Similarly, a chronic contraction of certain muscles that constrains movement and causes tension and pain may nonetheless go unnoticed because it has become habitual. As unnoticed this chronic contraction cannot be relieved, nor can its resultant disability and discomfort. Yet once such somatic functioning is brought to clear attention, there is the possibility of modifying it and avoiding its unpleasant consequences.

3. A third central aim of philosophy is right action, which requires both knowledge and effective will. Since we can only act by means of our bodies, our power of will -- the ability to act as we will to act -- depends on somatic efficacy. By exploring and refining our bodily experience, we can gain a better grasp of how our will works and a better mastery of its concrete application in behavior. Knowing and desiring the right action will not avail if we cannot will our bodies to perform it; and our surprising inability to perform the most simple bodily tasks is matched only by our astounding blindness to this inability, these failures resulting from inadequate somaesthetic awareness.

Consider a poor golfer who tries with all his might to keep his head down and his eyes on the ball and who is completely convinced that he is doing so, even though he in fact miserably fails to. His conscious will is unsuccessful because deeply ingrained somatic habits override it, and he does not even notice this failure because his habitual sense perception is so inadequate and distorted that it feels as if the action intended is indeed performed as willed. In too much of our action we are like the golfer, whose “strong” will remains impotent, since lacking the somatic sensibility to make it effective. For such reasons, Diogenes the Cynic advocated rigorous body training as “that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds.”

4. If philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and better living, then somaesthetics’ concern with the body as the locus and medium of our pleasures clearly deserves more philosophical attention. Even the pleasures of pure thought are (for us humans) embodied, and thus can be intensified or more acutely savored through improved somatic awareness and discipline. As thinking also involves the body’s muscular contractions, it is better served by somatic health.

5. Since the body is a malleable site for inscribing social power, somaesthetics can also contribute to political philosophy’s interest in justice.” It offers a way of understanding how complex hierarchies of power can be sustained without any need to make them explicit in laws. Entire ideologies of domination can be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, get typically taken for granted and so escape critical consciousness?: for instance, the norms that women of a given culture should only speak softly, eat daintily, sit with their legs close together, walk keeping head and eyes down, assume the bottom role
in copulation, etc. However, just as repressive power relations are encoded in our bodies, so they can be challenged by alternative somatic practices. Michel Foucault joins Wilhelm Reich and other body therapists in advocating this message, though the recommended somatic methods often differ greatly. Even if we are not interested in large-scale social reforms but simply one's own personal liberation from damaging habits and attitudes, a systematic attention to and modification of one's body practices can be a path to greater freedom.

Though there is much contemporary discussion of the body, somaesthetics offers a structuring architectonic to integrate these very different, seemingly incommensurable discourses into a more productively systematic field. It also offers a clear pragmatic orientation, something that the individual can directly translate into a discipline of improved somatic practice.

II

Somaesthetics has three fundamental dimensions. **Analytic somaesthetics** describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality. This theoretical dimension involves ontological and epistemological issues concerning the body, but also includes the sort of sociopolitical inquiries that Foucault made central: how the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health and beauty and even the most basic categories of sex and gender are constructions sustained by and serving social forces. Foucault’s approach to these somatic issues was typically genealogical, portraying the historical emergence of various body doctrines, norms, and practices. But analytic somaesthetics can also compare the body ideologies and practices of two or more synchronic cultures.

**Pragmatic somaesthetics** is the dimension concerned with methods of somatic improvement and their comparative critique. Over the course of human history, many kinds of methods have been recommended to improve our experience and use of the body: diverse diets, forms of dress, gymnastic training, dance and martial arts, cosmetics, body piercing or scarification, yoga, massage, aerobics, body-building, erotic arts, and disciplines of psychosomatic improvement like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method. These diverse methodologies of practice can be roughly classified into representational and experiential: the former emphasize the body's external appearance, while the latter focus not on how the body looks from the outside but on the quality of its experience. Such experiential methods aim to make us "feel better" in both senses of this ambiguous phrase that reflects the ambiguity of the very notion of aesthetics: they aim to make the quality of experience more satisfyingly rich, but also to make our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive. Cosmetic practices (from make-up to plastic surgery) exemplify the representational side of somaesthetics, while practices like Zen meditation or Feldenkrais's Method of Awareness Through Movement are paradigmatic of the experiential.

The representational/experiential distinction is useful for seeing that somaesthetics cannot be globally condemned as superficial, since confined to surface appearances. But the distinction should not be construed as rigidly exclusive, since there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner. How we look can influence how we feel, but also vice versa. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for ends of representation often produce feelings that are then sought for their own sake. Somatic methods aimed at inner experience sometimes employ representational means as cues to effect the body posture necessary for inducing the desired experience, whether by consulting one's image in a mirror, focussing our gaze on a body part like the tip of the nose or the navel, or simply visualizing a body form in one's imagination.

Conversely, representational practices like bodybuilding utilize improved awareness of experiential clues to serve its ends of external form. The bodybuilder must be able to distinguish the good pain that builds muscle from the bad pain that signals injury, just as he must feel when he reaches the full extension and contraction of a muscle, since going through the full range of motion is the only way to stimulate the entire muscle and every possible
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muscle fiber. The experiential/representational distinction is also not exhaustive; a third category of performative somaesthetics could be introduced to group methodologies that focus primarily on building strength, health, or skill: such as weightlifting, athletics, and martial arts. However, to the extent that such performance-oriented practices aim either at external exhibition or one’s inner feeling of power, they may be somewhat assimilated into the representational or experiential categories.

The methodologies of pragmatic somaesthetics need to be distinguished from their actual practice. I call this third dimension practical somaesthetics. It is not a matter of producing texts about the body, not even texts offering pragmatic programs of somatic care; it is rather about physically engaging in such care -- through reflective, disciplined, demanding corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement (whether representational, experiential, or performative). This dimension, not of saying but of doing, is the most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the logos of discourse typically treats the body in mere textual terms. But actual bodily performance is crucial to the idea that somaesthetics is practice as well as theory.

III

The study of somaesthetics in its analytic and pragmatic forms provides a wide range of knowledge about bodily forms, norms, practices, and techniques. Such knowledge, of course, has some educational value in informing us about these matters. But since space is brief, let me concentrate on the more provocative question of the educational value of practical somaesthetics, whose activity is not the representation of discursive truths. The practical somaesthetics of performance seems useful for education, if we follow the reasoning of Xenophon’s Socrates that the cultivation of a stronger, healthier, better performing body should result in better functioning of the senses and mind. Even when philosophers describe the body as merely the mind’s instrument or servant, they generally recognize that the mind is better served when its instrument or servant is in better functioning order. Though idealist philosophers who denounce the body and its senses as dangerous distractions that imprison the mind have often resisted this insight, even Plato (whose Phaedo presents perhaps the first and most vehement of such arguments against the body) ultimately insisted in works like Timaeus, Republic, and Laws on the importance of gymnastics for the better balance or harmony of the soul.

Rousseau’s Emile provides an excellent set of arguments for the mental advantages of developing not only health but bodily strength and skill. “The body must be vigorous in order to obey the soul... A good servant ought to be robust... The weaker the body, the more it commands,” thus “a frail body weakens the soul.” We therefore need to exercise the body to develop the mind, which it nourishes and informs through its senses: “it is only with a surplus of strength beyond what [man] needs to preserve himself that there develops in him the speculative faculty fit to employ this excess of strength for other uses... To learn to think, therefore, it is necessary to exercise our limbs, our senses, our organs, which are the instruments of our intelligence.” Practical somaesthetic needs to be distinguished from traditional forms of physical education that merely seek to develop strength by mechanical repetitions of exercises that are aimed at achieving standardized bodily forms and measurements or acquiring mere brute power. Somaesthetics (as the term aesthesis implies) is concerned with educating the bodily senses (including our kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses) that are needed to properly direct the bodily powers we deploy. A good part of this exercise involves our reflective awareness and assessment of our sensory appreciation, and this is where the disciplines of experiential somaesthetics come especially into play.

The educational value of such disciplines is not adequately recognized. Important philosophers, moreover, have made assertions that cast doubt on the usefulness of experiential somaesthetics. Kant, for instance, recognizes the role of physical education. For him it includes not only physical exercise like running, jumping, throwing, wrestling, carrying weights and games that involve such activities, but also the more elementary matters of “feeding and tending” and of “discipline (which he
conceives as the "merely negative" work of "restraining unruliness"). However, Kant seems strongly opposed to the sort of reflective examination of one's somatic experience that constitutes practical somaesthetics. "To listen to oneself and constantly direct attention to the state of one's sensations takes the mind's activity away from considering other things and is harmful to the head." "The inner sensibility, that one here generates through one's reflections is harmful. Analysts easily get sick... One must be self conscious in observing one's own representations and sensations (one feels oneself completely). This inner view and self-feeling weakens the body and diverts it from animal functions."\textsuperscript{11} In short, experiential somatic reflection is harmful to both mind and body, and the best way to treat one's body is to ignore, as much as possible, the sensations of how it feels, while using it actively in work and exercise.

Though I think Kant's argument is wrong, it rests on a grain of truth. In our normal activities, our attention is and needs to be primarily directed outside to the objects of our environment in relation to which we need to act and react in order to survive and flourish. Thus for excellent evolutionary reasons, we should be primarily devoted to examining these outside things, not our inner sensations. That is why, to borrow an image from Montaigne, nature positioned our eyes to be looking out rather than in. Kant's error, however, is confusing privity with exclusivity. If our attention needs to be mostly directed outward, this does not mean that it is not sometimes or even very useful to examine oneself and one's sensations. Life is not a monolithic affair, so attention must vary its focus according to our changing needs and interests. Though Kant is right that incessant attention to one's bodily sensations is harmful, the problem is not somaesthetic attention per se but one-sidedness of attention.\textsuperscript{11} Incessant attention to one's bank account, reputation, philosophical studies, or anything else would also be harmful.

How can experiential somaesthetics' sharpening of bodily awareness help reeducate our use of our selves and our senses in order to enable us to learn more and perform better? The answer is already implied in my earlier explanation of how somaesthetics advances the basic aims of philosophy, but let me now try to be still more explicit.

1. Experiential somaesthetics can inform us of our feelings and emotions before they are otherwise known to us, and thus it can help us better manage those feelings and emotions so that they do not interfere in our learning efforts. To return to the examples I gave earlier, by becoming generally more aware of my breathing through somaesthetic training, I can learn from changes in my breathing pattern that I am angry or anxious or uneasy before I would otherwise be conscious of such psychological disturbance; and, once aware, I can then do something to counteract its disturbing effects on my learning or action. For instance, I could realize I am now too upset or impatient to read this material properly and I could then either postpone my reading till I am calm or regulate my breathing to introduce the necessary calmness for reading carefully and enjoyably with understanding. Similarly, I may be reading in a posture that is uncomfortable or stress-producing (for example, if I am holding my neck, occipital muscles, back, rib cage, belly, or jaw too tightly) without really being aware of this discomfort. Yet though this discomfort now lies beneath the threshold of my consciousness (because of insufficient somaesthetic attention), it is disturbing enough to distract or diminish the quality of my attention to what I am reading. And such disturbing muscular contractions, when continued over time, will eventually break through to consciousness in the form of pain that is more obviously and powerfully distracting and that can be so strong as to prevent me altogether from concentrating on what I read or even from reading at all. But if we learn through somaesthetic discipline to become aware of these excessive muscular contractions in their initial and less consciously disturbing stage, we can do something to relieve them before they explode into consciousness as serious discomfort and pain.

2. The awareness achieved through experiential somaesthetics not only gives us better knowledge and management of our feelings (whether in learning or in other aspects of life) but also better control of our movements, hence our actions. As the golfing example makes clear, one cannot (except by blind luck) learn to correct one's bad swing into a good
swing until one is aware in concrete experiential terms of what one is doing wrong with one’s body in one’s bad swing and how the body should feel when its parts are properly integrated in the good swing. The case is similar for learning to improve other kinds of movement: hitting a baseball, kicking a football, shooting a jump shot, playing the piano. Here again, heightened awareness to unnecessary muscle contractions in making (or preparing for) the movement can also alert us to problems that will bring eventual pain or injury if these movements are very frequently repeated in their presently stress-producing form instead of being retrained into less taxing styles of performing the same movement. If one swings a bat (or plays the piano) while holding the rib cage very tightly so that one’s force of movement is only in the hands and arms rather than involving one’s back and pelvis, the long-lasting success of such action is very doubtful while pain and injury are very likely.

3. Education is not so much a matter of working on particular emotions or movements, but of reorganizing or retraining habits of feeling and movement and habits of conduct to which feeling and movement contribute. This is also true of experiential somaesthetics. We might have a habitual reaction of anxiety with respect to mathematics or foreigners of a certain race (perhaps because of some traumatic event that was accompanied by rapid breathing and a “freezing” of the jaw muscles in tight contraction), a reaction that repeatedly emerges against our conscious rational will and that leads us to poor conduct, such as instinctively refusing attention to any foreigner or to any mathematical expression. But we can do little to reform this habit of bad feeling and the undesired misconduct that it brings by simply urging the rational will to assert itself more strongly, since the habitual bad feeling and conduct rest on habitual somatic reactions that lie beneath ordinary rational awareness and beyond mere rational control. Only by bringing these disturbing somatic sensations into clear focus through heightened somaesthetic awareness can we ever hope to isolate them sufficiently in consciousness so as to control them and prevent them from issuing in misconduct. Only through such heightened awareness of them can we go still further and work to transform the bad somatic feelings associated with the math or foreigners into more positive feelings that could then foster more positive attitudes and conduct. Likewise, a person whose persistent humiliation has engendered a habitual posture of holding himself timidly and tightly hunched over with bowed head will never gain full confidence without learning to assume a more erect, self-assured body posture that allows feelings of greater confidence. This is not merely because of habitual associations, but also because the hunched-over posture impairs not only ease of breathing (by contracting the chest cavity) but facility of head movement for scanning the horizon, both of which are factors productive of anxiety on the most basic experiential level.

No matter how compartmentalized our institutional learning has become, we become educated as embodied wholes. As there is a somatic dimension to all our feeling, thinking, and behavior, so we can sometimes get a better handle on the education of our emotions, attitudes, and conduct by approaching things from the somatic side. This hypothesis is central to many systems of somatic education and therapy (from the Asian forms of yoga and meditation to the Western somaesthetic practices of Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method), and it has been confirmed by the success of these practices in educating the mental, physical, and spiritual powers of its practitioners.

IV

There is not space here to develop my arguments fully, but I hope to have indicated how a good case can be made for the educational value of somaesthetics, particularly in its practical experiential dimension, which, at first glance, might seem irrelevant or (as Kant thought) detrimental to productive education. I invite you to supplement my arguments by performing some somaesthetic exercise of your own, perhaps examining your feelings in the experience of reading this text. It is not easy to maintain a focus on these feelings, if one is not already well practiced in such meditations; and it is still harder to describe these feelings in words, since they are, for the most part, what William James called “the
nameless feelings" of our stream of consciousness. That is one reason why they are generally ignored by philosophical theory. So let me help you focus by some guiding questions:

What are you aware of on the bodily level as you read these lines, and can you become more aware of your bodily position and feelings? Does your posture feel maximally comfortable for reading, or are there any tensions in your jaw, eyes, neck, chest, belly, hands, or legs? If reading English is not very easy for you, you are likely to have extra tension in some place because of the special effort of concentration you are making. In making a special effort, we usually contract muscles beyond those necessary for making that effort; for instance, we often harden our jaw when we lift or push a heavy weight or when we force ourselves to do hard mental work, even if we neither lift the weight nor think with the jaw. Similarly, your effort of concentration in reading may involve unnecessary contractions and hardening of your rib cage, which constrains breathing. So are you breathing easy and comfortably, or is your breath more shallow and perhaps hurried, expressing your impatience to finish this task of reading? Are both feet resting calmly and firmly on the floor while you are reading? Does one foot (or part thereof) or one side of your body feel like it is bearing more of your weight than the other? Which part or which side? Is there any change of posture or breathing you think would make you feel more comfortable, and what deters you from making that change?

If you have not lost your patience through this brief exercise in somatically reflective reading, then you can better appreciate the final question of this paper. In what manner or framework could practical somaesthetics be most effectively introduced into the school curriculum at the various levels of primary, secondary, and college education? This problem greatly puzzles me, so I look to experts in educational studies for guidance. Though convinced that somaesthetic addresses philosophy’s basic goals, I do not see how practical somaesthetics can be easily incorporated into the standard philosophical curriculum or practiced in the typical philosophical classroom that I know from Europe and America. Its distinctive physical engagement would probably be seen as sensationalist provocation that flouts philosophy's established academic definition as purely mental and theoretical.

I can imagine how most colleagues and many students would be horrified if I introduced exercises in the Reichian orgasm reflex, which is crucial to the somaesthetic discipline of bioenergetics, even if this exercise does not require students to engage in sexual acts or touch each other or even touch themselves sexually. That students have to lie on the ground and undulate their bodies through rhythmic contractions would be more than enough to offend standards of decorum in philosophy instruction.

And what of the practices of touching that are crucial to the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method of Functional Integration? Even though the teacher's touching here is gentle, non-intrusive, and non-sexual, the mere fact of touching a philosophy student in the classroom seems a shocking violation of the established limits of teacher-student relations. Not wanting to link somaesthetics with sensationalism and scandal, I have taught it in my philosophy classes only as theory and never as concrete practice. But I am not satisfied with this solution, for somaesthetic theory cannot be fully unless one has the experiences that only concrete practice provides.

Should somaesthetics, then, only be taught in classes of dance and physical education, where touching and thematized physical movement are accepted classroom practices? I worry that this solution will not adequately address the theoretical side of somaesthetics and may not even do justice to the intensely mental, reflective dimension of experiential somaesthetic practice. The standard gym or dance class format tends to reduce its subject matter to instruction in movement; when yoga is taught in such formats it is typically robbed of its philosophical dimension so that what remains is essentially an exercise class.

This problem of a curricular framework for somaesthetics points to a more general limitation of philosophical learning in today's educational system. In ancient times philosophy was practiced not just as an academic discipline but as a way of life, so philosophical instruction would include the inculcation of certain bodily practices (including diet and forms.
of dress) that were characteristic of the particular school of philosophy (e.g. epicurean, stoic, cynic). Such a holistic, embodied study of philosophy still survives in the monastic traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and other faiths where religious philosophy is learned and practiced as a comprehensive way of life. Can something of this holistic approach be achieved in contemporary philosophical education outside the monastic tradition and within the university framework of regular "course offerings" or special programs? What reforms of curriculum, institutions, and attitudes would be needed? If something important is learned through the experiential practice of somaesthetics (or through other experiential forms of learning) that cannot be adequately learned by mere discursive means, then it is perhaps worth looking for good answers to these questions.

Notes


2 For details see, Pragmatist Aesthetics, ch.10.

3 Xenophon, Conversations of Socrates (London: Penguin, 1970), 172

4 Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Eminent Philoso-


7 Immanuel Kant, Reflexionen zur Kritische Philosophie (Hgr.), Beno Erdmann (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1992, paras. 17, 19 (pp.68–9). Kant later critically remarks that “man is usually full of sensations when he is empty of thought” para. 106 (p.117).

8 Kant had personal reasons for rejecting attention to somatic sensations. By his own confession, Kant sometimes suffered from hypochondria, so that heightened attention to inner somatic sensations seemed apt to result in “morbid feelings” of anxiety. See his book The Contest of the Faculties (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 187–189.

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