

Review Essay

Body Consciousness, Mindfulness, Somaesthetics

Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, PP. XV + 239.

Recent researches in neuroscience and experimental psychology (Susan Blackmore, 2003 and 2005) warrant a thorough revision of our traditional views on two related phenomena - mind and consciousness- that have been central to our understanding of the entire variety of human activities – philosophical, linguistic and social. In traditional vocabulary mind, spirit and consciousness often appear synonymous in their opposition to body understood as a mass of matter. The situation does not change even if we accept Shusterman’s opinion: “The term ‘soma’ indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation...” In common use ‘body’ is understood not as a dead object, but as a living physiological entity as opposed to mind as a psychological one, a sense in which one can meaningfully use the expression “unconscious body”. The body- mind dichotomy in the history of Western philosophical thought refers usually to this dichotomy of physiological and psychological entities that are biologically indivisible. Everybody is now aware of the huge body of knowledge that has emerged in recent years as critical responses to the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy. But Shusterman’s proposal is ethico - religious, in its pragmatist perspectives, rather than any(merely) academic treatment in its intellectual perspectives, in restoring the cultural value of the “soma” as against its devaluation in the medieval (or even classical) philosophical and religious traditions, against, for example Plotinus’ being “ashamed of being in the body,” and preferring the practices of asceticism and body-punishment. Shusterman writes, “Today, when philosophy has shrunk from a global art of living into a narrow field of academic discourse, the body retains a strong presence as a theoretical (and sometimes potentially political) abstraction. However, the idea of using its cultivation for heightened consciousness and philosophical insight would probably strike most professional philosophers as an embarrassing abstraction. I hope to change this prejudice.” (P. IX) He thus appears to be a preacher rather than simply a professional / academic philosopher. Yet his writing “a philosophy of mindfulness and somaesthetics” is a kind of philosophy that might be called “edifying” in the language of Richard Rorty. Shusterman’s affiliation to the neo-pragmatism has been established long since the 1990s.

Theoretically, body, mind and consciousness have been considered as separate entities in the Indian tradition. The Vedic texts discern five sheaths – physical or material (*annamaya*), vital (*prâ’amaya*), psychic (*manomaya*), conscious (*vijñânarnaya*) and beatitudinal (*ânandamaya*), one inside the other in the reversal

order, the fifth one being the abode of the ultimate reality called *âtman* that is characterized by this very abode, i.e., absolute beatitude. The first three layers or covers, physical, vital and psychic might constitute what Shusterman calls “Soma”: “I often prefer to speak of *soma* rather than body to emphasize that my concern is with the living, feeling, sentient, purposive body rather than a mere physical corpus of flesh and bones.” (p- XI) But the alternative impressions he proposes to use for this entity such as “somatic consciousness” and “somaesthetic consciousness” are confusing. Consciousness must necessarily be somatic because soma is the very location of consciousness. On the other hand, somaesthetic cannot be synonymous to somatic because it implies some extra properties that cannot be attributed to soma as he understands it, if by ‘aesthetics’ he does not mean the Greek *aesthesis*, i.e., mere feelings, sensations or even unqualified perceptual experience. (Hence soma must be attributed with the expressive intent as well).

Neuroscientists have so far failed to locate consciousness in the brain process that comprises the activities of one billion neurons, although they have detected that brain process precedes the function of consciousness. Physiologists like Francis Crick assert that consciousness is not aware of the brain process in early sensory areas, but only of the later results of that processing. Thus how can consciousness, a part of the brain process, which is itself a biological system, be treated separately from the biopsychic entities as the Indians have done? Besides, if the Sanskrit term *âtman* is understood in its correlation with the German *atman* (according to the Indo-Germanic linguistic system) that means “to breathe”, then virtually *âtman* is a vital or phenomenal entity, not a transcendental one, that can be located only in the fifth sheath. Therefore the heterodox thinkers like the Buddhists reject any persisting stable entity called ‘self’ (*âtman*) or consciousness that experiences, and instead, they propose a stream of experiences that are blended together and provide us with an illusory “one-ness”. So also is the popular theory of the American psychologist William James – “stream of consciousness”.

The orthodox Indian philosophers, however, consistently propose a unitary consciousness which they name severally – *cit*, *citta*, *cetanâ*, *caitanya* and *vijnâna* which they distinguish from the biopsychic system. Thus *citta* is not *manas* (mind) which is counted as one (internal / *antahkara’a*) among the organs – five sense organs and five motor organs. *Manas* is also separated from *buddhi* (*intellect*) and *ahankâra* (ego)

But sometimes *citta* is also used as an entity very close to mind, when, for example, Patañjali (2nd c. B.C.) states that there are five functions of *citta*: valid cognition, erroneous cognition, imagination, memory and sleep, and yoga aims at arresting these functions so that one attains internal enlightenment as well as the supreme goal of human life- *samâdhi* or complete self-submergence , the whole statement meaning, in other words, that *samâdhi* is nothing other than the function-less *citta* or consciousness free from the three levels of experience - waking (*jagrât*), dreaming

(*svapna*) and dreamless sleep (*suṣupti*). This fourth state (*turāya*) explains the nature of the ultimate Reality the all-pervading (pure) consciousness, devoid of the subject-object (and for that matter all binary) dichotomy, otherwise called *âtman*, *brahman*, *paramâtman*, the state of self-relished beatitude. According to this theory, then, far from being subject to any brain process or bioneurosis, consciousness itself is the sole cause of the biological, psychological and neurotic phenomena, a theory that anticipates the modern panpsychist belief that everything in the universe is conscious, there is nothing unconscious in this cosmos; consciousness was there from the start. (Blackmore, 2005:117)

Sanskrit critics of classical India have engaged themselves in rigorous debates on the nature of appreciation of the dramatic performance which they have named *rasa* (literally “juice”) meaning tasting or relishing. This relish is compared to the fourth level of *citta* or consciousness in its functionless state but with a significant difference that the state of self-submergence is absolutely indeterminate, whereas the relish of the theatre is determinate experience, although the beatitude of these two states may be on par in kind. (See my essay in *Art and Experience*, 2003) But, in spite of their emphasis on consciousness, thinkers of the brahmanic ideology have never despised the body, which they have rather glorified in various ways. The Upanishadic texts have even glorified sexual union, and the visual arts of classical India have embodied the vigour of *mithuna* (sexual union) and human body on the exterior portions of temples – *Ārāma deva mandiram* – body is the abode of divinity. “First take care of body, then practise religious rites” is the popular slogan of the brahmanic culture, because it is the body that is the foundation of religious practice. The word *tapas* used by Patañjali does not mean torturing the body as the Ārāma’as of the pre-Buddhist period were doing. Vyāsa (1st c. B.C.), Patañjali’s commentator interprets *tapas* (literally, heating) as the cleansing of mind by withdrawing it from its attachment with the sensory world that obstructs concentration. But this does not imply negation of body and the world, although in the Vedic, pre-Vedic and post-Vedic periods a group of ascetics were negating both body and the world while aspiring to move in some other world that is full of some heavenly pleasure. The yogic meditation that the Buddha practised was already instructed by the Vedic texts available during his time, and, instead of negating the body, he has also advised to restrain the sensory attachment of various kinds. In the *Satipāṭhāna* aphorisms of the *Majjhimanikāya* he measures four foundations of mindfulness (upathāna = Sanskrit *upasthāna* meaning presence/attendance) such as body, feelings, mind and qualities (*dharmas*). In fourteen basic sections the Buddha offers an account of watching the body: the monk is mindful when breathing in and out; he knows his difficult postures; he acts with clear comprehension in his various activities; he reflects on the body as full of different kinds of impurity; he reflects on the body as constituted by the elements of earth, water, fire and wind; he compares his body to a corpse in nine different states of petrification. The Buddha has also advised for having negative capabilities, i.e. one must be incapable of doing crime, things such as telling lies, committing theft and

murder (*Anguttara Nikāyas*.) It seems, however, that all these observations and instructions are substantially available in the Vedic scriptures which the Buddha learns and experiences by his own practices.

II

Having learnt so much from the Indic traditions on body, mind and consciousness when one comes across the Western tradition that Shusterman consults one finds hardly any such distinction among these entities. The philosophers he consults, four continental - Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simon de Beauvoir, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and two American - William James and John Dewey, consider consciousness in its phenomenal form that eliminates the Indian trans-phenomenal aspect as well as its dreaming and sleeping levels. Merleau-Ponty’s famous “body-subject” theory in its phenomenological perspectives provides Shusterman with a strong foundation for establishing his thesis of body consciousness. In appreciation of visual art, Merleau-Ponty quotes Valery: “The painter “takes his body with him”, and states:

“Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working actual body - not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement... (“Eye and Mind”, II) ... In paintings themselves we could seek a figured philosophy of vision – its iconography, perhaps. It is no accident for example, that frequently in Dutch paintings (as in many others) an empty interior is ‘digested’ by the round eye of the mirror. This prehuman way of seeing things is the painter’s way. More completely than lights, shadows, and reflections, the mirror image anticipates, within things, the labour of vision, like all other technical objects, such as signs and tools, the mirror arises upon the open circuit (that goes) from seeing body to visible body. Every technique is a ‘technique of the body’.

Thus the body is not merely visible in painting. It is also ‘seeing’ like the body-subject in its phenomenologically perceptual perspectives. But is it not true of Jean Ingres’ painting of the female nude in his *Baigneuse de Valpincon* (*Valpincon Bather*, 1808) which is printed on the cover of Shusterman’s book as recommended by the marketing department of the Cambridge University Press, against which he complains: “what a shock to learn that the marketing department had selected this beautiful but painfully misleading image for the cover of my book on body consciousness! As a critic of the media culture’s deceptive objectifications of the body, but also as a Feldenkrais practitioner sensitive to the strain and suffering of the spine I voiced my objections.” ?

The reason for this objection is more ethical than aesthetical. The painter has undoubtedly intensified the woman's (a female slave or concubine of the harems) formal beauty with her completely naked backside charged with erotic intoxication. But, although her facial expression is invisible, it embodies a passive pose, unconscious of the beauty of her body that is just meant for satisfaction of the sexual appetite of her 'keeper'. Further, the posture is anatomically uncomfortable. What then shocks Shusterman is not lack of any aesthetic quality in the picture, but lack of anatomical propriety of the posture together with indifference of the woman to her physical beauty as expressed in the posture. Instead of manifesting body consciousness, the picture manifests just the opposite- the figure's unconsciousness of the physical presence, thus obstructing the social and somatic import that he proposes to argue out in the book. Should the reader then presuppose that he reads a book on socio-soma ethics, not aesthetics?

The said picture was put on the cover of Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* more than half a century ago (1956, reprinted Penguin 1970) where Clark has discussed Ingres' aesthetic excellence in about seven pages (143-149) quoting Ingres, "One must not dwell too much on the details of the human body; the members must be, so to speak, like shafts of columns: such they are in the greatest masters". But Clark comments, "He continued to dwell on details and his figures, far from being like columns of antique Greece, come more and more to resemble the temple sculpture of Southern India... the final expression of this Orientalism is the *Bain Ture*. It is dated 1862, and Ingres with justifiable pride, has added to his signature his age: Aetatis LXXXII." Should an aesthetician condemn Ingres' Orientalism, in the words of Shusterman, as the media culture's deceptive objectifications of the body? In responding to the marketing department's answer (to Shusterman's objection) that the picture on the cover would be attractive to the vast majority of his readers, Shusterman gives a consolatory nod that the arguments of the book would open the eyes of his vast majority of readers "to other forms of and beauties of body consciousness." Excellent! The cover then serves a powerful paradox to his arguments. But why should he instruct his readers - "Do not judge this book by its covers"?

III

The task for the reader now remains to explore forms and beauties of body consciousness with a social and somatic import (rather than what is embodied or not embodied at all in Ingres?) Clark's appreciation of Ingres' response to the female body marks its meridional earnestness, "but this impulse was combined with a passion for form, or, to be more precise, with a need to externalize certain expressive shapes; and his paintings are often no more than a sort of show-case in which to display those points where obsessive form and sensuality are brought into focus. Ingres spent his whole life in an attempt to prize out of himself these nuggets of obsessive form; and the intensity of this effort made him so narrow and obstinate as to seem unintelligent. But he recognized that he must reconcile his insatiable appetite for particularity with

an ideal of classical beauty, and his greatness as a delineator of the nude could be described, in modern jargon as a tension between the two." Of the particular painting of the *Bather* of our concern Clark writes, "of all his works it is the most calmly satisfying and best exemplifies his notion of beauty as something large, simple and continuous, endorsed and amplified by an unbroken outline."

To discuss Clark at length is to question in what sense exactly Shusterman traces an absence of body consciousness in the *Bather* whereas the painter is so passionately conscious of the female body delineating it against the Victorian fear of the body. Ingres might be *accused* of bourgeois sensibility by a socialist (Marxist) audience, but from an aesthetic point of view there is hardly any difference between the passive posture of the concubine, disinterested in her body meant for the enjoyment of her 'keeper' and the women in vigorous sexual union delineated in the temple sculpture of India. What matters for the audience is, in both the cases, the artist's passion for form. Would, for that matter, Shusterman prefer the picture of an Indian *mithuna* sculpture in which both the partners are passionately conscious of their bodies? The questions that he puts on the pages XI-XII and proposes to answer them in his book are, honestly speaking, of ethical and socio-religious interest not of aesthetical in any possible way. Therefore, it is difficult to understand whether his notion of cultivation of body consciousness or exercise of heightened somatic awareness that philosophy's commitment to self-knowledge entails is relevantly correlated with a branch of aesthetics that might be called "somaesthetics". It seems, he proposes somaesthetics as an (interdisciplinary) area of knowledge that is not just a branch of "aesthetics", but might promote aesthetic practices, properly understood and exercised.

Nobody hesitates to agree with Shusterman's contention, "any acutely attentive, somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself." (p-8) In fact this is the very gist of the Indian yogic meditation. The Japanese *Zen* meditation, he consults, as everybody knows, is the derivative of the Indian yogic *dhyana*. However, Shusterman makes the point clear that the "forms and beauties of body consciousness" he wants to discuss in his book do not refer to any specific art historical and critical phenomena, but refer to "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthetics) and creative self-fashioning." Thus he does not deal with any philosophy of art or aesthetic theory, but proposes the validity of a science meant for the promotion of our experience of soma as creatively as we experience an artwork. In the present social context this exercise is even more necessary for our mental, physical and social health than cultivation of our experience of the beauties of art and nature. In other words, yogic meditation/mindfulness might be evaluated as an aesthetic experience meant for social health rather than a religious experience meant for mystic salvation. It is to this point that he draws our notice drawing upon the material from the six influential thinkers of the past two centuries. In Foucault's writings he explores three varieties of somaesthetics - analytic, pragmatic and practical, and even does not hesitate to re-examine their thoughts so as to accommodate them with his own ideas.

He challenges Plato's anti-somatic attitude that continued till the idealist tradition through Neoplatonism and Christian theology of the Middle Ages, and, of course very correctly demands a revision of the Foucauldian bodily pleasures that should go beyond the unorthodox sensual and sexual practices, At the same time, without sacrificing de Beauvoir's concern for the exploitation of female bodies one should look for her concern for the body consciousness in her later works. Shusterman does not spare even James' warning that heightened consciousness of somatic actions leads to failure in achieving our desired ends of higher values causing even psychological and moral problems. The cryptic notes and aphorisms of Wittgenstein that frequently imply insignificance of sensations also recognize the role of somaesthetic feelings, when he speaks of "aesthetic feeling for one's body" in the fields of philosophy of mind, politics, ethics and aesthetics. Dewey, according to Shusterman, improves over James with regard to body's role in will, emotion, thought and action.

Shusterman's use of soma in place of body, and its application in the cultivation of aesthetic values, necessary for a sound social structure lacking in the contemporary Western Culture vitiated by the overemphasis on media and information sciences triggered by the materialist world views so influential in the present generation, are certainly most valuable. His suggestion for extending the scope of aesthetics from its traditionally philosophical and critical treatments of the beauty in art and nature to exploration of beauty in somatic practices are warmly welcomed. This extension involves the scope for extending the perspectives of social, moral and political sciences that are relevantly intertwined. One may not accept the mystic and religious aspects of the yogic practices, but the emphasis on the somatic aspects of their meditation techniques are certainly of universal interest in regaining the loss in our social existence.

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