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OBSERVER

Mind-Body Problems

By RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

Contemporary culture displays a definite fixation on the body as a central medium of self-expression and self-fulfillment. Gyms have replaced both church and museum as the dominant site of disciplined self-improvement, where one feels obliged to sacrifice leisure and energy despite the inconvenience and discomfort entailed. As saintly heroes once served as prime exemplars of virtue, now supermodels and superathletes are enshrined as our culture's most-admired icons.

If one of philosophy's key tasks is to help us understand our world and, through critical analysis, offer guidance to improve it, should not the body be a key topic of inquiry? The body is not only an essential dimension of our humanity but the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought. Shouldn't philosophers then devote more study and cultivation to our bodily instrument, so obviously necessary for realizing philosophy's central aims of knowledge, self-knowledge, virtue, and happiness?

Yet despite today's body fever, it remains very hard to be a somatic philosopher, at least in the academy. It is in fact impossible to identify oneself as such from the official list of subfields that define the Anglo-American philosophical establishment. I was reminded of this problem last year as department chairman at Temple University when I tried to indicate the body as one of my specialties on our annual report for the Philosophy Documentation Center's *Directory of American Philosophers*. Among the more than 190 specialties listed, philosophy of the body or somatic philosophy could not be found.

That, however, was far from my greatest challenge as a somatic philosopher. More daunting was the secret life I had to lead for the four years I trained in New York City as a professional body educator and therapist (in the Feldenkrais Method) while chairing the department in Philadelphia.

The training involved two 20-day sessions per year, six hours a day. Since each session largely overlapped with an academic semester, one motive for keeping quiet about my training was to avoid calling attention to my inevitable absence from the hectic departmental office. But the precise body-centered reason for my absence made secrecy even more crucial. Colleagues and administrators would surely have been perplexed and probably piqued that instead of sitting in Philadelphia busily reviewing programs and responding to their various requests, I was lying

serenely on my back more than 90 miles away, on the mat-covered floor of a stylish Chelsea venue, breathing with conscious depth and luxury while fellow somatic trainees carefully tracked and altered my respiration by gently touching me all over.

Given philosophy's anti-somatic bias and occupational mind-set of hypercriticism, silence seemed the only option, even though I was proud of this hands-on dimension of my research and planned to write about it. For all my desire to come out, I simply had to recognize the attitudinal limits of academic freedom in philosophy. I had accepted the chairman's job in hope of diversifying the department by hiring specialists in African-American philosophy, the richness and relevance of which I discovered through my scholarship on rap, an interest that already cast suspicion on my philosophical authority. To announce that I was going still further outside the discipline's mainstream by putting body and soul into an unconventional somatic training would, I feared, utterly destroy my credibility, hence efficacy, as a chairman.

If secrecy seemed essential, so did the Feldenkrais training for my research in somaesthetics. As a pragmatist philosopher, I know that practical "knowing how" is every bit as important and revelatory as theoretical "knowing that." That is particularly true with some areas of somatic experience where one cannot really talk the talk without knowing what it feels like to walk the walk. Encouraged by the example of John Dewey (who attributed both philosophical insight and improved health to the many years of lessons he took from the somatic educator-therapist, F.M. Alexander), I experimented with a wide variety of body disciplines, including the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, which ultimately edged out Alexander's as the one I thought best for promoting somatic awareness, efficacy, and pleasurable grace in myself and my clients. (I compare these methods in *Performing Live*.)

But just as philosophical expertise requires the sort of professionally structured investigation that defines our doctoral programs, so true mastery of the best somatic disciplines calls for intensive study. That is certainly true for the complex, subtle discipline of sensorimotor awareness and re-education created by Moshe Feldenkrais, whose scientific career in engineering and physics deeply informed his somatic theory and practice. They are as far from New Age quackery as they are from mainstream philosophy, commanding respect from cutting-edge researchers in developmental psychology and the health sciences.

If the why of my secret double life is now clear, the how of managing it is harder to describe. My three years as an Israeli intelligence officer taught me the value of silence. I was already living in Chelsea as chairman, so people were used to phoning and faxing me there for matters they could not resolve by e-mail. Two wonderfully protective department secretaries screened and covered for me without ever asking (or perhaps caring) about the reason for my extensive absence.

But the key factor in preserving my cover was the smooth functioning and flourishing of the department -- which was always my highest priority. I learned that in academic leadership (unlike body work) one's virtual presence can accomplish (and count for) much more than parking one's pelvis in the assigned office. Appearing on NPR and Fox TV, writing for *The Nation* and *The Chronicle*, and getting some new departmental curricula and community initiatives discussed in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times* gave my work a mass-media aura and echo, furthering the (true) impression of my colleagues and administrative

superiors that I was working hard and well as chairman. Midway through my training I was unanimously re-elected for a second term.

Colleagues may have wondered why there were fewer department meetings and why they rarely saw me in the halls. But no one really complained about it, and their habitual complaints about each other (philosophy departments are famously fractious) dramatically declined. Gripes that warranted stopping by my office were not worth a long-distance call. Frictions were greatly diminished by minimizing the proximate contact of department meetings. Gone were the unpleasant visceral memories and habitual hostile body language acquired from previous conflicts, unconsciously aroused to spread their destructive venom in the gladiatorial arena of the conference room. How I wished my colleagues could take some Feldenkrais training to learn to discern (and manage) their somatic unease and aggression, or simply to learn to exhale fully and loosen up.

Fortunately my training ended before my final year as chairman, when all my energies were devoted to recruiting five new tenure-track hires, including two African-Americans. But though my training was over and my chairman's goals fulfilled, my secret remained. I knew I could not bring my body work into the classroom and programming of my department. The year's hiring process made it very clear that my university -- struggling to catch up to Pennsylvania's other, better-ranked institutions -- was fiercely focused on conventional benchmarks of academe and thus shy of radical interdisciplinary experimentation.

At the same time, I was lucky to be offered an endowed humanities chair at Florida Atlantic University, famous for innovative interdisciplinary curricular and research programs, such as the public-intellectual doctorate and the Center for Complex Systems and Brain Sciences. This body philosopher has finally emerged from the closet and into the light.

Preparing for my inaugural lecture here and my first triathlon (sponsored by FAU), I can hope, not just dream, of establishing a center for the interdisciplinary study of the body-mind-culture nexus.

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