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MAN, Eva K W

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A Cross-cultural Reflection on Shusterman's Suggestion of the "Transactional" Body
Eva Kit Wah Man

Shusterman's Reading of Dewey's "Interactional" and "Transactional" Body

In "Redeeming Somatic Reflection," the final chapter of his work *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Richard Shusterman analyzes John Dewey's philosophy of body and mind and claims that Dewey looks to biological naturalism to provide a more unified vision of the two.¹ He also observes that compared with William James, Dewey provides a better balanced theory that integrates emotion, cognition and physiological reactions into a larger unity of behavioral response.

Shusterman echoes that the will is not a purely mental affair that is independent of physical modality, and that a living organism's survival is always a matter of interaction with its environment.² He traces in detail the influences, development and changes in Dewey's discourses, and demonstrates how Dewey's philosophy evolves in terms of mind-body dualism, which he calls a mode of thought that "mind and matter are just different ways of parsing a fundamentally unified field of pure experience."³ Shusterman stresses that Dewey presents a more consistent non-dualistic naturalism in which body and mind are not two different, separable things but a fundamental unit, or "a unified wholeness of operation." He observes that the Deweyan model is not based on mind-body interaction, but "a transactional whole of body-mind."⁴ He further states clearly that Dewey does not think that the body-mind unity is an ontological given, but rather a progressive goal of dynamic, harmonious functioning that individuals should strive toward.⁵

This short article explores the meaning of Shusterman's "transactional mode," which he implies should expand the level of the body-mind unity to social conditions and even act as a measuring stick of the quality of a culture.⁶

¹ Shusterman, R. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

The meaning of Shusterman's "transactional whole of body-mind" is supplemented by his further elaboration of the "three interpenetrating levels" (the physical, psychophysical and mental levels), the complexity and intimacy of which increase in relation to their interactions with an organism.⁷ Shusterman begins by analyzing the complexity of the physical level, observing that an organism organizes complex physical materials and energies as a means of survival. At the psychophysical level, he demonstrates how Dewey argues that emotion is a combination of distinct cognitive perceptions and bodily reactions that underline the basic unity of purposive behavior. At the mental level, he mentions Dewey's linguistic requirement for the mind, which situates it in the realm of culture. In this way, he explains the levels' high degrees of complexity, and suggests that interpenetration occurs when the human mind is not opposed to but is an emergent expression of the human body; when ideas and emotional excitation are constituted at the same time and when culture is not a contradictory force but rather a fulfilling and reshaping one.⁸

Shusterman's discussion of habits reveals a deeper meaning of the transactional whole of body-mind. His explication of habits illustrates his thesis that "mental and bodily reactions are not two different things in search of a philosophical synthesis but are instead analytical abstractions already enveloped in the primal unity of purposive behavior."⁹ According to Shusterman and Dewey, habits involve the interpenetration of the emotional, cognitional and physiological levels. One must recognize that the notion of habit has undergone changes since the 19th century, the period to which Dewey's line of thought was applied. In the later half of the 19th century, theories of habit beat around the biologically based theories of mind, and explained habit as the tendency of the mind to reinforce mental patterns as a closed system and drive the individual to repetitive, automatic behavior to conserve energy. This explanation made individuals afraid that they were trapped in predictable and inflexible behavior that forbade their free will and ability to change.¹⁰ That habit became a contested area of psychological debate is also related to Shusterman's words about culture. The discourses of the late 19th century reflected the situations of individuals living in

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰ Vrettos, A. *Victorian Studies*, Spring 1999/2000,

<http://www.case.edu/artsci/engl/Library/Vrettos--Defining%20Habits.pdf>, 400. Retrieved on January 14, 2014.

increasingly modern, mechanized and industrial cultures.¹¹ Much like that seen in Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, human behavior during that era is now considered mass-produced. This historical reality has initiated changes in the reading of habit along with its complexity and integration.

From the discourse of habit, Shusterman analyzes the interpenetration of the will, behavior and environment, which cannot be reduced to the mental, physical and psychophysical. Shusterman observes that the will cannot be an entirely autonomous and purely mental construct because it is constituted by habits, which always incorporate environmental features.¹² The will and habit are tied in such a way that it is hard to differentiate the two or determine their priority. According to Shusterman, "a habit [is] before an ability to evoke the thought at will ... will is deeply enmeshed in habit."¹³ It takes tremendous effort and a lot of acquired skill to free the will from unreflective habits. Under these kinds of conditions, Shusterman echoes Dewey by observing that intelligence, reason or a mind cultivated by education can save an individual from involuntary habits. Shusterman further suggests that conscious control through somatic reflection and the related disciplines can help to eliminate habit.¹⁴ This coincides with Dewey's description and elaboration of the individual's existential interaction with the environment. In Dewey's words, the self can be defined in terms of habits, and habits must engage with and assimilate the environment in which the individual functions. Shusterman particularly quotes Dewey as follows: "(we) live ... as much in processes across and 'through' skins as in processes 'within' skins."¹⁵

Shusterman's note focuses on Dewey's preference for the term "transactional" over "interactional" when describing one's existence, as it diminishes the implication of greater separation and independence. Shusterman also advocates the term and thinks that the transactional self and body "convey the sense of a dynamic, symbiotic individual that is essentially engaging with and relating to others and is in turn essentially reliant on and constituted by such relations."¹⁶ It is clear that Shusterman also refers to the meaning and implications of the term as saving one from unreflective habits and helping an individual to adopt a better and freer life through

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shusterman, 192.

¹³ Ibid., 194-195.

¹⁴ Ibid., 212.

¹⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁶ Ibid., 214.

the promotion of somatic control. Shusterman's promotion of the "transactional body" explains his motive of understanding the body in its environmental context and thereby strengthening one's somatic sensitivity for greater somatic control. According to Shusterman, "We must develop greater sensitivity to the body's environmental conditions, relations, and ambient energies."¹⁷

Shusterman finds similar integrations and transactions among the mental, psychophysical and physical levels in Asian philosophical traditions. He particularly refers to the *Dao* (which he addresses as spiritual sensibility) and *ren* (principle of virtue) in classical Chinese thought, and identifies recognition, integration and virtue practices.¹⁸ He strongly appreciates the Daoist *Dao* in the sense that its practices imply somaesthetic cultivation, which he describes thoroughly in his work on the subject. According to Shusterman, "(*Dao*, or Nature) promises the richest and deepest palate of experiential fulfillments because it can draw on the population of cosmic resources, including an uplifting sense of cosmic unity."¹⁹ Shusterman correctly points out that Confucian notions also coincide with this cosmic model of somatic self-cultivation. He quotes the Confucian expression that Heaven and Earth and all things form a unified body, and Mencius' saying that the functions of the body are the endowment of Heaven and that only a sage can manifest them.²⁰ It would be worthwhile to look further into the meanings of the related integration and compare the transactional sense of the body implied in Confucian thought with the notion suggested by Shusterman

The Meaning of the "Transactional" Body in Confucianism

Shusterman particularly mentions Mencius' ideas of the body in the transactional context. For the purposes of review and discussion, some representative citations from the book of *Mencius* are given as follows. They are taken from the translation sources by Wing-tsit Chan, and are adopted by Shusterman.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 215.

¹⁹ Ibid., 216.

²⁰ Ibid., 216.

²¹ The quotations from Mencius in this article are extracts from *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, translated and compiled by Wing-tsit Chan (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963.)

(Mencius:) Men have these Four Beginnings just as they have their four limbs ... If anyone with these Four Beginnings in him knows how to give them the fullest extension and development, the result will be like fire beginning to burn or a spring beginning to shoot forth. When they are fully developed, they will be sufficient to protect all people within the four seas (the world). If they are not developed, they will not be sufficient even to serve one's parents. (2A: 6)

The “Four Beginnings” are the four fundamental forms of moral knowledge, that is, the *liang-chih*. These forms comprise feelings and sentiments of compassion, shame, modesty and reverence, and include distinctions between right and wrong. They are natural and universal, and produce virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, respectively. They also drive the inclination to act appropriately when the moral subject interacts with others. Mencius considers *liang-chih* to be the ontological foundation of the virtues, and observes that it must be nurtured and preserved. Feelings and sentiments represent the potential for moral action in the development of a person into a whole human being who is in harmony with all of humankind.²² The following passage considers the integration and interaction of the moral mind and the social world, and introduces the effect of the body's “vital force”:

(Mencius:) The will is the leader of the vital force, and the vital force pervades and animates the body. The will is the highest; the vital force comes next. Therefore, I say, ‘hold the will firm and never do violence to the vital force’ ... If the will is concentrated, the vital force [will follow it] and become active. If the vital force is concentrated, the will [will follow it] and become active ... If nourished by uprightness and not injured, it (i.e., the vital force) will fill up all between heaven and earth. As power, righteousness and the Way (or Dao) accompany it. (2A: 2)

The “vital force” (*qi* refers to bodily substance, matter and desire. It is neither the will nor the moral mind exclusively, but both interrelated in the sense that the moral mind should govern *qi*, or virtue will fail. This is a crucial point for humanity. Through the self-conscious effort to act according to moral principle, such as when the *qi* is guided by righteousness (*yi*), the righteous act naturally

²² The explications provided here are taken from Cheng Chung-ying, *New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 272-273.

leads to the ontological extension of oneself and transforms the world into a universe of significance that is integral to the individual self.²³

(Mencius:) There is not a part of the body that a man does not love ... There is not an inch of his skin that he does not nourish. Now, some parts of the body are noble and some are ignoble; some great and some small. We must not allow the ignoble to injure the noble, or the smaller to injure the greater. Those who nourish the smaller parts will become small men. Those who nourish the greater parts will become great men. (6A: 14)

(Mencius:) Those who follow the greater qualities in their nature become great men and those who follow the smaller qualities in their nature become small men. When our senses of sight and hearing are used without thought and are thereby obscured by material things, the material things act on the material senses and lead them astray. The function of the mind is to think. If we think, we will get them (i.e., the principles of things). If we do not think, we will not get them. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first build up the nobler part of our nature, then the inferior part cannot overcome it. It is simply this that makes a man great. (6A: 15)

A critical reading of the preceding citations discloses Mencius' metaphysical levels of integration between the mind and body, the moral and physical, and the individual person and cosmos, and provides an expanded version of Shusterman's notion of the transaction. The phrase "this (i.e., the mind) is what heaven has given to us" signifies a person's relationship with the ontological ground heaven (*tien*).

It should be noted that the Confucian Heaven is the transcendental ground of everything in Nature, including human beings, whose essential characteristics are endowed by Heaven as the moral mind. The mind is the noblest and greatest component of the body, and is more than simply physical due to its moral consciousness or innate knowledge of goodness. The smaller components suggested by Mencius are the physical parts with basic functions, such as hearing and vision, the needs or desires of which should be subordinated or regulated by the control of the moral mind; and the "thinking greatest-component," which constitutes the center of moral principles and the will. One can read the extended meaning of the transactional body in Mencius' promotion of the cultivation of the

²³ *Ibid.*, 243.

vital force, where moral knowledge and its capabilities must be developed and preserved through the physical to transform the human subject into a “great person” or sage.

At the second level, both moral psychology and moral metaphysics (involved in the moral mind according to the principles of the benevolent Heaven) provide a basis for understanding what a person should do (i.e., moral practices) in his or her personal life and social intercourse with others. According to the traditional Confucian school, this process is the central and ultimate concern of human activity.²⁴ The transactionality is best illustrated by the following reputational quotations of Mencius:

(Mencius:) When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent. (6B: 15)

“(Mencius:) Form and color (our body) are nature endowed by Heaven. It is only the sage who can put his physical form into full use.” (7A: 38)

Cheng Chung-ying provides a concise translation of the relationship between “fate” (*ming*) and “nature” (*hsing*) in the following famous section (7B: 24):

(Mencius:) It is due to our nature that our mouths desire sweet tastes, that our eyes desire beautiful colors, that our ears desire pleasant sounds, that our noses desire fragrant odors, and that our four limbs desire ease and comfort. But there is also fate (*ming*) [whether these desires are satisfied or not]. The superior man does not say they are man’s nature (*hsing*) [and insist on satisfying them]. The virtue of humanity in the relationship between father and son, the virtue of righteousness in the relationship between ruler and minister, the virtue of propriety in the relationship between guest and host, the virtue of wisdom in the worthy, and the sage in regard to the Way of Heaven – these are [endowed in people in various degrees] according to fate. But there is also man’s nature (*hsing*). The superior man does not [refrain from practicing them and] say they are matters of fate. (7B: 24)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 482-483.

Cheng's translation stresses that both mind and nature (*hsing*) mingle within the individual being, representing and fulfilling the different functions that constitute being human. *Hsing* is able to fulfill the person in terms of achieving identification with Heaven (*tien*), which provides Nature to humans and enables them to achieve greatness. Fate (*ming*) is able to fulfill the person in terms of his or her interaction with others. *Ming* is not a deterrent to one's virtue, but is sometimes an occasion for fulfillment. Mencius notes that one must receive fate in the right way, that is, to avoid what is undesirable and fulfill what is desirable.²⁵

A Cross-review of the "Transactional Body": Dewey, Mencius and Shusterman

In his article entitled "The End of Aesthetic Experience," Shusterman suggests that people are losing the capacity for deep experience and feeling, largely because they are undergoing extensive series of informational revolutions.²⁶ His discussion of aesthetic experience offers meanings that are related to his subsequent notion of the transactional body. His call for rekindling the notion of aesthetic experience hints at the transactional body, as it includes the following beliefs: aesthetic experience is a heightened, meaningful and valuable phenomenological experience; its importance and richness should be recognized more fully, as it will be strengthened and preserved the more it is experienced; and its concept is directional and able to remind us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life.²⁷

Shusterman's call for an ideal aesthetic experience is a clear reminder of Dewey's explication of aesthetic experience as an integrated and interactional bodily and emotional experience, described as follows in *Art as Experience*:²⁸

Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living ... We have an experience when the material experience runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 344-346.

²⁶ Shusterman, R. "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* (JAAC), (Wisconsin: U. of Wisconsin-Madison and Marquette U.) Vol. 55, No. 1, Winter 1997, 29-41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸ Dewey, J. *Art as Experience* (N.Y.: Perigee Books, 1980), 35 and 38.

satisfactory; a problem receives its solution ... Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience ... Nevertheless, the experience itself has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement. This artistic structure may be immediately felt. In so far, it is esthetic.”

Under the influences of biological evolutionism and his beliefs in functional and pragmatic implications, Dewey states that the activities of living things are characterized by natural needs, by the efforts to satisfy those needs and by satisfactions. These terms are primarily implemented in a biological sense as described in his work *Experience and Nature*:²⁹

By need is meant a condition of tensional distribution of energies such that the body is in a condition of uneasy or unstable equilibrium. By demand or effort is meant ... [to] modify environing bodies in ways which react upon the body, so that its characteristic pattern of active equilibrium is restored. By satisfaction is meant this recovery of equilibrium pattern, consequent upon the changes of environment due to interactions with the active demands of the organism.

It is interesting to note how Dewey expands the satisfaction of experience to aesthetic experience, which is often considered spontaneous, unexpected, fresh, unpredictable, purposive and instrumental, rather than the classical notion of “disinterestedness” that aesthetic experience implies.³⁰

“A consummatory object that is not also instrumental turns in time to the dust and ashes of boredom. The ‘eternal’ quality of great art is its renewed instrumentality for further consummatory experiences.”

Jeffery Petts explains Dewey’s notion of “consummation” as a job felt to be satisfactorily completed, a problem felt to be solved and a game played through “fair and square.” He claims accordingly that aesthetic experience is a feeling that things are “just so.”³¹ However, he also hints that this feeling that things are “just so” has an implication of value, for it is both prompted and validated by a felt response or feeling

²⁹ Dewey, J. *Experience and Nature* (N.Y.: Dover Publications, printed in 1958), 252-253.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 365.

³¹ Petts, J. “Aesthetic Experience and the Revelation of Value,” *JAAC*, Vol. 58, No.1, Winter 2000, 63.

of approbation, and introduces the possibility of many kinds of motives and interests, ranging from physical needs to emotional desires, personal interests and aesthetic evaluations. Petts stresses that an aesthetic experience is privately felt but intrinsically public, as it takes on value when it is marked by a consummating moment.³² Petts is of a similar mind to Dewey and Shusterman in terms of believing that human experience in full is extensional and transactional.³³

“My argument, in short, is that aesthetic experience is not simply a socially constructed response to environment ... but is defining of a more profound natural (to be explained) response of human beings to their environment, without which it would be inexplicable how any cultural preferences could emerge from that experience.”

As Shusterman suggests, cross-cultural study would enrich the reading of the transactional body, and he particularly refers to consulting Asian thought for a deeper understanding. The Deweyan model represents a belief in the biological and natural needs of a human subject, from which a full existential experience involving the mind, psyche and body (like an aesthetic experience) may arise as an intense, direct, immediate and integrated manifestation of the interaction of humans and the natural living environment. The feeling that things are “just so” represents fulfillment, describes the value of human experience and refers to equilibrium and harmony attained through interaction and adjustment. This connection is the foundation of the later expansion of works to the social, linguistic and cultural dimensions and to interaction.

In terms of Mencius, the feeling that things are “just so” has at least two levels. The first refers to moments when the vital force is regulated in a way that the tendency of behavioral practice accords with the moral mind. The second refers to the distanced accordance of the human mind to Heaven, where the latter confers a principle of morality that only a human could manifest. This level is both humanistic and cosmic. In the Deweyan sense, happiness or delight achieved on a biological level should be different from that achieved on the metaphysical level implied in the Confucian ontology. The former lacks depth in terms of the meaning of ultimate concern for things and their value. However, Shusterman and Petts refer to a transactional body and experience that is in touch with the plane of value both naturally and socially.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67.

One can also detect the harmonious state in the moral and aesthetic experiences in the Confucian thoughts, yet the differences between them and the Deweyan model are both epistemological and metaphysical. While the “just so” or the rightness described by Dewey refers to the successful adjustment between the subject and the living environment, the “just so” in the Confucian thinking is an ontological manifestation of things under the light of the human mind, when it is engaged with the metaphysical Nature and Heaven. This explains the suggestions made by Dewey’s followers like Beardsley, who discusses the aesthetic values of aesthetic objects in terms of the measurement of intensity, coherence, integrity and complexity of the aesthetic experience. Yet if the happiness or delight in the Deweyan sense is based on a biological dimension, it should be different from that being at the spiritual level or in the light of the wisdom implied in the Confucian ontology. In brief, successful environmental adjustment is not equal to an answer related to art and value.

It should be noted that both the Deweyan and the Confucian models share the view that aesthetic experience in the broad sense comes prior to all other human experience. For Dewey, an experience arises that has a satisfying emotional quality as it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement is an aesthetic structure itself, which may be immediately felt and it enables an intellectual (and a moral) experience to be complete.³⁴ The Confucian tradition reads aesthetic experience as an upsurge from the life experience itself, when the mind has the capacity only when it is totally engaged with the Nature.

The quests for human purpose and the meaning of life must obviously extend beyond environmental interaction and to the capacity of the human mind for hope and potential. Confucian thought dictates that the human mind is able to transcend the subject-object relationship and is engaged with Nature. For Dewey, bodily experience that has a satisfying emotional quality (because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement) may be immediately felt, and enables a complete intellectual (and moral) experience.³⁵

The comparative reading sheds light on Shusterman’s notion of the transactional body, when he quotes the Confucian expression that Heaven and Earth and all things form a unified body. The transactional body addresses the physical, psychophysical and

³⁴ Dewey, J. *Art as Experience* (N.Y.: Perigee Books, 1980), p.35 & p.38.

³⁵ Dewey, J. *Art as Experience* (N.Y.: Perigee Books, 1980), 35-38.

mental levels of a human being, and refers to the individual's private and public lives. In "The End of Aesthetic Experience," Shusterman identifies the worry that people are losing the capacity for deep experience and feeling in the new age of living.³⁶ The notion of the transactional body elaborated in his somaesthetics and his reference to Mencius' theory may provide a way to reflect on the reconstruction of human experience, and the Confucian body discourse confirms its possible integration and transaction.

It is worthwhile to do this comparative study not only for illustration and confirmation purposes, but to enlarge our thinking horizon of the relation among self, object and our environment. Shusterman once called for rekindling the notion of aesthetic experience with the beliefs that the experience embraces heightened, meaningful, and valuable phenomenological experience; its importance and richness should be fully recognized as it will be strengthened and preserved the more it is experienced; its concept is directional and is able to remind us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life.³⁷ In the Confucian's reading, the aesthetic experience happens in the engagement of the human mind with the metaphysical Nature provides alternative yet in-depth revelations to the points that Shusterman once raised.

³⁶ Shusterman, R. "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism (JAAC)*, (Wisconsin: U. of Wisconsin-Madison and Marquette U.) vol. 55, No. 1, winter, 1997, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-41.