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 The TPM Essay
 

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# A body of knowledge

We need a practical philosophy of the body, says **Richard Shusterman**

**O**ne striking paradox of our new media culture is its heightened attention to the body. As telecommunications render bodily presence unnecessary, while new technologies of body-imaging and plastic cyborg-surgery challenge the very presence of a real body, our culture seems increasingly fixated on the soma, serving it with the adoring devotion once bestowed on other worshiped mysteries. Fitness centres have largely replaced both church and museum as the preferred site of self-cultivation. Ever more money, time, and effort are being invested in dieting, fashion, and cosmetics (whose range has expanded from mere makeup and grooming to surgical extravagances that have become mainstream). Despite digitalised body construction, bodies seem to matter more.

Though fuelled by late-capitalist commercialism, today's somatic fascination should not be dismissed as an illusory fabrication of the advertising industry. It reflects an irrepressible recognition of the body's centrality in all human experience, which, *qua* human, is inevitably embodied. The body constitutes our primal perspective and mode of engaging the world, "the very centre of our experience," "centre of

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vision, centre of action, centre of interest," as Merleau-Ponty and William James assert. Our humanity is defined (for better and for worse) largely by our form, conditions, and modes of embodiment, which shape our minds, needs, desires, and habits, and thus distinguish us from angels and inhuman beasts. Even if we try to dissociate the body from our core identity by objectifying it as a tool (an ancient philosophical notion reflected in the derivation of the somatic words "organ" and "organism" from the Greek word for tool), we have to recognise the body as our most basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought.

If philosophy's job is the interpretation of experience and critique of culture with the aim of providing guidance towards improving them, then we should expect the body to be a key topic of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, as a crucial instrument of perception and action and thus of all inquiry itself, shouldn't the body also form the focus of disciplined philosophical cultivation, of concrete practice to improve one's somatic awareness and capacities?

Yet despite our culture's somatic fixations, being a body philosopher remains very problematic. Indeed it is impossible to identify oneself as such in terms of the official list of subfields that define the Anglo-American philosophical institution. Among the more than 190 specialties listed by the Philosophy Documentation Center, philosophy of body or somatic philosophy cannot be found. The closest specialties given are philosophy of gender, bioethics, philosophy of person, philosophy of self, and philosophy of