

Self-Knowledge and Its Discontents

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INTRODUCTION

On Apollo's ancient temple at Delphi three Greek maxims were inscribed whose importance was reaffirmed in Roman times, preserved in gilt letters. The most famous of these, "Know thyself," forms the focus of this essay and constitutes one of philosophy's most central ideals. If Heraclitus gave the injunction to self-knowledge its earliest surviving expression, recommending "to all men to know themselves and use moderation," it was Socrates who established it at the core of philosophy. Acclaimed by the Delphic oracle as the wisest of all men, he claims his superior wisdom is only the self-knowledge of his ignorance, while others falsely believe themselves wise and knowledgeable. He even argues that the oracle declared him wisest so as to prompt his critical search for wiser men and thus show that the most reputed "human wisdom is worth little or nothing."¹ Rather than engaging in lofty speculations, Socrates confesses "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that."² Deploying the injunction of self-knowledge to remind the arrogant Alcibiades of his current limitations, Socrates affirms such knowledge as the necessary spur for cultivating oneself for the political leadership his ambitious young lover seeks. "Trust in me and in the Delphic inscription and 'know thyself'," Socrates tells him, for "every human being needs self-cultivation, but especially us."³

But what, exactly, is the self to be known and cultivated? Some dialogical sleight of hand delivers the Platonic conclusion "that the soul is the man" (and "nothing other than his soul") so "the command that we should know ourselves means that we should know our souls," making them the object of our self-cultivation. Hence, a man's knowing or caring for his body is merely knowing or "caring for something that belongs to him, and not [knowing or caring] for himself." Since the soul is the true governing self, Socrates claims that "being self-controlled is knowing yourself."

If the dominant thrust of the Socratic demand for self-knowledge is critical recognition of our limitations and deficiencies, such fault-finding analysis can certainly stimulate and guide our efforts at self-improvement. But it also, if rigorously pursued, risks disheartening bouts of self-doubt and self-loathing that can generate depression. In its long history, Western philosophy (including the Christian theology it helped shape) has continued to urge the ideal of self-knowledge, while also repeatedly raising questions about its possibility and dangers for humankind.⁴ Deploying both historical arguments and contemporary findings in experimental psychology, I argue for the need to distinguish more clearly the different modes of self-examination, the diversity of which explains the often radically differing assessments of self-value and provide a better appreciation of the most philosophically

scorned form of self-examination and self-cultivation — that relating to our bodies and somatic consciousness.

HISTORICAL AFFIRMATIONS

Developing the idea of self as soul, neo-Platonists urge us to focus self-study on the soul's highest dimension, *nous*, which we share with higher, purer, divine spirits. "Remove all stains from yourself and examine yourself, and you will have faith in your immortality," Plotinus explains, since "the self-knowledge of the *Nous* of the soul consists in knowing itself no longer as man but as having become altogether different, in hastening to unite itself with the Higher alone."⁵

This logic of self-knowledge as a preparatory, purgational step toward the higher contemplation and union with God was often taken up by Christian mystics. Saint Catherine of Siena urges the individual "to abide forever in the cell of self-knowledge" so as to recognize one's sins and cut them off from one's better, truer self in the continuous quest for God, who provides a mirror of holiness to regard one's flaws and lead one to higher purity and divine communion.⁶ Despite the promise of spiritual uplift, is there no risk that rigorously examining one's sins and weaknesses in the "cell of self-knowledge" could constitute a stifling, psychologically devastating form of mental self-flagellation? If the mystic's firm faith in God's saving grace is what ensures that such self-critical *askesis* leads not to despair but to the elevating vision of divine union, what happens when one's faith is less than supremely certain? While Socrates had already questioned whether self-knowledge was really possible, Renaissance thinkers increasingly expressed worries about the health and wisdom of intense self-study, recognizing the need to look away from oneself, a fragile, foolish, corruptibly embodied being.

That Michel de Montaigne makes the quest for self-knowledge the core of his life and masterwork, *Essays*, does not prevent him from asserting that the task is not only unachievable but also devastating if taken to extremes. Asserting that Socrates, by seeking "to know himself...had come to despise himself," Montaigne argues more generally that the Delphic maxim is "a paradoxical command" since nature wisely directs us to look beyond ourselves. This not only helps us find resources and escape dangers from the outside, but also avoids predatory problems from within, since rigorous self-study must be a depressing, difficult, and dangerous exercise for creatures so full of folly, flaws, and misery.

This common attitude and habit of looking elsewhere than at ourselves has been very useful for our business. We are an object that fills us with discontent; we see nothing in us but misery and vanity. In order not to dishearten us, Nature has very appropriately thrown the action of our vision outward.

Hence Montaigne also insists on the essential restorative value of entertainment and pleasures of diversion that both relieve and strengthen the mind through alternative exercise and focus.⁷ In the next century, Blaise Pascal, whose brief unhappy life was plagued with physical infirmity and hypochondriac fears, confirms Montaigne's thesis that we desperately need diversion from self-reflection because of our self-wretchedness: "the only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking

of what they are,” since even a king “becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself.”⁸

Despite such worries, the centrality of self-study continues into modern philosophy through René Descartes’s striking method of building the entire edifice of knowledge from the foundations of his mental introspection in *Meditations*. “There is no more fruitful exercise than attempting to know ourselves,” he elsewhere argues, where he even notes the value of knowing our bodily constitution. But by ontologically separating body from mind and locating the substance of self within mind alone (which, he believed, unlike the body could be known directly through introspection), Descartes furthers the Platonistic trend of identifying self-study as knowing one’s mind or soul with the aim to “acquire an absolute power over its passions.”⁹

The contrast of mind and body allows for two radically different approaches to the project of self-examination and self-knowledge: one including introspection of our bodily feelings, habits, and comportments, the other essentially confined to our distinctively mental life of thought. With but few exceptions, modern Western philosophy has preferred the more narrowly mentalistic approach, either ignoring or repudiating somatic introspection. Immanuel Kant is exemplary in this regard. In *Metaphysics of Morals*, he claims “the First Command of All Duties to Oneself” is to “know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,” not in terms of your physical perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of...ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty.” Recognizing that such moral self-examination “into the depths of one’s heart” is not only cognitively difficult but could also generate self-loathing or self-contempt, Kant counters by arguing that the very effort to critically examine one’s moral stature provides comforting evidence of the individual’s “noble predisposition to the good” that is “worthy of respect” and can lead to self-improvement. “Only the descent into the hell of self-cognition can pave the way to godliness,” Kant concludes, echoing the ancient Christian logic that purgational self-criticism provides the path to divine illumination and union.

In contrast to the duty to examine one’s moral consciousness, Kant repudiates the project of reflecting on bodily feelings, claiming that it leads to the madness of hypochondria and morbid despondence. In *The Contest of the Faculties*, Kant describes hypochondria as a “sort of melancholia” (*Grillenkrankheit*) defined by “the weakness of abandoning oneself despondently to general morbid feelings” that do not point to a definite bodily malfunction but are usually associated with or produced by anxious attention to bodily sensations of unease or unhealthy discomfort. Noting constipation and flatulence as such somatic conditions of discomfort, he confesses his own “natural disposition to hypochondria because of [his] flat and narrow chest, which leaves little room for the movement of the heart and lungs,” thus engendering an oppressive feeling in the chest. But insisting on the power of the mind “to master its morbid feelings merely by a firm resolution” of the will, Kant claims he was able to cure this morbidity by simply refusing to pay attention to the discomforting somatic feeling that promoted it, “by diverting [his] attention from

this feeling.” Somatic introspection, he elsewhere warns, “takes the mind’s activity away from considering other things and is harmful to the head: “The inner sensibility that one generates through [such] reflections is harmful... This inner view and self-feeling weakens the body and diverts it from animal functions.” Hence, “[t]urning reflection away from the body leads to health.” In short, introspective somatic self-study is harmful to both mind and body, and the best way to treat one’s body is to ignore, as much as possible, the self-knowledge of how it feels, while using it actively in work and exercise.¹⁰

In the economy of mind/body dualism, mind could signify a soul of immortal power and divine purity, while the body — already deeply associated with vulnerability, sin, and limitation (not only by its ageing and mortality but by its very spatial boundaries and personal particularities) — could be ignored as bearing all the negative connotations of self-knowledge and self-examination. G.W.F. Hegel’s affirmation of the Delphic maxim reflects this logic: knowing oneself is construed emphatically as knowing *Geist* (Mind or Spirit) and not “the particular capacities, character, propensities, and foibles of the single self.” Self-knowledge “means that of man’s genuine reality — of what is essentially and ultimately true and real — of mind as the true and essential being.”¹¹

HISTORICAL CRITIQUES

Not surprisingly, modern intellectuals with less commitment to traditional Christian or idealist doctrines of the soul’s transcendent immortality and divine connection have been more prone to question the value of self-knowledge through self-examination. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s critique is exemplary and influential. Fearful that the Delphic maxim confines the mind to a stifling isolation that promotes ignorance, inaction, morbidity, and “psychological torments,” he insists that the only way to approve the command to “know thyself” is to interpret it as knowing the world in which one lives and acts, which includes knowing one’s relations to other selves who provide enlightening reflections that help one know one’s own. “We must not interpret it,” Goethe warns, in what he calls the “ascetic sense...of our modern hypochondriacs...and self-tormentors.” “That great and important-sounding phrase *erkenne dich selbst*” he argues, seems the suspicious

device of secretly bound priests, who confused men with unattainable requirements and wanted to lead them away from the activities of the outer world to an inner false contemplation. Man knows himself only in so far as he knows the world...and he becomes aware of himself only in it. Each new object, if looked at well, opens up in us a new way to see [ourselves].

Rigorous self-examination is especially unwise and unhealthy, Goethe argues, because it is perversely unnatural and its goal of self-knowledge impossible. The command

that man should strive to know himself...is a singular requisition, with which no one complies or indeed ever will comply. Man is by all his senses and efforts directed to externals — to the world around him, and he has to know this so far, and to make it so far serviceable, as he requires for his own ends. Altogether, man is a darkened being; he knows not whence he comes, nor whither he goes; he knows little of the world, and least of himself.

Goethe’s argument not only recalls Montaigne’s image of our natural outward gaze; it also looks forward to William James’s critique of self-reflection in terms of what

he calls the “law of parsimony” in consciousness. Since we must economize our attention, the pressing demands of life will not allow us to focus long and intently on ourselves. Even if we succeed in grasping ourselves, we must immediately forget ourselves to direct attention to ever new elements in the changing flux of experience.¹²

Friedrich Nietzsche’s challenge of religious and idealist notions of soul combines with his ferocious critique of the self-flagellation of Christian conscience to radically challenge the injunction of self-knowledge as psychologically unhealthy, unnatural, and indeed impossible. “This digging into one’s self, this straight, violent descent into the pit of one’s being, is a painful and dangerous undertaking. A man who does it may easily take such hurt that no physician can heal him,” Nietzsche writes in “Schopenhauer as Educator.”¹³ “What indeed does a man know about himself?” he continues in his essay on “Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense.”

[A]nd woe to the fateful curiosity which might be able for a moment to look out and down through a crevice in the chamber of consciousness, and discover that man, indifferent to his own ignorance, is resting on the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable, the murderous, as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger.¹⁴

Here Nietzsche not only reiterates the danger that intense self-consciousness brings painfully destructive and paralyzing consciousness of sin, but also prefigures the Freudian notion of a far more vicious, unruly unconscious from which we are helpfully protected by ignorance of self, but of which, for our ultimate healing we are urged to know better by bringing its content into consciousness.

Like Goethe, Nietzsche prefers the projective activity of self-cultivation to the introspective immanence of self-examination, hence his famous injunction “to become what one is.” Rejecting the very idea of a fixed essential self to be known, Nietzsche instead advocates a self that emerges through a process of perfectionist becoming: “Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum ‘know thyself’, but as if there hovered before them the commandment ‘will a self and thou shalt become a self.’” For the bold and willful spirit of “self-cultivation,” he thus concludes, “*nosce te ipsum* [know thyself] would be the recipe for destruction.”¹⁵

Later thinkers as different as Ludwig Wittgenstein, James, and Michel Foucault adapt this notion of a malleable, constructed self that is always in the making, together with the perfectionist ideal to become a different, better self. James radically dispensed with the idea of a transcendental ego, while defining the self as a bundle of habits and instructing how habits could be changed. His meliorist ideal of self-development advocated a “strenuous mood,” heroically exercising “active will” towards the “character of progress.”¹⁶ Wittgenstein, who volunteered for war through an intense desire “to turn into a different person” and whose continuous striving to improve himself is expressed in ceaseless efforts at philosophical rethinking, insists: “You must change the way you live.” Self-transformation, Foucault declares, is the guiding goal of the philosophical life: “the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.” As Wittgenstein acknowledges that self-examination can be painfully difficult — “The folds of my heart always want to stick together, and to open it I must always tear them

apart” — so Foucault highlights the tormenting interrogational practices inspired by the ideal of self-knowledge, privileging instead the ideal of self-cultivation as the higher end. Knowing the dolours of depression, both seriously contemplated suicide.¹⁷

James, who suffered from recurrent attacks of melancholy (and its related physical distress), confessed (to his brother Henry) that he welcomed a university teaching job because it would divert him from “those introspective studies which had bred a sort of philosophical hypochondria.”¹⁸ An expert of introspective analysis (as his *Principles of Psychology* makes clear), James nevertheless vigorously warns against its use in practical life, arguing the case more explicitly than Foucault or Wittgenstein ever did. Intense self-examination, James writes, involves

strong feeling about one's self [that] tends to arrest the free association of one's objective ideas and motor processes. We get the extreme example of this in the mental disease called melancholia. A melancholic patient is filled through and through with intensely painful emotion about himself. He is threatened, he is guilty, he is doomed; he is annihilated, he is lost. His mind is fixed, as if in a cramp, on these feelings of his own situation, and in all the books on insanity you may read that the usual varied flow of his thoughts has ceased.¹⁹

We must, James continues, free our selves — our thoughts, volitions, and actions — “from the inhibitive influence of reflection upon them, of egoistic preoccupation about their results,” and of “the over-active conscience” and self-consciousness. For effective original self-expression and self-development, he concludes “trust your spontaneity and fling away all further care.”²⁰

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY AND VARIETIES OF SELF-REFLECTION

James's position seems widely supported by recent psychological literature on self-examination. Current studies, which analyze this behavior under the notion of rumination, not only point to its negative psychological affects, but also link it in particular to the morbidity of creative people. As novelist William Styron notes in his personal memoir of melancholia, “artistic types (especially poets) are particularly vulnerable to the disorder — which, in its graver, clinical manifestation takes upward of twenty percent of its victims by way of suicide.”²¹ In linking creativity with depression, recent psychological research suggests that self-reflection is the underlying root of the connection. Findings have indicated not only that “negative affect leads to increased self-reflective rumination and...that inducing self-reflective rumination leads to increased negative affect,” but also that self-reflecting people tend to be both more creative and more prone to morbidity. Just as the causal link with depressive feelings is usually explained through the negative judgments of imperfections that rigorous self-examination typically yields, so increased creativity is explained as resulting from the fact that self-examiners take themselves more seriously and thus have greater motivation for distinctive creative expression and because their sustained practice of reflecting on themselves develops greater fluency of thought (such fluency measured in quantity of new ideas within a given time span) which in turn promotes creativity.²²

Though the arguments linking self-examination and self-knowledge with depression are empirically supported, I shall defend the value of self-reflection by

suggesting that we need a more careful parsing of its modes and uses than its detractors (or its advocates) have provided. First, we should recognize, with Socrates, that any viable program of self-cultivation and transformation needs to start with some grasp of what one is so as to have some sense of what one wants to change and whether or how one is changing. To get where one wants to go, it helps to know where one is. The first step to correcting a bad habit is to recognize what that habit actually is. If, as James argues, the self is a malleable bundle of habits, a crucial first step to self-improvement is probing the present limits of one's self so as to grasp the needed dimensions and directions of change. As Wittgenstein advocates, "If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself, because this is too painful, he will remain superficial."²³

Despite his critique of self-knowledge, Nietzsche admits that a certain degree of it is implied in his ideal of self-cultivation. Recognition of your "productive uniqueness" should spur you to "be yourself" by striving for self-cultivation toward a higher self with the aid of exemplary authors who inspire you toward it. Even when describing self-cultivation in terms of the deceptive fabrications and concealments of self-fashioning, Nietzsche reveals that such artful stylizing requires self-observation and self-knowledge. One must

survey all the strengths and weaknesses of [one's] nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed — both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime.²⁴

If self-transformation must begin with clear, explicit recognition of what one already is, we can understand why Wittgenstein insists, "A confession has to be part of your new life"; for "a man will never be great if he misjudges himself."²⁵

Second, since many advocates and practitioners of self-reflection have apparently not suffered from melancholia to any significant extent, there does not seem to be a necessary link between self-reflection and depression. So we need to inquire more precisely into the conditions or modes in which self-examination becomes morbidly depressing. One such condition seems to be an unrelenting, uncontrollable focus on the negative — negative judgments, negative affects, hypochondriac fears of negative futures, and a general negativity regarding the meaningless of one's life. Positive dimensions and hopes are totally eclipsed or obliterated in the obsessive gloom radiating from melancholy's scorching black sun.

Negativity itself is perhaps not the most depressing aspect of melancholic self-reflection; the uncontrollable, compulsive nature of such rumination may be worse. Kant thus defines the melancholia of hypochondria or the hypochondria of melancholia (the two terms, as Styron notes, being used interchangeably until the nineteenth century) precisely in terms of the mind's lack of "power to master its pathological feelings" by willfully "diverting...attention" from its "brooding" about "fictitious disease" and imagined "ills."²⁶ The core problem, then, is the weakness of mind whose will is powerless to stop us from "paying attention unwillingly to mental and bodily phenomena."²⁷ The inability to control one's

direction of thought and stem its passive repetitive feeding on morbidity creates, in turn, a strong negative feeling of impotence that heightens one's already negative mood and passive inertia, thus making it ever harder to divert one's attention to positive thoughts and action that could remedy the situation.

Contemporary psychological literature underlines this passive, uncontrollable dimension of melancholic self-reflection by defining rumination in precisely such terms. Susan Noelen-Hoeksema, a leading researcher in connecting depression and rumination (and in documenting their particularly frequent and strong combination in women) defines "rumination" as "passively and repetitively focusing on one's symptoms of distress" and argues that women are more likely to exhibit this uncontrolled, excessive focus because they tend to have a more diminished sense of mastery and control than men, as well as a more limited scope for remedial action in the world.²⁸ But must self-reflection be passive and uncontrollable? Are there not forms of self-observation that instead display and encourage active, disciplined, and heightened control of mental focus? Does not such sharpening of mental concentration, acuity, and will power constitute part of the traditional philosophical argument for self-examination and self-knowledge?

Self-reflective meditative disciplines in both Eastern and Western traditions have long justified and sustained themselves by providing their diligent practitioners with enhanced mental focus, strength of will, spiritual peace, psychic happiness, and somatic well being (including great pleasure). Recent psychological research is also beginning to realize that self-examination or "personal self-consciousness" includes a wide variety of motives, styles, and foci, so that it should not be narrowly identified with passive, obsessive, depression-promoting rumination. One study shows a clear distinction between neurotic self-attentiveness, or *rumination*, and intellectually curious self-attentiveness, or *reflection*. If the former seems clearly linked to depression and motivations of fear and anxiety, the latter is instead essentially motivated by active, positive curiosity, not significantly correlated with bad feelings, but instead saliently linked to "self control" and "conscientiousness" that imply will power and mental mastery.²⁹

Other recent studies in experimental psychology and neurophysiology have demonstrated that meditation training (including disciplines of self-examination) can effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and panic, thus generating more positive affect in the meditating subjects.³⁰ Further experiments have established the neurological basis of this positive power. Having determined that positive feelings and a "resilient affective style" are associated with high levels of left prefrontal activation in the brain and with high levels of antibody titers to influenza vaccine, scientists have shown that subjects introduced to an eight-week meditation training program display not only significantly higher levels of left-sided anterior activation than the control group of non-meditators but also significant increases in antibody titers.³¹ The results clearly suggest that meditation improves not only our mood but also our immune function.

Identifying the obsessive, excessive feature of rumination as key to its morbidity should help us recognize that condemnations of self-knowledge as detrimental

to mental health too often wrongly assimilate such knowledge with relentless, disproportionate overuse of self-conscious self-examination. Too much of any good thing can be bad, and that is the case for self-reflection, whose value depends in using it in the appropriate circumstances and measure. Though many (including James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) have argued that motor actions and speech are impeded if we pay explicit attention to precisely how we are performing them, somatic educational studies have shown the need for a certain measure of disciplined self-examination of our bodily self-use not only for learning a new form of behavior but especially to improve an established habit of action.³² Here we should recall that alongside “Know thyself,” Apollo’s Delphic temple inscribed a second maxim, “Nothing too much,” as if to insist on the need for appropriate moderation in applying the first maxim.

SOMATIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Besides different styles, motives, quantities, contexts, and levels of self-control in self-examining consciousness, there are also different foci to distinguish. One useful distinction is that between attending to one’s own experience in contrast to thinking about how one appears to others (whether in terms of bodily appearance, character, social status, or overall identity). And within one’s own experience, some might wish to distinguish examining one’s mind, character, or soul from examining one’s somatic feelings. Recall how Kant and the neo-Platonists contrasted the uplifting duty to reflect on one’s soul with the unhealthy degeneracy of somatic reflection. As someone who has been advocating and practicing the discipline of somatic reflection for almost a decade, not only as a philosopher engaged in somaesthetics but as a professional somatic educator and therapist in the Feldenkrais Method, I have a stake in defending somatic self-awareness and reflection. Having elsewhere done so against condemnations of its asocial selfishness, unhealthy passivity, and ruination of effective action, let me here conclude by focusing on how somatic self-awareness relates specifically to the tradition of self-knowledge and the issue of melancholia.³³

First, we should note that our Western philosophical tradition does contain some affirmations of reflective body-consciousness. Nietzsche’s critique of self-examining consciousness as unhealthy, futile, and delusional (partly because of the illusory nature of consciousness itself) finds a distinctive contrast in his recommendation to increase our self-knowledge with respect to corporeal matters. Affirming the body as “an unknown sage” within you that has “more reason than in your best wisdom,” he urges us to “listen...to the voice of the healthy body.”³⁴ John Dewey, though well aware of the dangers of ruminating introspection, avidly advocated and practiced the Alexander Technique of “conscious constructive control” that involves intense focusing on certain aspects of one’s body posture and movement so as to understand more clearly our habitual modes of action (and thought), and thus provide a better cognitive basis for improving them.³⁵

The meditation techniques used in recent research to demonstrate the salutary benefits of disciplined meditative self-consciousness for reducing anxiety, panic, and depression while promoting better affect are in fact also techniques that

essentially rely on deploying focused body consciousness: namely, yoga, body-scanning, and seated meditation (which involves intense concentration on one's breathing so as to distract the mind from other thoughts). This should not be surprising, since if yoga, zen, and other systematic disciplines of somaesthetic introspection did indeed lead to the mental weakness, morbid introversion, and hypochondria that Kant and James feared, they would never have thrived for so many centuries and in so many different cultures.

My own experience of zen training in Japan has shown me how methodical somaesthetic reflection can develop one's power of volition by directing intensely focused consciousness to one's breathing or to other somatic feelings (such as the contact of one's feet with the floor in walking meditation). Will power, as James insists, involves keeping attention firmly fixed on an idea and resisting the mind's natural tendency to wander off target either because of specific distractions introduced by new sensations or because of our habitual interests and thought associations. We are naturally and habitually inclined to devote attention to the outside world of flux and the ever-changing perceptions that it stimulates, not to the constant and imminent experience of breathing. Even if we momentarily attend to our breathing, our thought almost immediately tends to move on to other things. It is thus extremely difficult to compel one's attention to remain focused wholly on the experience of breathing itself or of any somatic process. Disciplines of sustained somaesthetic focusing can strengthen our will by training our attention to keep its concentration and resist its inclination to wander. Breathing and the body are wonderfully apt targets for such exercises of focusing attention because they are always there to focus on, while the mind typically ignores them in running off to more interesting or demanding objects. When I began my meditation training, it was hard for me to keep my focus for more than a single breath, but after continued, strenuous effort, I was able to sustain such concentration for much longer periods, yet do so with feelings of relaxed ease and pleasure. And my increased powers of attention could then be shifted beyond the breathing or meditative walking, so that everyday objects and familiar people were suddenly perceived with greater intensity, depth, and accuracy. My movement and action, like my perception, became sharper, surer, and more satisfying.

I conclude by confronting a lingering worry about the morbidity of somatic reflection. Christian, Platonist, and idealist arguments against attention to the body are often based on its essential imperfection, mortality, vulnerability, impurity, and general lowliness. In contrast to the inspiring nobility, immortality, or even divinity of the soul, reflective focus on one's corporeal self promotes self-diminishment and self-loathing whose only value would be to compel us to look higher to a sacred soul. But even without invoking such a soul, should not somatic self-focus necessarily tend to depress us by reminding us of the mortal flaws and limitations of our flesh? Only, I would argue, if we unrealistically expect a kind of purity and perfection that we have no right to expect and whose absence should not therefore be a depressing disappointment. Without the presumption of divinely perfect bodies (immortally invincible and free from all pain, fatigue, or blemish), there is every reason to regard

our somatic selves with grateful wonder and enthusiastic curiosity for the vulnerable yet astoundingly complex and well-functioning organization of biological, social, psychological, and cultural materials that we indeed are.³⁶

There is a more radical and paradoxical way to counter the fear of somatic reflection revealing imperfections that diminish self-worth and lead to melancholy. It is the Buddhist option of using somatic self-reflection for denying the ultimate reality of a substantial, autonomous, fully owned individual self that we could be deeply depressed about. The self's apparent permanence and individuality is, through focused body consciousness, mindfully dissolved into a porous, messy welter of different elements (liquids, solids, and gases) whose transitory and changing collaboration gives rise to the temporary, fragile construct we identify as the somatic self and falsely oppose to the rest of the material and social world from which it is temporally constructed and without whose materials and energies it could never be. Let me close with a passage from one of the Buddha's sermons advocating heightened mindfulness of body:

a bhikkhu reflects on this very body enveloped by the skin and full of manifold impurity, from the sole up and the hair down, thinking thus: "There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine."...Thus, he lives observing the body.³⁷

So concludes the Buddha, knowing that such self-knowledge is far from a recipe for melancholia but instead a release from ultimately depressing illusions of the self's substantial permanence that make us take our individual selves with too much of the wrong kind of seriousness and selfishness, forgetting the bonds to others that so much define us. Nothing too much, echoes the second Delphic maxim. A good place to end this long essay.

1. Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. John Cooper and David Hutchinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 1997), 23b. All references to Plato in this text are quoted from this source.

2. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 229e–230a.

3. Plato, *Alcibiades I*, trans. David Hutchinson, 124b–d.

4. The term "self" forms part of the danger. As John Dewey shrewdly notes, "Many good words get spoiled when the self is prefixed to them: Words like pity, sacrifice, control, love." He does not continue this list to include knowledge, but he does explain the reason for the poison in the prefix: "The word self infects them with a fixed introversion and isolation." John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1898–1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 96.

5. Plotinus, *Enneads* (Boston: Brill Academic, 1918), I.v.7; V.iii.4.

6. St. Catherine, *Letters of St. Catherine of Siena* (New York: E.P. Dutton and AMP, 1906), 47.

7. Michel Montaigne, *Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 766 and 821.

8. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailshimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 67–8.

9. René Descartes, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 314 and 348.

10. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191; Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of Faculties* (London: Penguin, 1992), 177–89; Immanuel Kant, *Reflexionen Kants zur Kritischen Philosophie* [Kant's Reflections on Critical Philosophy], Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1992), 68–9.
11. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 3.
12. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethes Werke* (Hamburg: Frankfurt/Main, 1966), vol. 12, 413 and vol. 13, 38; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gespräche mit Eckermann* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1921), 485–6.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Kritische Studienausgabe* [Critical Edition], eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 340. All subsequent references to Nietzsche are quoted from this source.
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15. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Human, All Too Human," II, 366; Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," II, 9.
16. William James, *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); William James, "The Absolute and the Strenuous Life," in *The Meaning of Truth*, in *William James, Writings 1902–1910* (New York: Holt, 1987), 940; William James, *Talks to Teachers* (New York: Dover, 1962), 143.
17. For precise references and more details, see my *Practicing Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), chapter 1.
18. William James, Letter of Aug. 24, 1872, to Henry James, in *The Letters of William James, Volume I*, ed. Henry James (Cambridge: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920).
19. William James, "The Gospel of Relaxation," in *Talks To Teachers*, 108–9.
20. *Ibid.*
21. William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Random House, 1990), 35–6.
22. P. Verhaegen, et al., "Why We Sing the Blues: The Relation Between Self-Reflective Rumination, Mood, and Creativity," *Emotion* 5, no. 2 (2005): 226–32. See also Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Responses to Depression and their Effects on the Duration of Depressive Episodes," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 100 (1991): 569–82.
23. Rush Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 174.
24. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," sections 1, 4; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, IV, 290.
25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright (in collaboration with Heikki Nyman), trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
26. Kant, *Contest of Faculties*, 187 and 189; Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 44.
27. Kant, *Reflexionen Kants*, 68.
28. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, et al., "Explaining the Gender Difference in Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 5 (1999): 1061–72.
29. Paul D. Trapnell, et al., "Private Self-Consciousness and the Five-Factor Model of Personality: Distinguishing Rumination from Reflection," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 2: 284–304.
30. See, for example, Jon Kabat-Zinn, "The Relationship of Cognitive and Somatic Components of Anxiety to Patient Preference for Alternative Relaxation Techniques," *Mind/Body Medicine* 2 (1997): 101–9. The meditative disciplines used were yoga, body scan, and seated meditation.
31. See Richard J. Davidson, et al., "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65 (2003): 564–70; and Richard Shusterman, "Well-Being and Affective Styles," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, Series B, 359 (2004): 1395–411.
32. See my *Body Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
33. See especially, Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*, chapter 6; Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chapter 8.

34. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 146–7 and 145.

35. See my *Practicing Philosophy*, chapters 1 and 6.

36. I elaborate the social dimension of self and the self's constitution through others in *Practicing Philosophy*, chapters 1–3 and in *Performing Live*, chapter 9 (187–200), where I also insist that we must “seek self-understanding through the medium of others,” including a project of “multicultural recognition” since the contemporary selves shaped by global culture are also products of cultural others.

37. See John and Patricia Koller, eds., *Sourcebook of Asian Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1991), 206.