

WHY DO I ADVOCATE SOMAESTHETICS?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I will defend somaesthetics since I agree with most of its theses. What is more, I am in the lucky position that I can allude to my earlier article in the *ESPEs* journal regarding the most general features of Shusterman's somaesthetics.¹ These two papers form one. In this way, I do not have to deal with the development and basic features of pragmatism or Shusterman's somaesthetics.

That is why, in my present essay, I will focus firstly (I) on the emancipatory dimension of pragmatism in general. Secondly (II), I will show a unique value and motivation, meliorism, central in pragmatism and missing in many European philosophies. Finally (III), I will remember a more personal side of Shusterman's philosophy, showing how philosophical problems emerge and are solved in his hands.

Keywords: pragmatism, Shusterman, somaesthetics, emancipation, meliorism, continental philosophy

As the founder and leader of the *Hungarian Forum of Somaesthetics* (2018), I have a soft place in my heart for this aesthetics and philosophy. Beyond my personal, emotional motivations, my standpoint also has a rational explanation. On the one hand, I am convinced that pragmatism not accidentally has its renaissance from the last third of the 20th century. Our more and more practical world needs a practice-oriented, experience-based, naturalist philosophy. On the other hand, pragmatism can play this role since it has never become a canonized philosophical movement. Thus, it has never demanded from its members believing in a unique, official credo, giving up their other interests and aims. Pragmatism always existed as a loose group of erudite intellectuals who had diverse interests and followed some principles (practice-oriented naturalism, radical empiricism, meliorism, pan-relationism, and democratism).

There are also other reasons why this framework-type pragmatism is viable and valuable. As the inverse of an official credo, pragmatism can spontaneously assure

the proper moving space for the participant's individual development. At the same time, if we are lucky enough, pragmatism can establish or support more and more democratic social circumstances (Dewey: "Democracy is a way of life.") and satisfy human's natural need for happiness (Aristotle).

I want to emphasize here, in my essay, three unique characteristics of pragmatism and somaesthetics, which are already proven, but many people do not accept them. These characteristics are the emancipatory dimension of pragmatism and somaesthetics, their meliorism, and philosophy as a way of life.

Emancipatory dimension of American Pragmatism

As a Pragmatist, I hold it as evidence that human life is practice. However, many people still see recognition and pure knowledge as the essence of humans. If we look at a surgeon or a theoretical physician, it is evident that their life is also practice since they have to satisfy their everyday life needs. On the other hand, their profession is also practice, even if it needs high-level knowledge. Human life is a problem-solving practice from a pragmatist perspective, where everything (even a scientific or a philosophical theory) is a tool.

The practice-oriented and naturalist thinking of the American thinkers was emancipatory for many European philosophers. (Emerson influenced Nietzsche, James influenced Bergson; Pragmatism influenced Heidegger, etc.) The living body was not only put aside but many times despised in continental philosophy (e. g. Plato, Scholasticism, etc.) The only exception is perhaps the Aristotelian tradition, where the philosophical problems and the ideas for their solution were taken in many cases from experience. Nevertheless, it is beyond question that the final aim is also the god-like Form of Forms in Aristotle.

To be honest, it is emancipatory to see from outside the European aesthetics that is determined mainly by Hegel (together with Baumgarten and Kant). Moreover, it is emancipatory to use such a perspective that is not saturated with the arrogance of strict rationalism but is governed by emancipation and meliorism.

¹ Alexander Kremer: "Pragmatists on the Everyday Aesthetic Experience," *ESPEs* Vol 9, No 2 (2020) pp. 66–74. [Vol 9, No 2 \(2020\) \(unipo.sk\)](#)

As to 'emancipation,' we can say that its general meaning is to liberate somebody from some unequal situation. It follows from this that emancipation always means some equality. That is why emancipation is a particular case of meliorism. Nevertheless, as democracy means human freedom and social justice, I am persuaded that emancipation, understood as equality, also belongs to the broader topic of democracy.

What do we know about emancipation? From a historical point of view, we can speak about three different stages in the development of equality, that is emancipation. Historically the first form of equality means equality in front of the (Christian) God; other gods were not gods of all humankind, but only that of some tribe or group of people, or they did not promise equality in god's love. It was the first type of general equality at the beginning of the Common Era. Its second type is the legal and political equality of the citizens, which was created by the bourgeois revolutions, especially in the French Revolution of 1789. The third type, economic equality, is still a dream since it does not exist in the real world of any society; we can speak even today only about the pursuit of equal opportunities.

There are, however, at least three main threats to emancipation: cultural, economic, and political-military threats. Of course, these are intertwined with each other in most cases. Let us look at first the cultural dimension. It is evident that the effects of globalization destroy the cultural diversity of nations, especially the cultural heritage of the smaller countries like Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, etc. It is beyond question that the government and the civil institutions might slow down the procedure, but they cannot change the effect.

The economic threat is more dangerous since it represents a more significant power. It is well-known that multinational companies have much greater financial and economic power than smaller or even middle-sized countries. Plus, it is also clear (for example, from the last crisis of the world economy, which started in 2008) that the economic competition, or rather the economic battle and fight of the leading economic and financial powers

(USA, EU, Far-East, BRIC countries) is getting stronger and sharper, because the concentration of capital reaches new and new heights. (Look at the case of Hungary, which is a symbolic example. The IMF saved our country from financial collapse. Still, its financial rules and regulations created good positions first and foremost for the multinational companies and not for Hungary, in terms of promising economic development in the future.)

The enormous threat is, of course, the political, military, and terrorist threat of emancipation. Look at the Russian invasion of Ukraine's eastern part, Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the other terrorist attacks (see Paris, Charlie Hebdo shooting, Jan 7, 2015; Copenhagen shooting, Feb 16, 2015) terrorist groups and networks. Our world changes not only faster than earlier, but its instability also became much more prominent. All of these consequences threaten emancipation very much, and the only hope is democracy.

Pragmatism (both old and new) here can help a lot! Just because of the meliorism principle, according to which we have to improve both our individual and community life with the help of our practice in every moment. Not only the representatives of the traditional pragmatism (especially James and Dewey) but also the new pragmatists (especially Rorty and Shusterman) were and are ardent defenders and supporters of emancipation and democracy. I am also persuaded that it is much easier to get functioned the competitive than the deliberative theory of democracy. The first interpretation focuses, namely much more on the institutions, which we can change faster, and it can also help build later a deliberative democracy.² We do need neither the Islamic State nor Al Qaeda; neither Putin's nor Erdogan's dictatorship, the most important thing is building and strengthening democracy!

² Cf. A. Kremer: "Rorty on Democracy," *Pragmatism, Religion, Democracy*. (Alexander Kremer, editor) *Pragmatism Today*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, Winter 2013. (<http://www.pragmatismtoday.eu/index.php?id=2013winter2>)

Meliorism

Although etymologically speaking, we know only that the British novelist George Eliot believed that he coined the words 'meliorist' and 'meliorism',³ it is assured that first, the American Pragmatists have chosen it as one of their basic philosophical principles. Meliorism can be interpreted both in a religious and secular sense. I am convinced that William James and Richard Shusterman are excellent examples here. Let's take the last lecture ("Pragmatism and Religion") of James' "Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking" lecture series. We can see that James introduced the melioristic approach as an alternative to both tender-minded rationalism and tough-minded empiricism:

Midway between the two, there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism, tho it has hitherto figured less as a doctrine than an attitude in human affairs. [...] meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become. It is clear that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism. (James 1907, 285–6)⁴

James, being a religious pragmatist, expressed his opinion in religious terms. Contrary to James, Shusterman expresses himself in secular terms, but his commitment to this pragmatist principle is as positive as Dewey's and Rorty's case. It is proved by the fact that he listed meliorism among his basic pragmatist principles in his paper,

³ "In 1877, British novelist George Eliot believed she had coined meliorist when she wrote, "I don't know that I ever heard anybody use the word 'meliorist' except myself." Her contemporaries credited her with coining both meliorist and meliorism, and one of her letters contains the first documented use of meliorism, but there is evidence that meliorist had been around for 40 years or so before she started using it. Whoever coined it did so by drawing on the Latin *melior*, meaning "better." It is likely that the English coinages were also influenced by another melior descendant, *meliorate*, a synonym of *ameliorate* ("to make better") that was introduced to English in the mid-1500s." (Meliorism | Definition of Meliorism by Merriam-Webster – June 16, 2021)

⁴ For a deeper analysis, read Mats Bergman's article: "Minimal Meliorism: Finding a Balance between Conservative and Progressive Pragmatism" In Ulf Zackariasson (Ed.) (2015). *Action, Belief, and Inquiry—Pragmatist Perspectives on Science, Society, and Religion* (pp. 2–28). *Nordic Studies in Pragmatism* 3. Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network.

"What Pragmatism Means to Me":

8. Meliorism. The meliorist goal of making things better is a key and distinctive pragmatist orientation. Its activist meliorist orientation aligns it in some respects with the Marxian idea that philosophy's interpreting the world is not enough since it is more important to change the world for the better. Through conceptual reform and new ideas, philosophy can make a difference by deconstructing or circumventing various obstacles and opening thought and life to new and more promising options. (Shusterman 2010, p. 64)

It is clear and very important from Shusterman's point of view that the world is malleable and that humans are essentially active since it encourages a more positive, melioristic attitude (cf. Shusterman 2010, p. 64.). He knows well that many philosophers of Europe still insist on the view that "a mature philosophy concerns itself with unchanging realities" (Shusterman 2010, p. 64). Nevertheless, it cannot be an obstacle for him to go beyond this obsolete philosophical approach:

If action is essential and the world is partly determined by our action, then it is more sensible to orient that action toward improving experience and more useful to believe that our action can in some way be effective. Positive meliorist thinking (which should be distinguished from naïve, utopian optimism) can help stimulate positive results. (Shusterman 2010, p. 64)

Shusterman's project and philosophical problems

After showing the emancipatory and melioristic dimension of pragmatism and somaesthetics, I will characterize some of his somaesthetics' differences regarding other thinkers of embodiment. In the end, I will summarize some of his essential, personal motivations for creating somaesthetics.

If we glance at Shusterman's philosophical relations, we can enumerate plenty of thinkers and philosophical movements. He knows well many thinkers from the earlier mentioned Presocratic Greek philosophers, Confucius, and Dewey, through Plato, Aristotle, and many other philosophers, to Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, and he is well trained in the professional dimension of the 21st century, as well. (See my above-mentioned ESPE

article.) Of course, the most important figures he emphasizes are Montaigne, James, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Wittgenstein, Rorty, Danto, and Bourdieu. Shusterman has evidently his opinion also about many other contemporary thinkers (Deleuze, Bataille, Habermas, Cavell, etc.). Still, he did not want to work out his views regarding every person mentioned above.

Nevertheless, we can find some detailed reflections. Speaking about Shusterman's reflections on other philosophers, we must rely on his original intention:

If somaesthetics is radical, it is only in the sense of reviving some of the deep roots of aesthetics and philosophy. Yet, new names like "somaesthetics" can have a special efficacy for reorganizing and thus reanimating old insights, as William James shrewdly recognized in defining pragmatism as "a new name for some old ways of thinking," a definition that aptly fits my sense of somaesthetics. (PA 263)

"Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," which was published as the last chapter of the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000), describes more precisely what was Shusterman's original intention in establishing the field of somaesthetics:

There is already an abundance of discourse on the body in contemporary theory. But such body talk tends to lack two important features. First, it needs a structuring overview or architectonic to integrate its very different, seemingly incommensurable, discourses into a more productively systematic field. It would be useful to have a comprehensive framework that could connect the discourse of biopolitics with the therapies of Bioenergetics and might even link analytic philosophy's ontological doctrines of psychosomatic supervenience to bodybuilding's principles of supersets. The second thing lacking in most current philosophical body talk is a clear, pragmatic orientation – something that the individual can directly translate into a discipline of improved somatic practice. Both of these deficiencies can be remedied by the proposed field of somaesthetics, a discipline of theory and practice." (PA 271)

Thus, it is evident that Shusterman's ambition was not to put forth an absolutely original topic or philosophical approach. He only wanted to give a unified theoretical framework for all research dealing with the living human body. It is the analytic somaesthetics beside the pragmatic

and practical parts of somaesthetics. Nevertheless, even if he wanted only to give a framework for those activities dealing with the soma, unifying the different theoretical standpoints (Montaigne, Dewey, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) Shusterman had to solve several contradictions and form his own unified theoretical view.

As to Foucault, for example, he wrote first about their differences in the last chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Later, he analyzed the relationship between Foucault's philosophy and his life ("Profiles of the Philosophical Life. Dewey, Wittgenstein, Foucault," in *Practicing Philosophy*, pp. 17–64),⁵ and devoted a whole chapter to the differences between his and Foucault's views in *Body Consciousness* (pp. 15–48, "Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault"). I think Shusterman clearly summarized his opinion in *Body Consciousness* (2008):

Among the many reasons that made Michel Foucault a remarkable philosopher was a doubly bold initiative: to renew the ancient idea of philosophy as a special way of life and to insist on its distinctly somatic and aesthetic expression." He then "examines Foucault as an exemplary but problematic pioneer in a field [Shusterman calls] somaesthetics" because we find its "three fundamental branches, all powerfully present in Foucault" (BC, p. 15 and 23).

What can then be Foucault's problematic side? Shusterman has already summarized it in the 10th chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2nd edition, 2000):

Foucault's avid pursuit of somaesthetics in all its three major branches is no less remarkable than Dewey's, though radically different. The analytic genealogist, who showed how "docile bodies" were systematically shaped by seemingly innocent body disciplines in order to advance certain socio-political agendas, also emerges as the pragmatic methodologist proposing alternative body practices to overcome the repressive ideologies entrenched in our docile bodies. Foremost among these alternatives were practices of consensual, gay sadomasochism, whose experiences, he argued, challenged not only the hierarchy of the head but the privileging of genital sexuality, which, in turn, privileged heterosexuality.

⁵ These two descriptions of Foucault's philosophy could have happened almost simultaneously since the somaesthetic chapter was published only in the 2nd edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000), and Shusterman published *Practicing Philosophy* in 1997.

Foucault also repeatedly advocated strong "drugs which can produce very intense pleasures," insisting that they "must become a part of our culture." Bravely practicing the somaesthetics he preached, Foucault tested his favored methodologies by experimenting on his own flesh and with other live bodies. In *Practicing Philosophy*, I probe the limits of Foucault's choices while affirming somaesthetic alternatives that he neglects and I prefer to practice. (PA 281)

Shusterman applied a similar method when he interpreted Dewey's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy which are closer to his somaesthetics. However, Shusterman is not only a historian of philosophy, but he is, first of all, a philosopher.

Due to the solid metaphysical traditions, the philosopher's traditional picture is still dominant in Europe. The philosopher is the wise man who creates abstract ideas, which are incomprehensible for everyday-life people, and anchors his theory in some transcendental structure or transcendent absolute, and – of course – he knows the Final Truth. Plenty of European intellectuals do not even recognize that they are prisoners of this prejudice. They cannot even imagine that the philosopher can also take after secular scholars of the secular world, not only after the priest. A philosopher can take after an engineer or doctor who claims to know no Final Truth, saying that we can prove only particular truths with the help of our evidence-based experiential and experimental procedures.

Our life becomes more and more practical, practice and theory are getting closer and closer to each other. In such a situation, pragmatism can help us more and more. As it is well-known, aesthetics and philosophy became extremely abstract in Hegel's "Absolute Idealism." He believed e. g. that aesthetics should only deal with fine arts since the significant artworks are the world spirit's significant objectifications. Our task is to understand the world spirit as the substantial mover of the world. Nowadays, most intellectuals do not believe in this sort of Hegelian theory, and we would like to improve not only our rare moments of revelation but also our everyday life. Here, naturalist pragmatism and som-

aesthetics, which are radically empiricist, can help us a lot. (Accepting the existence of everyday life aesthetic experience, somaesthetics has worked out, for example, several dimensions of everyday aesthetics (somaesthetics of food and eating, that of architecture and creating photos, ars erotica, etc.))⁶

Somaesthetics is a framework-type theory, and Shusterman collects everything that he needs. However, what is it that he needs? Where are his most essential motivations and questions from? I am convinced that Shusterman, as a genuine pragmatist, takes these mostly from his own life. That is, he takes them from his own practice and experience. These are the decisive inspirations when he raises or solves a question. I think that he relies dominantly on his own personal experiences when he forges his most important questions, ideas, and the core of his answers. He then looks for or creates the proper theoretical forms of expression and argumentation if they cannot be found already in other thinkers. This is the main reason why his aesthetics and philosophy are never impractical nor unfeasible.

Mentioning a few examples of his thought-provoking life experiences will be enough. First, you should remember, when he fled to Israel at the age of 16, and he started there a new life. That new life included three years of military service as an officer (1973-1976). Secondly, it is worth mentioning his Zen Buddhist meditation training in 2003. Shusterman's work as a performative artist, described in his book of 2016, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, which is both a memoir and work of fiction, illustrated with images of him performing improvisations in a golden, skintight lycra unitard.

Although these are only examples, I am convinced that Shusterman's whole life involves the practice of looking for new paths, experiences, and solutions. I think this is the reason why he can merge the experience of his Jewish origin not only with several elements of Dewey's pragmatism but also with distinctive features of Ancient Greek philosophy's art of living, hip-hop culture,

⁶ Cf. R. Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Confucianism, Buddhist mindfulness, and modern somatic therapies like the Feldenkrais Method. There are, of course, other elements in his enormous experiential treasury that inspire and shape his writing, some too personal to express in public texts.

Shusterman, as a good pragmatist, tries to learn from his adventures and experiences. However, he not only learns from them but also shapes them to his own needs. In this way, he makes richer, more and more multi-dimensional, his personality and his philosophical and aesthetic perspectives. After understanding the essential effects, he distinguishes the advantageous and disadvantageous elements, features, processes in a thoroughgoing discursive interpretation. This procedure that depends dominantly on his life experiences rather than on the books he read (though these also play a part) is the main reason for his living, developing somaesthetics, and somatic philosophy. That is why his somaesthetics and philosophy are, and always will be, full of life.

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