

**BODY CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EXCENTRIC SELF:
BETWEEN PLESSNER AND SOMAESTHETICS**

Richard Shusterman

Florida Atlantic University

richard.shusterman@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that Helmuth Plessner's theory of excentric positionality provides the project of somaesthetics with explanatory support on epistemological and ontological issues. After presenting Merleau-Ponty's argument that the somatic subject cannot possibly explore its body and body consciousness, an argument that challenges the somaesthetic project of improving body consciousness and performance through somatic reflection, the paper considers how the pragmatist response to this argument can be strengthened by introducing Plessner's theory of excentric personality to provide a deeper critique of Merleau-Ponty's position.

Keywords: Plessner, Merleau-Ponty, somaesthetics

I.

Philosophy, from its Socratic beginnings, has affirmed the goals of self-knowledge and self-improvement for more virtuous action. Yet the pursuit of self-knowledge poses many problems: psychological worries that preoccupation with self-examination leads to depressive, obsessive rumination; ethical and social concerns that sustained focus on the self leads to selfishness and isolation that impoverishes experience both for the individual and the groups to which she belongs; ontological questions about what sort of entity is this self that one seeks to know.¹ Moreover, there are diverse epistemological problems of how it can be known, which often differ according to the differing ontological character ascribed to the self, including, of course, that it does not really exist. My purpose in this essay is to explore a particular problem of self-knowledge: how one can know one's body or somatic self, a problem that takes multiple forms including Descartes' famous contrast of the direct knowledge of one's minds via the

¹ Some of these psychological, ethical and social problems are analyzed in "Self-Knowledge and its Discontents: From Socrates to Somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2012).

vivid transparency of consciousness to the mysterious obscurity of one's inner bodily state, a contrast that motivates his identifying the true self with the mind alone.

I shall instead treat the problem as it emerges in the context of contemporary philosophies that highlight embodiment as an inalienable feature of the human self, recognizing its evolutionary heritage and animal nature along with its distinction from other animals. I focus on a puzzling problem of somatic self-knowledge that is most powerfully posed by Merleau-Ponty, surely one of the twentieth-century's most important philosophers of the body, who celebrates its subjectivity cognitive power while paradoxically problematizing its capacity for critical self-knowledge. In the twenty-first century, pragmatist somaesthetic philosophy has tried to resolve the problem by countering Merleau-Ponty's arguments, but its efforts have not been entirely satisfying, partly because of its minimal theorization of the soma's ontological and epistemological character (Shusterman 2008). This paper argues that the somatic philosophy of Helmut Plessner (1892-1985), a leading figure in the German tradition of philosophical anthropology who remains very influential in contemporary German thought, could provide somaesthetics with considerable philosophical support in these matters of somatic ontology and epistemology, particularly through his notion of excentric positionality.

As Plessner remains a largely unfamiliar figure in Anglo-American philosophical discussion, so somaesthetics is hardly a household name and requires a brief definition here: Grounded in pragmatist thinking, it is an interdisciplinary research field concerned with the study and cultivation of the soma (the physical, living, sentient, purposive body) as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and of creative self-fashioning. An ameliorative project that integrates theory and practice, it aims to enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body, but also our lived somatic experience and performance. Somaesthetics therefore involves a wide range of knowledge forms and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can

improve it. One of somaesthetics' principal goals is the improvement of somatic consciousness, to make us feel better in our bodies in two ways: to enjoy more satisfying somatic feelings and actions (which are always accompanied by bodily feelings of some kind) and to perceive those somatic feelings and actions with greater accuracy and clarity (Jay 2005; Shusterman, 2008, 2012; Turner 2008, Tedesco 2012; Voparil and Giordano 2015.)

We can distinguish various levels of body consciousness. We can even speak of a level of body consciousness beneath our ordinary waking consciousness. When we are asleep and thus essentially *not* conscious (by the standard meaning of the term), we still demonstrate a very basic intentional body consciousness, for example by unconsciously rolling to the center of the bed when we get too close to falling off the edge. Ordinary waking conscious, which is much clearer, involves both perceptions of objects in the world and perceptions of our feelings in reaction to those objects. Besides feeling the cold rain that falls, one feels the body's shivering reaction to it. We feel the point of a pin but also the pain in the finger that it pricks.

Many of our conscious feelings and movements, however, are felt only in the background of consciousness, without our having a clear and explicit awareness of them. When walking down a flight of steps I must feel the position and contact of my feet on those steps in order to descend them smoothly but typically I have no explicit, focalized awareness of those feelings of contact or placement. Nor do I have a reflective awareness that critically assesses the feelings of contact and movements of placement to consider how graceful or efficient they are and whether they differ from one foot to the other. As Merleau-Ponty argues in his powerful critique of intellectualism and his corresponding defense of the body's essential intentionality and capacities of perception, we do not normally need these higher, explicit or reflective levels of body consciousness to successfully navigate the world and perform the actions necessary for the effective conduct of living. Our spontaneous, immediate body

consciousness (already trained through the prior mediation of habit) is sufficient for performing our actions without specific, explicit attention to our bodily feelings and movements. We want to take a sip of coffee, and we spontaneously reach for it, grasp it, lift it to our lips, and sip it without any intellectual calculation of the proper positioning and pressure of grip in our hands, the touch of our lips on the cup, and the regulation of our breathing so that we will not swallow the coffee in the wrong way. Our actions can be so automatically performed, especially when our attention is focused on other matters (for example, the paper we are reading), that we may not even be aware that we are drinking the coffee. In order to highlight the wonderful efficacy of our unreflective, spontaneous body consciousness (which he describes in terms of "natural marvels"), he contrasts it with the brain damaged patient Schneider who needs to reflectively calculate his bodily movements to do what normal people can do with unthinking, spontaneous ease (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Somaesthetics likewise celebrates the marvelous efficacy of our unreflective body consciousness, but recognizes that despite the general excellence of our spontaneous perception and performance through unreflective body consciousness and acquired habits of action, there are times when these habits of perception and action are far from optimal. Many normal people suffer from habits of excessive muscular contractions or other forms of faulty posture or movement that eventually result in pain, injury, or unsatisfactory performance although capable of performing the desired function to some extent or for some time. These detrimental somatic habits can be corrected to enable improved functioning and resultant improved quality of experience, but the correction of such somatic habits requires taking them out of the background of what Merleau-Ponty celebrates as "the unreflective life of consciousness" of our "primary subjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi, 402) and bringing them instead into the foreground of explicit reflective consciousness. Somaesthetics therefore insists on the important role of

focused, thematized, reflective body consciousness for the quintessentially philosophical task of self-knowledge but also for the more general meliorist task of improved perception and performance. While affirming, with phenomenology, the essential primacy of spontaneous “primary subjectivity” in our somatic perceptions and movements, somaesthetics insists that we often need the complement of explicit observation and reflective consciousness in these matters to improve our quality of life and conduct.

On this point, however, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology presents a serious problem to the somaesthetic project. He claims that we cannot really observe one’s own body, arguing that it “defies exploration and is always presented to me from the same angle...To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me.” Moreover, I cannot change my perspective with respect to my body as I can with external objects. “I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but my body itself is a thing that I do not observe; in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 90-91). “I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148).

Somaesthetics, in contrast, appeals to our ordinary somatic experience to argue that we can and actually do observe our lived bodies. We observe our faces or bellies, not only through our eyes and mirrors but through the touch of our hands, to observe whether we need to shave or to diet and exercise; we can observe our feet are dirty by seeing, feeling, or even smelling their lack of cleanness; we can observe the position of our arms and legs not only by seeing and touching them but by feeling their position from the inside, proprioceptively. In short we can explore our bodies not only from the different perspectives of the body’s

different senses. Beyond these ordinary practices of somatic observation, a variety of meditative disciplines are structured on heightening the soma’s conscious critical self-examination.

Merleau-Ponty nevertheless argues that observation of one’s lived body is in principle impossible, for theoretical reasons. His argument seems to rely on two underlying philosophical assumptions. The first is the very deeply entrenched presumption that critical observation requires some separation – a critical distance – from what is being observed. But since we can never separate ourselves from our own bodies, then it seems impossible for us to observe them, despite our feelings of doing so in everyday experience. The second assumption is that a subjectivity that perceives or observes must be essentially different from the object of observation. But since the body as one’s “primary subjectivity” is the perceiving, intentional, active subject, then it can’t also be the perceived object. If we recognize the body as the subject, it cannot be perceived as an object since its entire essence and role are fully focused on the subjectivity of perceiving, feeling, and purposively acting.

Defenders of somatic reflection can challenge the presumption that the distance needed for critical observation of the body requires an impossible out-of-body perspective. We can critically examine aspects of our somatic experience without going outside our bodies to some putative disembodied mind. We use a finger to probe a small bump on our face; we use our tongue to discover and remove the traces of food on our upper lip or on our teeth. We discriminate or assess our pain *within* the painful experience, not only after it has passed and we are, in that sense, beyond or outside it. In short somatic self-examination provides a model of immanent critique where one’s critical perspective does not require being entirely outside the situation critically examined but merely requires a reflective, detached perspective on it that is not wholly absorbed in the immediacy of what is experienced. Rather than being

seen as external, the perspective can be better described as somehow more peripheral to or aside from the focus of one's attention and experience. In other words, if the immediate focus of attention constitutes the absorbing immediate center of experience, then reflective somatic consciousness could be described as decentered or in Plessner's terminology as having "excentric" positionality (Plessner 1928/1975; Plessner 1941/1970).

These perspectives through which one's somatic subjectivity steps back and examines its own somatic experience are sometimes achieved by effortful disciplines of attention (such as yoga, *zazen*, etc.) but the subject's position of distanced or decentered reflection in which he observes his body with explicit focused attention often also arise spontaneously through experiences of somatic dissonance where unreflective spontaneous coordination is disrupted, thus stimulating a decentered, reflective critical attention to what is going on. We can understand the possibility of immanent yet critical distance by recognizing the complexity of the soma and its modes of consciousness. If the soma involves a complexity of intentional functions and forms of perceptual awareness, then critical somatic consciousness involves some aspects of the soma's complex array of systems examining other aspects of that complexity. This line of argument is essentially all that somaesthetics has provided to explain the possibility of somaesthetic reflection or critical introspective body consciousness.

II.

Because of its practical melioristic thrust and because it could rely on the everyday fact that we do observe our bodies, somaesthetics has not yet sufficiently theorized the ontological nature of the soma that enables this decentered, reflective perspective. Although it often emphasizes how somatic conscious repeatedly moves back and forth from spontaneous unreflective perception and performance to modes of explicit observation and critical reflection, somaesthetic theory

has not yet clearly articulated the complex structure of human nature that permits this play of changing perspectives. Plessner's theory of excentric positionality fills that gap while likewise providing a more precise formulation of the soma's complex constitution.

To explain this contribution properly, but also to understand the essential context and content of Plessner's somatic philosophy, we need to consider the "body" terminology that shapes his theory. This in turn requires examining its German terms and their historical philosophical usage. The German language has two words with rather different meanings that are commonly used for what in English we simply call body. These German words for body -- *Körper* and *Leib*, with their accordingly different cognate grammatical derivatives (*körperlich/leiblich*, *Körperlichkeit/Leiblichkeit*) -- are typically opposed in philosophical discourse on embodiment. To put the contrast most simply, *Körper* denotes the physical body as object while *Leib* typically signifies the lived, feeling body or the body as intentionality or subject. This conceptual contrast is not confined only to German but has been adapted into French by Merleau-Ponty who sharply distinguishes what he calls "*le corps propre*" (which can be identified with the German *Leib* and is generally translated into English as "the lived body") from the body as physical object or *Körper* (Merleau-Ponty 1945). This strong contrast, though rightly pointing to the complexity of our embodied existence, can be seen as threatening to generate a problematic somatic dualism somewhat analogous to body/mind dualism. Somaesthetics intentionally introduced the term soma as a key defining concept of the project in order to embrace both *Körper* and *Leib*, not merely to avoid the linguistic suggestion of a dualism of two bodies but also because the somaesthetic project concerns the body both as perceptive, active subjectivity but also as a physical, malleable medium for self-stylization and the material, corporeal expression of one's tastes and values.

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl was the first to provide a systematic discussion of *Leib* and *Körper* (for

instance in Husserl, 1913 and 1960). Though distinguishing between *Körper* as physical object-body and *Leib* as lived or experienced body, he did not seek to erect a sharp dualism between the two. Both are aspects of the same living human body, and he therefore sometimes speaks of that body as the *Leibkörper*, both to underline the underlying union of the two terms and to give phenomenological primacy to the *Leib* as that with which one starts in one's experience of the world. *Leib*, for Husserl, is therefore the *Nullpunkt* or absolute "here" that generates physical measurable, mathematical spatiality without being itself spatial in this objectified or naturalized sense (Husserl 1934). The *Körper/Leib* contrast generates the related distinction between *Körperlichkeit* and *Leiblichkeit*. The former concerns the structural morphology of the body -- the skeletal bones, inner organs, afferent and efferent nerves, muscles, air canals, blood vessels, blood and other fluids, and also the neural structures in the brain; while *Leiblichkeit* denotes the lived dynamic experience of the body, its living flow of life as it is experienced or localizable in inner lived feelings or sensations. Adapting the Husserlian *Leib/ Körper* distinction, Merleau-Ponty celebrates the importance of "*le corps propre*" or "lived body" which he construes as a bodily subject, exhibiting basic intentionality and including consciousness of a prepredicative, unreflective form and which he sharply contrasts to the body as mere physical object "*le corps comme objet*" (Merleau-Ponty 1945). In emphasizing the marvels of the lived body's spontaneous unthinking actions in contrast to the reflective calculations of mechanistic physiology, he shows no regard for the value of reflecting on our bodily actions and feelings. Our body, he instead insists, wonderfully guides us, but "only on condition that we stop analyzing it" and its feelings in reflective consciousness, "only on the condition that I do not reflect expressly on it" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 78, 89).

III.

Plessner's somatic theory involves a multiple critique of this phenomenological tradition. First, he criticized Husserl's concept of *Leib* for being localized. Although *Leib* was distinguished from the *Körper* as not being spatial, Husserl nonetheless located it as inner in contrast to the externality of the *Körper*. This suggests that the *Leib*, though allegedly nonspatial, is somehow *in* the body as an inner spatial thing or some mysteriously immaterial, nonspatial soul dwelling within our physical body. This problematic suggestion is strengthened by the fact that Husserl identifies *Leib* consciousness with inner feelings or sensations of self, such as proprioception and the inner sense of self which he calls one's "sphere of peculiar ownness"; this seems all too analogous to the old dualism of an inner mind or soul that is the true self (of one's "exclusive ownness") inside an outer, spatial body that Plato likened to a prison and Descartes to a machine (Husserl 1960, 93-94). Plessner instead avoids reification of the *Leib* as some entity inside the *Körper*, even when he speaks of human experience in terms of *Leib im Körper*. *Leib* is not a thing; neither an object nor a transcendental subject, *Leib* is a way of experiencing oneself and one's world. It is the form of lived, immediate experiential behavior that is differently lived and interpreted in the variety of cultures in which it is expressed. It is thus also different from Merleau-Ponty's identification of the lived body's "unreflective life which is... unchanging, given once and for all" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xiv).

Plessner's background in both animal physiology and human sociology shapes his more fundamental critique of the phenomenological understanding of the *Körper-Leib* relationship. Phenomenology's approach of taking the transcendental subject or individual conscious self as the starting point, Plessner argued, was too deeply trapped in traditional dualisms: body and mind, subject and object, self and other. When Plessner speaks of the essential "ambiguity" of our existence as "a lived body in

a physical body [als *Leib im Körper*],” he emphatically is not suggesting the duality of some spiritual or mental entity residing in a different material one (Plessner 1970, 34). Moreover to simply connect the terms *Leib* and *Körper* with or without a hyphen and then describe them as a union of different forms of being is likewise insufficient to escape the sense of dualism these words convey.

Eschewing the idea of a transcendental subject or self as the foundation for a theory of personhood, Plessner (already in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft*, Plessner 1924/1981) replaced such methodological individualism with a broader social theory of the sociocultural constitution of persons through the different roles that society gives them (which does not preclude persons creatively finding or inventing new roles for themselves). He likewise shifted the ontological characterization of *Leib* and *Körper* from fixed entities to active functions of taking positions or adopting roles. Rather than being constituted by a single, basic, primordial self-consciousness, the person will display multiple forms of self-consciousness according to the different roles she plays in society. Our experienced somatic consciousness is not an ontological, universal given revealed by phenomenology but instead a social product. Not only our actions but our feelings are the product of habitus formed by our sociocultural world. As Plessner paradoxically puts it,

“man is ‘by nature’ artificial” because humans can only be what they are through the social-cultural world they inhabit and incorporate (Plessner 1931/1981, 199).

Not confining himself to mere critique of phenomenology’s *Leib/Körper* distinction, Plessner elaborated the distinction in his own way in terms of *Leib sein /Körper haben* (*being a Leib* or living body and *having a physical body*), beginning with his 1928 master work *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* and into his post-war writings.² This is far from an analogue

of the Platonic dualism (e.g. in *Phaedo* and *Alcibiades*) where the self is defined as an immaterial soul although having a physical body (which it can use and in which it is contained as in a prison), Plessner’s intention is entirely different. Both *Leib* and *Körper* are physical and both are living.

Rather than ontological distinction between different kinds of entities (immaterial and material), that are rival candidates (or combinatory partners) for constituting the true self, Plessner’s distinction between being *Leib* and having *Körper* is an expression of a fundamental ontological complexity of relationships within the self in living an “existence [that] is ambiguous: *as a physical lived body – in the physical lived body*” (Plessner 1970, 36). It is a matter of two basically different relations or positions taken toward the body, two contrasting ways that the self relates to its body in actual practice or behavior, as being a *Leib* and having a *Körper*. Each human being must manage “this double role” because “every kind of learning, e.g. grasping..., standing, running, and so on” is based on it. A human both *is a physical “living body (head, trunk, extremities, with all that these contain)... and has this living body as this physical thing.”* “Thus bodily existence for man is a relation, in itself not unequivocal, but ambiguous, a relation of himself to himself [*sich...sich*] (or, to put it precisely, of him to himself)” (Plessner 1970, 34-35).

This relationship or positioning can and should change in terms of the different functions or roles persons perform at different times, the different tasks they seek to accomplish, and the different conditions or circumstances they encounter and in which they have to act. What does not change is the essential linking of these different somatic relations. “Both orders are entwined in each other and form a remarkable unity,” and we must hold on to both though they may seem “mutually exclusive” in their logic (Plessner 1970, 36). On the one hand, in being *Leib* (which means living one’s physical body as one’s experiencing subjective core), the

² Contemporary discussions of Plessner have simplified the orthographical form of this terminology to *Leibsein*

and *Körperhaben*, and I will follow this practice here.

Leib is the absorbing, perceiving focus through which we experience rather than an object of perception or experience. On the other hand, one also must take that same physical living body (one's own body with its various parts) as an object that one perceives along with other objects localized in space and thus experientially outside the perceiving core of subjectivity; and in this way, one has one's own body as an object (*Körperhaben*). As Plessner articulates this ambiguity: "I must insist on the absolute focal reference of all things in the environment to my body [*Leib*], or to the center of perception, thinking, initiative, and sympathy persisting 'in' it, i.e. to me or the 'self' in me; and I must give up this absolute focal reference in favor of the relative localization of all things, including my body," even as the location of my consciousness (Plessner 1970, 36).

In this sense, through its ability to objectify or distance itself from its center of consciousness, "the human position can be understood as excentric"; it can experience, observe, and know itself from outside its experiencing center (Plessner 1970, 36). Human life, moreover, demands both perspectives of having a body and being a body, while moving between these perspectives of being "outside and inside" the center (Plessner 1970, 36-37; see also Krüger 1999, 130-134). Sometimes it is difficult to reconcile both perspectives; for example an explicit focus on looking at one's feet (from the *Körperhaben* perspective) when walking a beam may well disturb our spontaneous sense of balance (for those feet are seen as separate objects from one's center), while seeing those same feet while we are absorbed in *Leibsein* centeredness) will cause no such problems.

In *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* Plessner articulates this notion of excentric positionality in much greater detail by contrasting it with animal embodiment. An animal also has a *Körperleib*, a physical lived body that it experiences and that relates "to its positional center, to the absolute here and now" but this center "does not appear to the animal as an object"

(Plessner 1928/1975, 288). The animal thus does not perceive its center as its center; in other words, its "living body is denied full reflexivity," which would require "that the center of positionality, whose distance from the living thing's own lived body grounds the possibility of all givenness, be at a distance from itself" so that this center can be given to it. (Plessner 1928/1975, 289).

However, that perspective to which the experiencing, observing center is thus given is not an additional center through some "multiplication of the subject's core" but rather it is the center itself taking its excentric position (Plessner 1928/1975, 289-290) To posit an additional center or inner self for the positional attitude of observing one's center or self would not only lead to an endless multiplication of centers, whereby each observing center would need to be given in perception or experience to another excentric center that would observe it but which in turn would need to be given to a further excentric center from which it could be observed. Remember that this perceived need to posit a further somatic subject in order to observe one's own body or somatic subjectivity forms a key part of Merleau-Ponty's argument against our capacity for somatic self-examination and thus against the value (if not also the very possibility) of somaesthetic reflection.

Plessner provides a refutation of the argument by showing that we do not need an additional observing body for the soma to observe itself. The human organism or soma can do this for itself. Hence there is also no need to posit an observing inner mind or soul to observe the soma's experiences, its perceptions, feelings, actions, and thoughts. We should not, Plessner argues, conceive "the positional center, the subject, as a fixed reality" (*Leib* or mind) inside the organism, when this center instead "only exists as an execution" or "a positing" of the living organism through its vitality and focus (Plessner 1928/1975, 290). The "total reflexivity" characteristic of the living human body (or what somaesthetics terms "soma") is achieved through its ability to make its "center of positionality be at a

distance from itself” so that “the reflexive character of the centrally represented body is given to itself”(Plessner 1928/1975, 290). The human organism, Plessner explains, is still “absorbed in the here and now, lives out of the center,” but “it has become conscious of the centrality of its existence” and thus “knows of itself” and can examine itself as center (Plessner 1928/1975, 290). This reflexivity creates the ‘I’ which Plessner describes as “the vanishing point of its own interiority” that is always “behind it,” because one can always regard each experiencing center from a further excentric position. This ‘I’ – as what is “removed from its own center in every possible [experience] of life and is the observer of the scene of this inner field [of experience]” constitutes “the subject pole that can no longer be objectified or put into the object position” (Plessner 1928/1975, 290) and thus exists as if “without place...in a spatiotemporal nowhere-never,” thus giving rise to the familiar idea that this ‘I’ is an immaterial soul (Plessner 1928/1975, 291).³

IV.

Having presented Plessner’s theory in his own terms, using frequent citations from his own complex language (albeit in English translation), we can clarify this theory further by reformulating and applying it to a central issue for somaesthetics: the contesting values of spontaneity versus reflection and the need for integration of these modes. Spontaneity is the realm of *Leibsein*. In this somatic mode, a person relates to her living body or soma unreflectively by simply acting and perceiving

through it as her experiencing center; hence the soma is not thematized as an object of perception or reflection (whether as an inner or outer object). The person here *is* her soma, since she simply unreflectively or spontaneously lives her life and acts effectively through its (*leiblich*) intentionality and intelligent activity in the world. Being fully absorbed and identified with the soma’s experiential (*leiblich*) center, the person experiences and acts in the world and on her own soma through this center, but does not reflect on this experiencing center as an object of conscious. She uses the soma effectively as a tool in the world but does not objectify its experiencing somatic center as such a tool; nor does she calculate and deliberate reflectively about how she is using the tool. The use is spontaneous and uninhibited by reflection on one’s soma and how to use it.

This freedom from deliberation and inhibition typically makes the spontaneous movement smoother and more effective. William James, a past master of applying somaesthetic reflection for his research in psychology, insists on this point in arguing against somatic reflection in the field of action. His maxim for successful sensorimotor performance is “Trust your spontaneity and fling away all further care,” elaborating that “We walk a beam the better the less we think of the position of our feet upon it” (James 1962, 99; James 1983, 1128). Such unreflective somatic intelligence is so effective because it is largely the product of sedimented habit in using our bodies to perceive and act in the world. Because these habits form our second nature, they can perform their tasks spontaneously without our pausing to think about how to perform them. Moreover, because these habits are sedimented from the different experiences a person has through the different roles she plays and the different social conditions in which she lives, the person’s spontaneous somatic experience and performance (or *Leibsein*) is not some presocial, primordial, universally shared type of bodily experience. No matter how immediate this spontaneity feels, it is always a mediated immediacy, mediated by habit-

³ We cannot here explore the question of what exactly enables humans to take this excentric position. Is it the complexity and modularity of our brain systems; or the complex social nature of human life with its need to play different roles and to recognize them in other people; or perhaps the use of language to refer to and thus to reflect on things that are remote in time and place, and thus not in the “here and now” that defines the centric position? All three of these possible explanatory factors are interconnected. One may wonder whether other higher primates, to the extent that they resemble humans in such factors, come anywhere near an ability to take an excentric view of themselves.

acquired skills and learning, just as the immediacy of aesthetic experience is. I may experience a Shakespeare sonnet with an immediate sense of its beauty, yet that experience relies on my prior learning of English and the conventions of poetry.

The sedimentation of habit that creates spontaneously effective perceptions and performances involving familiar actions in familiar roles likewise enables the spontaneity of smooth transitions from one role to another. Among the habits we acquire are habits of transition between roles with their corresponding somatic subjectivity. That is how a policewoman can move smoothly from her tough professional somatic subjectivity as a cop to the tender somatic subjectivity of a mother caring for her infant without having to reflectively deliberate or rehearse how she should change her behavior and feelings in changing between roles.

Another sort of transition with which we become habituated is the transition from spontaneous somaesthetic consciousness to reflective somaesthetic consciousness, from *Leibsein* to *Körperhaben*. When a person relates to her soma as *Körperhaben*, not only is the soma objectified as something that the person has, but also her experienced consciousness as soma is objectified and thus becomes thematized or reflective. In thus objectifying the soma and its consciousness as something the person experiences as having rather than simply being, the person is distanced or decentered from full identification with her body as *Leibsein*. She can explicitly examine and reflect on her somatic self (including its perceptive, experiencing center) as if she were in some sense outside it.

Human life involves many situations when persons can and must take this reflective or excentric perspective to their somatic organism and its somatic consciousness. They not only objectify their somas when reflecting on its external appearance through practices of self-examination (with or without mirrors), often for purposes of grooming, adorning, and reshaping (through

cosmetics, clothes, jewelry, dieting, bodybuilding, etc.) or purposes of health (examining a cut, bruise, or swelling) in some sense outside it. People also, though less frequently, engage in critical reflection on their somatic consciousness, examining their experiencing center from the excentric position. Besides the special meditative practices devoted to such examination, we find reflective somatic consciousness in everyday life, for example when we critically assess our feelings of energy or fatigue, when we diagnostically appraise a pain we are feeling to determine its source or probable cause, or when we evaluate our mood or emotional state because we find it somehow troubling or disruptive. According to the circumstances they encounter and the purposes and experiences they have, persons maneuver between the spontaneous centric position of *Leibsein* and the reflective ex-centric position of *Körperhaben*, decentering themselves from full identification with the soma, in order to take proper notice of some somatic problem that takes us out of the spontaneous flow of *Leibsein* or to work at systematically improving somatic experience or performance by making the experiencing acting soma an object of thematized consciousness.

Most often, our transitions between spontaneity and reflection are themselves spontaneous and rapid. Such transitions are second nature to us because both perspectives are essential to the soma's ambiguity. In Plessner's words, a person's "transition from being within his own lived body to existing outside of his lived body is the irreducible double aspect of existence, a true split in his nature. He lives on both sides of this split" and thus needs to move efficiently between both perspectives (Plessner 1928/1975, 292). Inability to move from one perspective to the other would render human life exceedingly difficult and constitute a serious pathology.

The spontaneous, centered perspective is the one we more often take and more easily maintain and regain. Adopting a sustained and systematic program of somaesthetic reflection usually requires good reasons

and also some degree of effortful will. Improving one's habits to achieve improved performance is one central motivation. Consider an example: Though a golfer's swing should work best when his attention is fixed on the ball and not on his own body, a slumping golfer may learn from his coach that the placement of his feet or his way of tightly clenching his club while contracting his torso muscles unintentionally puts him off balance and inhibits movement in the ribcage and spine, thus disturbing the flow, power, and accuracy of his swing. At this point, the golfer should release from his spontaneous (*Leibsein*) consciousness and engage in sustained somaesthetic reflection about his posture and somatic feelings (e.g., proprioceptive feelings of weight and tension, kinaesthetic feelings of movement) so that he can clearly recognize the bad habits of stance and swing, inhibit them, and then self-consciously transform his posture, grip, and movement until a new, more effective habit of swinging is established. Once established, such focused reflective somaesthetic attention can then be relinquished, thereby enabling the golfer to return to a more effective spontaneous somatic consciousness whose object and focus is the ball, not the soma and its conscious feelings of balance, tension, and movement. Nonetheless, as the golfer's skill and habits of somaesthetic reflection have been reinforced, they can be reapplied with greater ease in future cases where his spontaneous habits prove inadequate, including a relapse into the earlier swinging habit he has just corrected.

Both spontaneous and reflective somatic consciousness (*Leibsein* and *Körperhaben*) are essential for a person's flourishing, for successful functioning, improved performance and developmental growth. Somaesthetics celebrates the value of both. If spontaneity is more fundamental and closer to the lived, immediate enjoyment of life, while somaesthetic reflection seems more distant and difficult to sustain and apply systematically, then this more difficult endeavor requires more effort to develop greater mastery of its multiple uses. This includes the ability for somatic self-

reflection to turn itself off when it threatens to bury the spontaneous joy of life under the gloom of relentlessly morbid self-critical study.

References

- Husserl, Edmund (1913). *Ideen Zu Einer Reinen Phaenomenologie Und Phaenomenologischen Philosophie*. Halle: Niemeyer.
- (1934). "Umsturz der Kopernikanischen Lehre in der gewöhnlichen weltanschaulichen Interpretation. Die Ur-Arche Erde bewegt sich nicht. Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Körperlichkeit, der Räumlichkeit der Natur im ersten naturwissenschaftlichen Sinne. Alles notwendige Anfangsuntersuchungen," Manuscript D 17, Husserl Archive at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
<http://hiw.kuleuven.be/apps/hua/details.php?cmd=search&words=D%2017&cat=signature>
- (1960). *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns The Hague: Nijhoff.
- James, William (1890;1983), *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1962). James, William. "The Gospel of Relaxation," in *Talks To Teachers on Psychology and To Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. New York: Dover.
- Jay, Martin (2003). "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Art," in *Refractions of Violence* (pp.163-176). New York: Routledge.
- Krüger, Hans-Peter (1999). *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen: Das Spektrum menschlicher Phänomene*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945/1962). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris : Gallimard; English version *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge.
- (1964). *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- (1968). *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Plessner, Helmuth (1923). *Die Einheit Der Sinne: Grundlinien Eines Aesthesiologie Die Geistes*. Bonn: F. Cohen.
- (1924/1981). *Grenzen Der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik Des Sozialen Radikalismus*, in: Plessner, H., *Gesammelte Schriften V*, ed. by G. Dux, O. Marquard, and E. Ströker, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. English translation, *The Limits of Community: a Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. Andrew Wallace. New York: Humanity Press.
- (1928/1975). *Die Stufen Des Organischen Und Der Mensch. Einleitung in Die Philosophische Anthropologie*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

- (1931/1981). "Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht", in: Plessner, H., *Gesammelte Schriften V*, ed. by G. Dux, O. Marquard, and E. Ströker, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- (1941/1970). *Lachen Und Weinen Eine Untersuchung Nach Den Grenzen Menschlichen Verhaltens*. Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus. English translation, *Laughing and Crying: a study of the limits of human behavior*, trans. J.S. Churchill and Marjorie Grene (Evanston: Northwestern University Press).
- Shusterman, Richard. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- (2012). *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tedesco, Salvatore (2012). "Somaesthetics as a Discipline between Pragmatist Philosophy and Philosophical Anthropology, *Pragmatism Today* 3 (2), 6-12.
- Turner, Bryan (2008). "Somaesthetics and the Critique of Cartesian Dualism." *Body & Society* 14(3), 129-133.
- Voparil Christopher and John Giordano (2015). "Pragmatism and the Somatic Turn: Shusterman's Somaesthetics and Beyond," *Metaphilosophy* 46 (1), 141-161.