

SOMAESTHETICS AND CARE OF THE SELF: THE CASE OF FOUCAULT

I

Among the many features 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. This paper examines Foucault as an exemplary but problematic pioneer in a field I call somaesthetics, a discipline that puts the body's experience and artful refashioning back into the heart of philosophy as an art of living. A long dominant Platonist tradition, intensified by recent centuries of Cartesianism and idealism, has blinded us to a crucial fact that was evident to much ancient and non-Western thought: since we live, think, and act through our bodies, their study, care, and improvement should be at the core of philosophy, especially when philosophy is conceived (as it used to be) as a special way of life, a critical, disciplined care of the self.

Even in today's atmosphere of heightened body consciousness, most academic theorists have followed Pierre Hadot in treating the philosophical life as a one-sided life of the mind.¹ Hadot, who has played a leading role in reviving contemporary interest (including Foucault's) in philosophy as a way of life, defines this life in terms of its programmatic practice of therapeutic disciplines (e.g., "meditation," "therapies of the passions," and "self-mastery") which he pointedly calls "spiritual exercises" and which he defines in sharp contrast to bodily exercises and needs. Tracing these exercises back to Socratic dialogue and focusing primarily on the "Stoico-Platonic" tradition, Hadot more precisely defines their spiritual character and philosophy's essential goal in terms of Plato's body-scoring *Phaedo*. In this dialogue Plato portrays philosophy's life as a training in death, through the exercise of "separating the soul as much as possible from the body . . . until it is completely independent."

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In this context, Hadot presents spiritual exercise as the tool through which “philosophy subjugates the body’s will to live to the higher demands of thought,” “an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view—linked to the senses and the body—so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought,” to embody our pure essence of reason. Noting that these spiritual exercises to strengthen the soul can be seen as a form of “spiritual gymnastics” analogical to physical exercises to bolster the body, Hadot even recognizes that “the *gymnasion*, the place where physical exercises were practiced, was the same place where philosophy lessons were given.” Yet he seems strangely unwilling to countenance the idea that both activities could fruitfully be combined in pursuing philosophy as a way of life. Though awed by Hadot’s scholarly grasp of ancient philosophy, I dare to think that just this combination of mind and body can be detected if we look beyond the imposing anti-somatic shadow of Plato’s *Phaedo*. In *Timaeus*, for instance, Plato urges “an equal and healthy balance between [body and mind]. So anyone [like the philosopher] engaged on mathematics or any other intellectual pursuit, should also exercise his body and take part in physical training.”²

If we look beyond Platonic sources, we will be reminded that Socrates “took care to exercise his body and kept it in good condition” by regular dance training. “The body,” he declared, “is valuable for all human activities; and in all its uses, it should be as fit as possible. Even in the act of thinking, which is supposed to require least assistance from the body, everyone knows that serious mistakes often happen through physical ill health.”

Socrates was not the only ancient philosopher to celebrate physical health and advocate somatic training and refinement. Before him, Cleobulus, a sage “distinguished for strength and beauty, and initiated in Egyptian philosophy,” “advised people to practice bodily exercise.” Aristippus (hedonistic pupil of Socrates and founder of the Cyrenaic school) claimed “that bodily training contributes to the acquisition of virtue,” while Zeno, founder of the Stoics, likewise urged regular bodily exercise, claiming that “proper care of health and one’s organs of sense” are “unconditional duties.” Though rating mental pleasures above mere bodily ones, Epicurus still affirmed “health of body and tranquillity of mind as the twin goals of philosophy’s quest for “a blessed life.”³ Diogenes, founder of the Cynics, was still more outspoken in advocating bodily

training as a necessary key to virtue and the good life.⁴ Practicing the somatic discipline he preached, he experimented with a variety of body practices to test and toughen himself: from limiting his diet and walking barefoot in the snow, to masturbating in public and accepting the blows of drunken revellers.

Recognition of somatic training as an essential means toward philosophical enlightenment and virtue lies at the heart of Asian practices of Hatha Yoga, Zen Meditation, and T'ai chi ch'uan. As Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yusuo insists, the concept of "personal cultivation" or *shugyo* (an obvious analogue of "care of the self") is presupposed in Eastern thought as "the philosophical foundation," since "true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking," but only "through 'bodily recognition or realization' (*tainin* or *taitoku*)."⁵

This paper will neither explore these ancient and non-Western philosophies of self-care, nor explain somatic philosophy's eclipse in modernity and its displaced resurgence in twentieth-century body theorists-cum-therapists like Wilhelm Reich. However important these topics are, I prefer to focus here on developing a more systematic conception of philosophy as a distinctly embodied practice of transformative self-care by exploring Foucault's rich but controversial contributions to this idea.⁶ While my book *Practicing Philosophy* presented a comparative study of Foucault's somatic philosophy by contrasting it to Dewey's and Wittgenstein's,⁷ I now pursue Foucault's project more in the style of an analytically trained reconstructive pragmatist. First, I propose a systematic framework and a name for the field he was working in—a frustratingly unclear, unchartered, and virtually unrecognized discipline I call "somaesthetics." After showing how Foucault's somatic work can be usefully situated in this field, I examine some important objections both to Foucault's program and, more generally, to somaesthetics as I conceive it: charges of narrowness, sensualism, hedonistic triviality, and apolitical narcissism.

II

Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore

also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it. If we put aside philosophical prejudice against the body and instead simply recall philosophy's central aims of knowledge, self-knowledge, right action, and quest for the good life, then the philosophical value of somaesthetics should become evident.

1. Since knowledge is largely based on sensory perception whose reliability often proves questionable, philosophy has always involved critique of the senses, exposing their limits and avoiding their misguidance by subjecting them to discursive reason. Philosophy's work here (at least in Western modernity) has been confined to the sort of second-order critical analysis of sensory propositions that constitutes traditional epistemology. The complementary route offered by somaesthetics is to correct the actual functional performance of our senses by an improved direction of one's body, since the senses belong to and are conditioned by the soma.

As Socrates recognized that physical ill health could generate errors through organ malfunctioning or simple fatigue, so therapies like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method (like older Asian practices of Hatha yoga and Zen meditation) seek to improve the acuity, health, and control of our senses by cultivating heightened attention and mastery of their somatic functioning, while also freeing us from bodily habits and defects which impair sensory performance.

2. If self-knowledge is a central aim of philosophy, then knowledge of one's bodily dimension must not be ignored. Concerned not simply with the body's external form or *representation* but with its lived *experience*, somaesthetics works toward improved awareness of our feelings, thus providing greater insight into our passing moods and lasting attitudes. It can therefore reveal and improve somatic malfunctionings that normally go undetected even through they impair our well-being and performance.

Take two examples. We rarely notice our breathing, but its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state. Consciousness of breathing can therefore make us aware that we are angry or anxious when we might otherwise remain unaware of these feelings and thus vulnerable to their misdirection. Similarly, a chronic muscular contraction that not only constrains movement but results in tension and pain may nonetheless go unnoticed because it has become habitual. As unnoticed, this chronic contraction cannot be relived, nor can its resultant disability

and discomfort. Yet once such somatic functioning is brought to clear attention, there is a chance to modify it and avoid its unhealthy consequences.

3. A third central aim of philosophy is right action, for which we need knowledge and self-knowledge, but also effective will. Since action is only achieved through the body, our power of volition—the ability to act as we will to act—depends on somatic efficacy. Knowing and desiring the right action will not avail if we cannot will our bodies to perform it; and our surprising inability to perform the most simple bodily tasks is matched only by our astounding blindness to this inability, these failures resulting from inadequate somaesthetic awareness and control.

Consider the poor golfer who tries to keep his head down and his eyes on the ball and who is completely convinced that he is doing so, even though he in fact miserably fails. His conscious will is unsuccessful because deeply ingrained somatic habit override it; he does not even notice this failure because his habitual sense perception is so inadequate and distorted that it feels as if the action intended is indeed performed as willed. Too much of our action is like the “head-lifting” golfer whose will, however strong, remains still impotent, because lacking the somatic sensibility to make it effective. Such misperception and weakening of the will stunts virtue. Advanced today by body therapists outside the bounds of legitimized philosophy, this line of argument has ancient philosophical credentials. Diogenes the Cynic was not the only Greek philosopher to advocate rigorous body training as “that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds.”⁸

4. Pursuit of virtue and self-mastery is traditionally integrated into ethics’ quest for better living. If philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of happiness, then somaesthetics’ concern with the body as a locus and medium of our pleasures clearly deserves more philosophical attention. Even the joys and stimulations of so-called pure thought are (for us embodied humans) influenced by somatic conditioning and require muscular contraction; they can therefore be intensified or better savored through improved somatic awareness and discipline.

5. These four neglected points do not exhaust the ways that somatics is central to philosophy. Foucault’s seminal vision of the body as a malleable site for inscribing social power reveals the crucial role somatics can play for political philosophy. It offers a way of understanding how complex hierarchies of power can be widely exercised and reproduced

without any need to make them explicit in laws or to officially enforce them; entire ideologies of domination can thus be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, get typically taken for granted and so escape critical consciousness. That “proper” women speak softly, stay slim, eat dainty foods, sit with their legs close together, assume the lower position in copulation (heterosexual of course) are embodied norms that sustain women’s social disempowerment while granting them full official liberty. But just as oppressive power relations impose repressive identities that are encoded and sustained in our bodies, so they can be challenged by alternative somatic practices.

Fruitfully embraced by recent feminist and gay body theorists, this Foucauldian message has long been part of the program of psychosomatic therapists like Reich and Feldenkrais. Affirming deep reciprocal influences between somatic and psychological development, such theorists explain somatic malfunctioning as both a product and reinforcing cause of personality problems, which themselves may require body work for their proper remedy. Similar claims are made by yogis and Zen masters, but also by bodybuilders and martial-arts practitioners. In these diverse disciplines, somatic training forms the heart of ethics’ care of the self, a prerequisite to mental well-being and psychological self-mastery.

Despite today’s abundance of philosophical talk about “the body,” it tends to lack two important features. First, a structuring overview or architectonic to integrate its very different, seemingly incommensurable discourses into a more productively systematic field, some comprehensive framework that could fruitfully link the discourse of biopolitics with therapies of bioenergetics, or connect the ontology of supervenience with the bodybuilding methods 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. Inspired by Foucault’s embodied vision of care for the self, the discipline of somaesthetics seeks to remedy both deficiencies.

III

1. Somaesthetics has three fundamental dimensions, all present in Foucault. *Analytic somaesthetics* describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and of their function in our knowledge and

construction of reality. This theoretical dimension involves traditional ontological and epistemological issues of the body, but also includes the sort of sociopolitical inquiries Foucault made central: how the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health and beauty, and even the most basic categories of sex and gender, are constructed to reflect and sustain social forces.

Foucault's approach to these somatic issues was typically *genealogical*, portraying the historical emergence of various body doctrines, norms, and practices. This descriptive approach could be extended by a comparative analytic that contrasts the body views and practices of two or more synchronic cultures. But the value of such historico-cultural analysis does not preclude a place for analytics of a more universal bent as expressed in traditional ontological theories of the mind-body relationship (e.g., dualism, eliminative materialism, functionalism, emergentism, etc.).

2. In contrast to analytic somaesthetics whose logic (whether genealogical or ontological) is descriptive, *pragmatic somaesthetics* has a distinctly normative, prescriptive character by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique. Since the viability of any proposed method will depend on certain facts about the body (whether ontological, physiological, or social), this pragmatic dimension will always presuppose the analytic dimension, though transcending it not only by evaluation but by meliorative efforts to change certain facts by remaking the body and society.

Since ancient times a vast variety of pragmatic disciplines have been recommended to improve our experience and use of the body: diverse diets, body piercing and scarification, forms of dance and martial arts, yoga, massage, aerobics, bodybuilding, S/M, and disciplines of psychosomatic well-being like Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Reichian bioenergetics, etc.

These diverse methodologies of practice can be roughly classified in terms of *representational* and *experiential* forms; representational somaesthetics emphasizes the body's external appearance, while experiential disciplines prefer to focus on the aesthetic quality of its "inner" experience. Such experiential methods aim to make us "feel better," in both senses of this ambiguous phrase (which reflects the ambiguity of the very notion of aesthetics): to make the quality of experience more satisfyingly rich, but also to make our awareness of somatic experience more acute

and perceptive. Cosmetic practices (from hair-styling to plastic surgery) exemplify the representational side of somaesthetics, while practices like *zazen* meditation or Feldenkrais "Awareness Through Movement" are paradigmatic of the experiential mode.

The representational/experiential distinction is useful in countering condemnations that somaesthetics must be superficial, since confined to surface appearances.⁹ But this distinction should not be taken as rigidly *exclusive*, since there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner. As advertising constantly reminds us, how we look influences how we feel, but also *vice versa*. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for ends of representation often produce feelings that may then be sought for their own sake. The dieter becomes an anorexic craving the feel of hunger; the bodybuilder an addict of "the pump." On the other hand, somatic methods aimed at inner experience often employ representational means as cues to effect the body posture necessary for inducing the desired experience, whether by consulting one's image in a mirror, focussing one's gaze on a body part like the tip of the nose or the navel, or simply visualizing a body form in one's imagination. But, by the same token, a representational practice like bodybuilding conversely utilizes acute awareness of experiential clues (e.g., of optimal fatigue, body alignment, and full muscle extension) to serve its sculptural ends of external form.

The representational/experiential distinction is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. A third category of *performative* somaesthetics could be introduced for disciplines devoted primarily to bodily strength or health (e.g., weightlifting, martial arts, athletics, and calisthenics). But to the extent that such performance-oriented disciplines aim either at external exhibition or one's inner feelings of power and health, we might assimilate them into either the dominantly representational or experiential mode. In any case, we can also usefully classify somaesthetic practices in terms of whether they are primarily self-directed (e.g., yoga) or other-directed (e.g., massage), and whether they are atomistic or holistic, i.e., whether they focus on only particular body parts or surfaces (e.g., manicure) or, instead, treat the whole body and person (T'ai chi ch'uan).

3. No matter how we classify the different methodologies of pragmatic somaesthetics, they need to be distinguished from their actual practice. I call this third dimension *practical* somaesthetics. It is not a

matter of producing texts, not even texts that offer pragmatic methods of somatic care; it is instead about actually practicing such care through intelligently disciplined body work aimed at somatic self-improvement (whether in representational, experiential, or performative form). Concerned not with saying but with *doing*, this practical dimension is the most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the discursive *logos* typically ends in textualizing the body. For practical somaesthetics, the less said the better, *if* this means the more work actually done. But because, in philosophy, what goes without saying typically goes without doing, the concrete activity of somatic training must be named as the crucial practical dimension of somaesthetics conceived as a comprehensive philosophical discipline concerned with self-knowledge and self-care.

Foucault (like John Dewey) is exemplary for working in all three dimensions of somaesthetics. The analytic genealogist, who showed how “docile bodies” were systematically shaped by seemingly innocent body-disciplines to advance certain socio-political agendas, emerges also as the pragmatic methodologist proposing alternative bodypractices to overcome the repressive ideologies entrenched in our docile bodies. Foremost among these alternatives were practices of consensual S/M, whose experiences, he argued, challenged not only the hierarchy of the head but the privileging of genital sexuality (which in turn privileges heterosexuality). Foucault also repeatedly advocated strong “drugs which can produce very intense pleasures,” insisting that they “must become a part of our culture” (FL 384) And boldly practicing what he preached, Foucault tested his chosen methods by experimenting on his own flesh and with other live bodies.

In criticizing these methods, we should not ignore the particular value of drugs and S/M for certain projects of self-care that Foucault was personally most concerned with, projects of radical innovation, gay liberation, and his own problematic quest for pleasure. “Different strokes for different folks” affirms a vernacular wisdom appropriate for more than S/M disciples. To some extent, should this not be a maxim for any adequate notion of somatic self-care? If Emerson and Nietzsche are right that each self is essentially unique (the unrepeatable product of countless contingencies), shouldn’t each self require his or her own special constellation of body disciplines? But, on the other hand, don’t our embodied selves share significant commonalities of biological make-up and societal conditioning that would allow some interesting generalizations about the

values and risks of different somatic methods? How could philosophy or science (or even practical life) be possible without such generalization?

IV

Bracketing these grand questions, this paper will also put aside both Foucault's fascinating genealogical studies in analytic somaesthetics and the details of his actual bodily practice. Concentrating on the methods and aims of Foucault's pragmatic somaesthetics, I shall address some objections they are apt to incite, especially those that challenge the very validity of somaesthetics as an adequate interpretation of philosophical self-care.

1. First is the charge that Foucault's advocacy of drugs and S/M simply signifies a nihilistic French sophisticate's jaded taste for narcotic sexual perversion. Foucault's declared aim is quite the contrary: to break our obsession with sex as they key to all pleasure, a repressive fetishism that blinds us from realizing other somatic pleasures that could render life more beautiful and satisfying. "We should be striving," Foucault repeatedly insists, "toward a desexualization, to a general economy of pleasure that would not be sexually normed." Condemning what he called 'the monarchy of Sex,' Foucault advocates "fabricating other pleasures" through "polymorphic relationships with things, people, and bodies" for which the traditional "'sex' grid is a veritable prison."¹⁰ Foucault explicitly recommends S/M *not* for its sexual kick but for its creative "desexualization of pleasure" by "inventing new possibilities with strange parts of [the] body—through the eroticisation of the body." S/M, he elaborates, is:

a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features, the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure. I think *that's* something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasures with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on. ["Sex, Power, and Politics of identity" (FL 384)].

How, one may wonder, can the body and its pleasures be simultaneously desexualized and eroticized? The paradox is muted by recalling that 'sex' in French denotes the genitals, so desexualizing somatic pleasure can simply mean undermining the primacy of genital gratification by

eroticizing other body parts than *le sex*. This is one of Foucault's major aims, and one reason why he compellingly criticizes both Sade and Reich. But can eros be altogether freed from the grid of sexual desire, something to be understood and cultivated "under a general economy of pleasure"? This more radical form of desexualized eroticization would more fully serve Foucault's goal to make the body "infinitely more susceptible to pleasure," by developing its capacities for varieties of somatic pleasure that transcend the sexual.¹¹

Despite its significant transgressions, S/M remains dominated by sex and hence overly confined in its palette of pleasures. Foucault's own advocacy of S/M betrays these limits. In "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," gay S/M is praised because "all the energy and imagination, which in the heterosexual relationship were channeled into courtship, now become devoted to *intensifying* the act of sex itself. A whole new art of sexual practice develops which tries to explore all the internal possibilities of sexual conduct." Likening the gay leather scenes in San Francisco and New York to "laboratories of sexual experimentation," Foucault claims such experimentation is strictly controlled by consensual codes, as in the medieval chivalric courts "where strict rules of proprietary courtship were defined." Experimentation is necessary, explains Foucault, "because the sexual act has become so easy and available . . . that it runs the risk of quickly becoming boring, so that every effort has to be made to innovate and create variations that will enhance the pleasure of the act." "This mixture of rules and openness," Foucault concludes, "has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty which the simple consummation of the act lacks. The idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument" (FL 330–331).

This is hardly a promising recipe for breaking free of the sexual grid towards a polymorphism of pleasure. All somatic imagination is narrowly focussed on intensifying "the sexual act" and reducing every segment of the soma to a "sexual instrument." No matter how transgressive and experimental, it unwittingly reinforces the homogenizing normalization of pleasure as sexual and structured by "the act" (however deviantly consummated). Its very tools and icons of bondage (chains, ropes, whips, dungeons, etc.) ironically convey S/M's captivity to the *sexual* norm of

pleasure. The monotony of these old-fashioned images of discipline, and the creative poverty of newer ones like Nazi “boots, caps, and eagles” do not speak well for S/M’s imaginative daring, a problem Foucault himself admits with some dismay.¹²

Noting these limits in S/M is not to privilege so-called standard practices of love-making—straight or gay; for they all share precisely the same limiting sexual frame. My aim is to advocate celibate somatic pleasures that escape the sexual frame and so more widely multiply our palette of joy. Through the variety that such celibate pleasures introduce, and the somaesthetic techniques of self-mastery through which they are pursued, they can even intensify the sexual pleasures from which they distinguish themselves.

If confined both to the sexual grid and to a very conventional (albeit transgressive and varied) repertoire of scripted practices, why would S/M win Foucault’s zealous endorsement as the somaesthetic key to creating a radically new way of life and self-stylized ethical subject? There are several good reasons: S/M’s intrinsically social, dialogical, collaborative nature and its theatrical playing of reversible roles not only stress the reciprocal sociality of pleasure but further inculcate two crucial Foucauldian messages: that our selves are not fixed ontological identities but, instead, socially constructed roles that we play with respect to others; and, therefore, that we can to some extent refashion ourselves by deliberately adopting different role-playing performances. But perhaps Foucault’s strongest reason for advocating S/M was the lived, intense hedonic power of his actual experience. What does it matter if the means are conventional (even banal), if the results are so intense and pleasurable?

2. Here we reach a second objection to Foucault’s somaesthetics. By affirming only the most intense pleasures, which he identifies with strong drugs and sex, Foucault again reduces our range of pleasures, thus confounding his explicit aim of rendering us infinitely more susceptible to pleasure through multiple modalities. Rejecting what he calls “those middle-range pleasures that make up everyday life” (dismissively denoted by the American “club sandwich,” “coke,” and “ice cream” or a “glass of wine”), Foucault insists that “a pleasure must be something incredibly intense” or it is “nothing.” True pleasure is therefore identified with overpowering limit-experiences and thus with death. The most “complete” or

“real pleasure,” Foucault avowed, “would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn’t survive it. I would die . . . some drugs are really important for me because they are the mediation to those incredibly intense joys that I am unable to experience, to afford, by myself” (“Ethics of Pleasure,” FL 378)

Confessing “a real difficulty in experiencing pleasure,” Foucault needs to be overwhelmed to enjoy it. We should not dismiss this simply as Foucault’s personal problem. It reflects a pervasively devastating dichotomy drawn between the allegedly meaningless bodily pleasures of everyday life (unimaginatively identified with food and drink) and those truly significant somatic pleasures defined by their violent intensity and identified with transgressive drugs and sex.¹³

But everyday somatic pleasures also include breathing, stretching, and walking; and these can be developed to produce experiences of extreme intensity and exaltation, as we see in the familiar yoga methods of *pranayama* and *asana* or in Zen disciplines of meditative sitting, walking, and dancing.¹⁴ Conversely, the experience of strong drugs and heavy sex can become routinized and meaningless. The psychology of sensory fatigue means that intensification of pleasure cannot simply be achieved by intensity of sensation. Sensory appreciation is typically dulled when blasted with extremes. The most intensely enjoyed music is not the loudest. A gentle grazing touch can overpower the pleasure of a thunderous thrust.

Pleasure has a complicated logic; ascetics know how to get it by rejecting it. Yogis find its highest intensities not from the sensory explosions of narcotic orgasms but rather from an emptiness that reveals its own empowering intensity and fullness. In proposing an “ethics of pleasure,” doesn’t Foucault need a more careful “logic” and “logistic” of its central concept? Pierre Hadot has criticized him for hedonistically misreading the ancients by confusing the sensual pleasure of *voluptas* with the more spiritual, religious notion of joy (*gaudium*). Helpful as this distinction may be, it remains too simple. For there is also delight, satisfaction, gratification, gladness, contentment, pleasantness, amusement, merriment, elation, bliss, rapture, exultation, exhilaration, enjoyment, diversion, entertainment, titillation, fun, etc. Shouldn’t we more carefully recognize the many different varieties of experience typically grouped under pleasure so as to give each

its due appreciation and so derive from each its proper value? If this seems too tedious a task to pursue in the spirit of hedonism, we must at least recognize (more than Foucault) that the intensification of pleasure neither requires a one-sided diet of sensational limit-experiences nor, in fact, is well served by such a regimen.

3. So far I have tried to strengthen Foucault's somaesthetics by refining its hedonism to transcend his limiting fixations on sexuality, transgression, and sensational intensity. But isn't there a deeper problem in pragmatic somaesthetics, in its very focus on pleasure of whatever form? Is it not condemned to a trivial narcissistic hedonism in contrast to philosophy's noble aim of descriptive truth? Besides doesn't somaesthetic concern with pleasure contradict the very idea of strict discipline (*askesis*) that is so central to classical ethical notions of care of the self, and how, moreover, can it be reconciled with the other-regarding nature of ethics?¹⁵

Since my own aesthetic theory has frequently been criticized as hedonistic, the critique of pleasure is extremely important to me, though far too complex to treat adequately here.¹⁶ Let me merely make the following hasty points:

a. First, even if most pleasures, taken individually, were superficial and meaningless, pleasure itself plays a deeply important role in the direction of life. Philosophers therefore prefer to define it not as a conscious sensation but in motivational terms; not all forms of pleasure display a specific conscious quality, but they all have a *prima facie* motivational import. *Ceteris paribus*, it makes no sense to say that one greatly enjoys something but has absolutely no reason to do it. From the evolutionary and psychological levels, pleasure advances life by making life seem worth living; its positive emotional coloring encouragingly opens us to new experiences and to other people.

b. Partly for this reason, somaesthetics' pleasures of the body should not be condemned as necessarily entailing a retreat into selfish privacy. Feeling *bien dans sa peau* can make us more comfortably open in dealing with others; and somaesthetics' representational dimension is centrally concerned with making one's body attractive to others. Though this may turn into the narcissism of pleasing others simply to please one's pride of self (a problem perhaps epitomized by the posing bodybuilder), such dis-

torting temptations of pride are present in even the most anti-hedonic, body-scorning forms of ethics.

c. We must also reject the dogma that the body is irremediably too private, subjective, and individualistic in its pleasures to form the substance of ethics and politics. We share our bodies and somatic pleasures as much as we share our minds, and we surely show them in public as much as we express our thoughts. Pleasure is misconstrued as intrinsically private by being misidentified as an inner bodily sensation to which the individual has unique access. Unlike a toothache or stubbed toe, pleasure does not typically display itself as a specific, narrowly localized body feeling. The pleasure of playing tennis cannot be identified in one's running feet, beating heart, or sweating racket-hand. Somatic pleasures like tennis can't be mere sensation for two other reasons. The stronger a sensation, the more attention it claims for itself and the more it distracts from concentration on other things. If enjoying tennis were the having of strong sensations, the more we enjoyed it, the harder it would be to concentrate on the game. But clearly the opposite is true. Secondly, if pleasure were mere sensation, we could in principle enjoy the pleasure of tennis without any connection to the actual or imagined playing of the game.

Such objections indicate a more general point. Pleasure cannot be simply identified with sensation because the very enjoyment of sensation depends on the context or activity which shapes its meaning. The glass of mediocre wine that Foucault condemns to everyday banality can be the site of intense pleasure, even spiritual joy, when framed in the proper sacred context. Such examples (just like S/M's hedonic transfiguration of pain) testify to pleasure's semantic and cognitive dimensions that deny its reduction to mere sensationalism. As philosophy long insisted, we also take pleasure in knowing, and this pleasure inspires us to learn more.

d. Even if most pleasures seem trivial, some experiences of delight are so powerful that they deeply mark us, transforming our desires and thus redirecting our way of life. Deep aesthetic experience and mystical religious experience share this power, and in many cultures they are intimately linked: the poet and prophet likewise inspired and inspiring through exaltedly altered mental states.¹⁷ The overwhelming spirituality of such experience is often expressed and heightened by a deeply somatic deliciousness that St. Teresa describes as "penetrating to the marrow of

the bones,” enthralling and transfiguring us. The terms “rapture” and “ecstasy” convey this idea of being seized and transported outside ourselves by pleasure so intense that it sometimes seems almost painful to endure. This is not the easy pleasure of self-gratification but the terrifying thrill of self-surrender in the quest for self-transformation. Seized by this ravishing delight, some have felt close to dying from its electrifying power (and studies of mystical experience show in fact that heartbeat, breath, and circulation are virtually arrested.).¹⁸ Yet these heart-stopping ecstasies are also celebrated for providing somatic empowerment and spiritual redirection.

Though Foucault errs in presuming that intensity of delight requires violent sensory stimuli, his devotion to intense pleasures should be charitably understood in this transcendental connection. The aim is not sensual delectation *per se*, but the self-transformation that intense pleasure can induce, as in the Sufi mystic Al-Ghazzali’s formula of “transport, ecstasy, and the transformation of the soul.”¹⁹ The best forms of pragmatic somaesthetics combine such delights of self-surrender with the strict disciplines of somatic self-control (of posture, breathing, movement, etc.). Such disciplines not only prepare and structure ecstatic experience but they provide a controlled field where the inspiring energy of peak experience can be deployed and preserved in systematic practices that promote the reachievement of these peaks in healthy contexts. This ensures that soaring self-surrender can fall back on a safety net of disciplined self-mastery in preparation for a further leap. Beneath the breathless rapture of *samadhi* rests the yogi’s years of disciplined breath-control. Such somaesthetic discipline also provides its own pleasures of self-governance, while its cognitive and ethical benefits—in training the senses, will, and character—further transcend the values typically identified with hedonism.

V

The aesthetic in somaesthetics is thus not confined to the narrow pursuit of immediate pleasure (however valuable that pleasure may be). Somaesthetics equally connotes both the cognitive sharpening of our *aisthesis* or sensory perception *and* the artful reshaping of our somatic form and functioning; not simply to make us stronger and more percep-

tive for our own sensual satisfaction, but to render us more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action.

In the context of such broader goals, somaesthetics should not be seen as self-indulgent luxury. The higher somaesthetic forms therefore make pleasure the essential byproduct of an ascetic yet aesthetic quest for something better than one's current self, a quest pursued by mastering one's body and refining it into a vessel of experienced beauty so that it may be surrendered to still higher powers and joys potentially within us—an incipient higher self, perhaps even a divine Oversoul. Such somaesthetic discipline (equally present in the work of Alexander and Feldenkrais as in Yoga or Zen) involves, of course, a great deal of intellectual *askesis* as well.

Rejecting the mind/body dualism (since the very phenomenon of sense perception defies it), these practices aim at the holistic transformation of the subject, in which the dimensions of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual improvement are so intimately intertwined that they cannot effectively be separated. Thus Hatha Yoga's state of *Ghatha Avastha* is simultaneously described as one where "the Yogi's posture becomes firm, and he becomes wise like a god . . . which is indicated by [the] highest pleasure experienced," involving the acute perception of a subtle drum-like sound of divine energy "in the throat." Similarly, it is alleged that in *Parichaya Avastha*, an "ecstasy is spontaneously produced which is devoid of evils, pains, old age, disease, hunger, and sleep." In such conditions of *samadhi*, one is even said to conquer death.²⁰

But paradoxically, precisely in their struggle to overcome life's painful somatic limitations, somaesthetic practices like yoga usefully underline the body's inescapable mortality and even gesture beyond it, teaching us a wisdom of humility. Only a puerile somaesthetics would forget that being embodied means being mortal and hence finitely limited in our quest for bodily excellence. Modern philosophy's great neglect of the body can partly be explained as a wishful denial of humanity's limits and mortality, stubbornly enacted by us death-denying yet constantly dying animals. But bodily finitude does not entail the futility of working on our somatic selves; no more than our failure to know everything discredits the attempt to know more. Conscious care of our somatic selves need not be the denial of our mortality but a way of steadily working with

it and preparing for it, a way of caring for the self toward its ultimate passage into death.

Foucault's fascination with death includes a *plaidoyer* for cultivating the pleasure of suicide ("a fathomless pleasure whose patient and relentless preparation will enlighten your whole life," FL, 296). In emphasizing the close connection between self-transcendence, ecstatic pleasure, and the passion of bodily death, his program of somaesthetic experimentation is not so much shocking as profoundly traditional. For a deep tradition of religious life powerfully binds these elements.

If Foucault's somaesthetics shares this deeply spiritual dimension, it seems occluded in our eyes (and perhaps his own) by his excessive concentration on the sensationalist pleasures of drugs and sex, and by his choice of the Baudelairian Dandy to embody his somaesthetic ideal. This makes Foucault more vulnerable to Pierre Hadot's charge that aestheticism means superficial, artificial self-posturing rather than the earnest sort of deep spiritual transformation we expect of the ethical ideal of self-care. A more useful exemplar for Foucault might have been the divinely inspired self-discipline of Socrates, whose somaesthetic power could cast a seductive spell of beauty despite his old age and ugly facial features, thus enabling him to argue he was more beautiful than the famously handsome Critobulus in Xenophon's *Symposium*.

In any case, it seems wrong to condemn the aesthetic ideal as spiritually lacking. We forget how art has supplanted traditional religion as the site of transcendent spirituality; and Foucault's model of aesthetic self-transformation is not without its religious moment. In the very interview where he advocates a sexual ethics of intense pleasure, Foucault equally insists that the aesthetic quest for self-transformation holds the promise of salvation but demands a "work like a dog" discipline of intellectual effort.

For me intellectual work is related to what you could call aestheticism, meaning transforming yourself . . . that knowledge can transform us. . . . And maybe I will be saved. . . . This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (FL 379).

Why, we could continue, should one work so hard, if the artistic transformation is merely perfunctory and superficial: a line of mascara, the shallow shimmer-shine of tinted hair? Modernity's sad irony is that art has

inherited religion's spiritual authority, while being compartmentalized from the serious business of life. Aestheticism must seem amoral and superficial when art is falsely relegated from ethical praxis and instead confined to the realm of *Schein* (i.e., appearance, illusion). Challenging this false dichotomy between art and ethics, pragmatism seeks to synthesize the beautiful and the good. While recognizing (with Socrates and Montaigne) that our greatest artwork is our selves, it conversely brings ethical considerations to the aesthetic fashioning and judgment of such art. Though pragmatist aesthetics claims Foucault as a partial ally, it finds its best nineteenth-century exemplars neither in Baudelaire nor in Nietzsche but in America's Emerson and Thoreau, past prophets of the somaesthetics that I advocate. Let me close by quoting them.

"Every man," says Thoreau, "is the builder of a temple, called his body to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins to refine a man's features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them."

"Art," Emerson claims, "is the need to create; but in its essence, immense and universal, it is impatient of working with lame or tied hands, and of making cripples and monsters, such as all pictures and statues are. Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end."²¹

In the American culture that Emerson and Thoreau helped form, how are we to create and care for our embodied selves today? With steroids and silicone implants, with prick rings and leather masks, with drugs and dieting, or jogging and *pranayama*? Foucault may not give the best answers, but he confronts us with the crucial issue. Conceived as an art of living, philosophy must attend more closely to cultivating the bodily-sentient medium through which we live.

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NOTES

1. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, A. Davidson (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); citations here from pp. 84, 94, 102. Hadot's one-sided emphasis on the mind is clearly echoed in the accounts of philosophical living offered by Stanley Cavell, Martha Nussbaum, and Alexander Nehamas. In *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and*

the Philosophical Life (New York: Routledge, 1997), where somaesthetics is introduced to provide a more body-friendly account of philosophical living, I also offer a critique of Cavell and Nehamas for ignoring the body and defining the philosophical life wholly and emphatically in terms of words and the textual exercises of reading and writing. Martha Nussbaum's study of *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) exhibits the same intellectualist one-sidedness in limiting philosophical life to "the technique" of "rational argument" (pp. 5–6, 353–54). She moreover follows Hadot in emphasizing the Stoics and the medical-therapeutic model of philosophical life as opposed to the aesthetic model that Foucault, Nehamas, and I advance.

Nussbaum's anti-somatic bias comes out more clearly in her recent critique of Nehamas for fostering the idea of "the cult of personality" in his account of philosophical living, by focussing on "uniqueness and idiosyncrasy" of "the historical person" of the philosopher" which she associates with the philosopher's "bodily image." See Martha Nussbaum, "The Cult of the Personality," *The New Republic* (Jan. 4, 1999), 32–37, a critical review of Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). Though right to deny that philosophy's ideal life must be one of uniqueness (a criticism I myself directed at Foucault and Rorty), Nussbaum seems uncharacteristically off target in blaming Nehamas for highlighting the body and the historical person. For one of his central points, however questionable I find it, is that philosophical lives are properly constituted and lived *not* in real bodies or historical persons but only in the texts those embodied persons create.

2. *Timeaeus* (88), trans. H. D. P. Lee (London: Penguin, 1965), pp. 116–17.

3. Similarly, though Epicurus rated mental pleasures above mere bodily ones, he still affirmed "health of body and tranquillity of mind" as the twin goals of philosophy's quest for "a blessed life." The citations are from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), I: 91, 95, 153, 163, 221 II: 215, 658; and Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 172.

4. Of Diogenes the Cynic, we are told: "He would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue" (Diogenes Laertius, II: 71)

5. Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 25. In Yuasa's later book, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), the term *shugyo* is translated as "self-cultivation." Derived from combining the two Chinese characters that respectively stand for "mastery" and "practice," *shugyo* literally means to "master a practice," but the idea that this requires self-cultivation and self-mastery is implicit and essential.

6. This work includes not only Foucault's three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, but his many short essays, lectures, course summaries, discussions, and interviews dealing with body practices, sexuality, and the ethics and technologies of self that are collected in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live; Collected Interviews, 1961–1984* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), henceforth FL; and Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

7. Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 17–64. My account of Foucault's somaesthetics in that book is indebted to unpublished Foucault lectures at the Collège de France (whose transcripts were generously made available to me by James Miller) and to Miller's own biographical explorations in *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

8. Diogenes Laertius, II: 71; cf. I: 221; II: 119.

9. I deploy it, for example, to refute Horkheimer and Adorno's global condemnation of the very notion of body culture in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See "Die Sorge um den Körper in der heutigen Kultur," in Andreas Kuhlmann (ed.), *Philosophische Ansichten der Kultur der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994), pp. 241–77 and "The Somatic Turn: Care of the Body in Contemporary Culture," in *Performing Live* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), where I also deploy the other classificatory distinctions of somatic practices mentioned later in this paragraph.

10. Michel Foucault, "Power Affects the Body" and "The End of the Monarchy of Sex" in FL, pp. 212, 214, 218–19.

11. See "Friendship as a Way of Life," FL 310.

12. Foucault complains: "The problem raised is why we imagine today to have access to certain erotic phantasms through Nazism. Why these boots, caps, and eagles that are found to be so infatuating, particularly in the United States? . . . Is the only vocabulary that we possess to rewrite this great pleasure of the body in explosion this sad tale of a recent political apocalypse? Are we unable to think the intensity of the present except as the end of the world in a concentration camp? You see how poor our treasure of images really is!" ("Sade: Sergeant of Sex," FL pp. 188–89). Recent insider studies of S/M, moreover, insist that innovational surprise and daring are narrowly constrained by elaborate codes and conventions that govern the so-called theatrical "scripting" of the encounter and are aimed more at guaranteeing safety and satisfying expectations than at providing the real shock of the new. (It almost seems that an old-fashioned, unscripted blind date might supply more intensity of uncertainty and surprise!) See, for example, G. W. Levi Kamel, "The Leather Career: On Becoming a Sadoomasochist" and "Leathersex: Meaningful Aspects of Gay Sadoomasochism," in Thomas S. Weinberg (ed.), *S&M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp. 51–60, 231–47.

13. Foucault's blind rejection of middle-range pleasures is one of the points I criticize in my review of his later writings, "The Self as a Work of Art," *The Nation* (June 30, 1997), 25–28. A parallel, equally vitiating, blindness prompts some culture critics to dismiss the value of any aesthetic experience unless it is of the intensity and difficulty characteristic of avant-garde masterpieces. For critique of this view, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), chs. 2, 7.

14. For discussion of these Japanese disciplines that are less familiar to us than yoga and *zazen* (seated meditation), see Yuasa *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, pp. 11–14, 20–36.

15. Pierre Hadot levels this critique at Foucault's aesthetics of existence, along with the related charge that his idea of aesthetic self-fashioning involves an adding of artificiality that was foreign to the classical notions of self-care through *askesis*. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 207–12. In *Practicing Philosophy* I defend an aesthetic version of self-care and respond to Hadot's specific critique of this notion. But I also argue more generally (as I already did in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, pp. 246–55) that there is no necessary tension between the ascetic and the aesthetic, and that aesthetic self-construction can take the form of an ascetic reduction to bare essentials, as we see in the aesthetics of minimalism.

16. For critique of my hedonism, see Rainer Rochlitz, "Les esthétiques hédonistes," *Critique*, 539 (May, 1992), 353–73; Alexander Nehamas, "Richard Shusterman on Pleasure and Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56 (1998), 49–51; and Wolfgang Welsch, "Rettung durch Halbierung?: Zu Richard Shustermans Re-

habilitierung ästhetischer Erfahrung," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 47 (1999), 111–26. For my reply, see "Provokation und Erinnerung: Zu Freude, Sinn und Wert in ästhetischer Erfahrung," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 47 (1999), 127–37.

17. See, for example, the strong parallels traditionally drawn between the experience of *waka* poetry, Nô theatre, and Buddhist experience of *satori*, as summarized in Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, pp. 21–28.

18. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 412, Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, pp. 59–60.

19. Cited in James, 403. Foucault may have found S/M's practice of the pleasure/pain conflation especially suitable for the ecstatic experience of self-surrendering self-transformation, whose extreme intensity of pleasure (according to many accounts) seems so overwhelming as to border on the painful.

20. See Svatmarama Swami, *The Hatha Yoga Pradapika*, trans. Panchan Sinh (Allahabad, India: Lalif Mohan Basu, 1915), 57. Compare also the yogic meditation of *Sitkari*, through which the Yogi achieves not only health and pleasure, but "becomes next to the God of Love in beauty" (*ibid.*, 23).

21. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Portable Thoreau* (ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 468; and Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Art," in Richard Poirier, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 192.