

The Locus of Self

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Thanks to Richard Shusterman for an intriguing invitation to make a series of connections, as he himself does, across a number of ideas about self. Shusterman launches his own enquiry with the famous pronouncement, “Know thyself,” then roughs it up to the point where the very idea of self-knowledge takes on a slightly discouraging tone. Shusterman sets out to

distinguish more clearly the different modes of self-examination, the diversity of which explains the often radically differing assessments of self value and even provide a better appreciation of the most philosophically scorned form of self-examination and self-cultivation — that relating to our bodies and somatic consciousness.

I wish here to push at Shusterman’s proposals of somatic consciousness and of diverse modes of self-examination. Shusterman himself employs an array of terms to stand in for Delphic self-knowledge throughout his essay: self-cultivation, self-examination, self-study, self-criticism, self-transformation, self-expression, self-development, and self-reflection. Most have a philosophical or psychological genealogy to be considered in any juxtaposition to self-knowledge. Working through those genealogies would be a terrific project bringing together not only the figures that Shusterman cites in his essay but any number of religious, educational, and other theorists. However, I am going to read “diversity” thinly; I would not attempt to answer back to Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, or Ludwig Wittgenstein here. I am going to stick with the consequences of the beginning and the end of Shusterman’s journey and suggest two things: anything, even self-knowledge, can take a morbid turn when taken to excess, and bodies are both conduits and obstacles to generative self-knowledge.

“Know thyself” was, of course, not the only pronouncement at Delphi; just as famously, “Nothing to excess” was a truth to live by. The Socratic infusion of the mandate to knowledge was not context-free, and clearly neither Socrates nor Plato lived lives of purely interior contemplation. The excessive sense of self that raises the warnings of danger are not the dangers of knowing itself but of taking the object for the goal. Why, after all, ought we to know ourselves, and what could that knowledge add to the value of self or of the body politic?

Let us step away from philosophers’ perspectives and ask the question more broadly: Why ought we, in either wisdom or ignorance, encourage self-knowledge? Not because Plato or some oracle says to, but in the context of the modern West, this is not such a frivolous question. On the one hand, a recent study opines that today’s college students are more narcissistic than ever; they are allegedly self-regarding and self-deluded about their worth.¹ The interviews on the *Today Show* make clear that we are cribbing the language of the mythic Narcissus and making a sociological complaint, not really making a diagnosis of psychiatric pathology. Social commentary goes like this: because we turned in the 1990s to self-esteem massage — giving kids

pats on the back for stinky behavior and marginal performance — there are college residence halls full of entitled, selfish brats who believe they are stars in our classrooms and in life. The evidence is on YouTube for us to see (or for you old media folks on *American Idol*). It seems clear that the knowledge of self available to the poor children videotaping themselves running into picket fences or shaving their heads or smoking doobies or singing bad Britney Spears covers and posting them on MySpace or Facebook or YouTube — as if to allege that only in being “viewed” do they become visible — is pretty superficial. The very concepts of self and reality are themselves so fractured and distorted in these public/intimate spaces that it is hard to know of what “knowledge” would even consist. So on this account it is an *absence* of a self to know and the over-reliance on a *simulation* of a self that is fragile and underdeveloped that is the problem. Further, teachers offering undeserved warm fuzzies and helicopter parents have stood as obstacles to the development of a self — and I do not in any sense mean a fixed and permanent self, only a robust enough sense of self that coheres and is, therefore, knowable by self and by other. At the same time they have allowed the knowing to be limited — only to be refracted through the gazes of those who have no sense of human excellences. This leads me to wonder if there is something comforting for us about the acceptance of our students as poor imitations of Paris Hilton, who is herself only a simulacrum of someone worth knowing. In this parlous condition they need us, both as audience and as cheerleader, which gives us something worthwhile to know about ourselves.

But this account is also excessive in two ways. First, this conception of the “other,” in this case late adolescents, as fragile and damaged yet valorized gives employment (literal and figurative) to those who produce them as such (see your campus’s Parents Office). The conception, consequently, is more creative and generative than may be sustainable. Second, the “New Narcissists” themselves, not altogether surprisingly, push back at this diagnostic move. They also have something at stake in the construction of a self that is worthwhile and not entirely reflected/reflective.

Does the push for a nondistorted, nondepressive self-knowledge make sense in this context? I would argue yes, that while the contemporary call of youth culture seems to mitigate against deep reflection in contrast to intensive self-assertion, the promise of education is not simply in its requirement of nesting self *qua* agent within the embrace of activities of knowing. The promise of education also rests on its call beyond a simple appreciation of self — to engage in the social and political benefits of what Michel Foucault refers to as the “practices of the self.”² Educative activity provides one backdrop for a formative understanding of the self that at once remains dynamic, rather than made, and is also always already in relations that both contribute to and challenge its conditions.

In part the invocation of educative practice (which is not, by the way, unique here; I could have gone for philosophical or religious practice) is a way of answering my own query about why we should push for some variant of self-knowledge as important and, potentially, reparative. The very quest for self-knowledge in that Socratic sense is a signal, an acknowledgement of a movement toward connections

to knowing more than just about the self. So educators in fact have some obligation to engage their students in activities of knowing and practices of self that would expose the limitations of those cultural or psychological distortions of self-regard that may be impeding that acknowledgment. We must, then, wish to balance the happy talk of perfection-achievable-by-breathing and the grinding obsession toward unattainable human perfection as Shusterman posits via Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. How? By giving access to a world beyond the familiar, beyond the mirrors (mediated and otherwise) that cut off rather than enhance vision. If that is a push against human nature or against the constraints of our particular cultural moment here in the West, so be it.

Shusterman's call for somatic consciousness poses a slightly different variety of challenges. While there is a long tradition, as he rightly points out, that extends from Plato through early Christian doctrine through Descartes and on, that frustrates the connection of *soma* and *nous*, there are any number of means to access the connection — more and less healthy (and more and less traditionally Western for that matter). The traditions of rationalism that devalue the body, its lack of control, its lack of logic, and its fecund and excretory nature propose that mind is higher. Even the hierarchical Platonic world that privileges the “one who knows” over the one that feels or works manually still has a place for the body of the guardians and the breeders of the golden, and for the creations of bodily excellence and health. Some religious traditions revel in the body — not a vessel of earthly temptation as in more ascetic strains of Christianity — as a means of being touched by God or the Devil. Traditions as varied as some shamanistic communities' readings of the body as marked by good and evil or Pentecostal “speaking in tongues” or voodoo rituals that rely on human bodies as conduits between worlds all depend on bodies to represent faith. The Word takes a backseat. There are aesthetic traditions that are somacentric — even beyond the bodily participation of the artist (as in dance or in sculpture) — to the call to a somatic awakening. Antonin Artaud articulated a theater of cruelty in which the spectator would not be allowed to experience only with the mind or to filter meaning through some disciplined or logical remove. Instead he intended for the spectator to become the victim of the drama — to feel as though he or she was having teeth removed forcibly without anesthetic.

Of course more ubiquitously in our time, various feminisms have challenged the idea of logic and values floating free of bodies and context as problematic. Pushing back against various philosophical, medical, and cultural devaluations of the specifically female body, various traditions locate knowing in the body, whether it is the maternal body, the sexual body, or even the transexual body. (And I might mention other theoretical discourses such as disability studies that also foreground bodies as sites of political, moral, educational, and epistemological effluvia). The body, here, is productive and generative, not only of literal products such as children or breast milk or menstrual blood, but in the same way that Plato talks about the generative possibilities of *eros* — as encompassing a wide array of possibilities of production, from art to culture to truth.

As I suggested previously, there are always challenges to claims of self-knowledge arising out of complex cultural conditions at any time and place. And so it is here. There are “practices of the (somatic) self” that call upon a sense of both self and knowledge that do not seem as generative and reparative as Shusterman might wish. An eating disorder, such as anorexia, is in some sense a parodic formulation of self-knowledge that of course is quintessentially about a distorted somatic consciousness. We hear the testimony of women in clinical settings who are, on the one hand, quite articulate about their knowledge about weight and health and nutrition and, on the other hand, unable to reconcile that knowledge with the knowing of the self that is so incompatible with the perceptual knowing of parents, therapists, and friends. Less immediately pathological perhaps is the somatic parallel to the narcissistic thinness of emotional knowledge discussed previously, in which knowledge is reflected through the gaze of the self as other: an uptick in reliance on cosmetic plastic surgery. “Since 1997 there has been an increase of 444 percent in the total number of cosmetic procedures. Surgical procedures (led by liposuction and breast augmentation) have increased by 119 percent, nonsurgical procedures (led by botox injections) by 726 percent.”³ Contemporaneously with the increase in actual medical and aesthetic procedures are increased opportunities for the reflected viewing that creates knowers of self that are not self.⁴

I use these two examples to support Shusterman as he reminds us of the challenge to “counter the fear of somatic reflection revealing imperfections that...lead to melancholy.” But I also use these examples as the basis of a cautionary note: many of our contemporary practices of the self are deeply invested in a kind of somatic consciousness (distorted as it may be). And I want to affirm the counter offered by some of the college students insulted by the narcissism study, who asserted their commitments to public service. The antidote to the melancholy of self-knowledge that results from excess or insufficiency may well be to be very explicit about the prescription of a relational epistemology that demands the elevation of productive *social* relationships as the primary road to self-knowledge.

1. Eric Hoover, “New Study Finds ‘Most Narcissistic Generation’ on Campuses, Watching YouTube,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/daily/2007/02/2007022803n.htm>.

2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*: (New York: Vintage, 1990), 25–8.

3. Smart Plastic Surgery.com, “Cosmetic Surgery Statistics” (2002–2007), <http://www.smartplasticsurgery.com/surgery/statistics.html#STATS2005>.

4. Television shows include *Dr. 90210*, *The Swan*, and *Extreme Makeover*. For the obsessed, pathological, and compulsive collision of cosmetic perfectionism and celebrity culture, see <http://www.awfulplasticsurgery.com>.