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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

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.

