

Needed Body: From Self-Liberation to Ethical Society

Lukáš Arthur Švihura
University of Presov, Slovakia

Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino, *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics: Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living*, London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 206 pages.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Existence, Body, Michel Foucault, Richard Shusterman, Somaesthetics

Michel Foucault and Richard Shusterman are undoubtedly two of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and this is no accident. Alongside phenomenologists, they brought the idea of the body and its importance to the center of philosophical inquiry after a long period of time when the body was profoundly neglected in our Western philosophical tradition. They did so through their original philosophical approaches – such as creating a framework for interpreting ancient ethical-ascetic practices, as seen in later Foucault's philosophy of the aesthetics of existence, or creating a vast interdisciplinary framework for reconsidering the body and its importance in Shusterman's somaesthetics. Thus, dedicating a book to an important part of these philosopher's legacy, was an exceptional idea, and readers interested in either Foucault's or Shusterman's works should be grateful to the editors, Valentina Antoniol, a researcher in political philosophy at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro," and Stefano Marino, a professor of aesthetics at the University of Bologna.

Their intellectual offspring is titled *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics: Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living*. It was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2024. The edited book contains nine comprehensive chapters from nine notable authors who are leading personalities in their fields of interest: Philippe Sabot, Arianna Sforzini, Daniele Lorenzini, Martin Jay, Vincent M. Colapietro, Richard Shusterman, Chris Voparil, Barbara Formis, and Leszek Koczanowicz (listed by their respective chapters). The editors wrote the introduction, and I would like to emphasize that one of the chapters was written directly by Richard Shusterman, to whom the book is dedicated.

The book begins with the editors' 'Introduction,' which is titled the same as the book itself. This is a standard and effective way to pique the reader's interest and encourage them to delve into the texts. The introduction is clear and explanatory. Taking into consideration Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Shusterman's somaesthetics, it introduces the book, stating that it "is the first study specifically devoted to the development of rigorous critical comparisons between the theories and works of these two important contemporary philosophers. The present volume aims to fill a gap in the existing international literature, and it is in this direction that the essays presented here have been developed, confronting the thoughts of Foucault and Shusterman and offering innovative possibilities for the development and deepening of the themes investigated" (p. 16).

The editors are honest with their words, and filling the gap in existing literature is certainly the reason why this book is important for those interested in the subtle connections between ethics, politics, and aesthetics in the thinking of Foucault and Shusterman. Regarding the book's comparative nature, it is important to note, that not every chapter is written in a comparative manner. Some studies are devoted primarily to Foucault's legacy, while others focus primarily on Shusterman's work. Readers interested in comparisons must be prepared to read carefully, because they must sometimes take on this task themselves. However, this is an important and valuable part of the book, because it invites readers to actively

think alongside the chapter authors and draw their own comparisons. I see this as an invitation for readers to participate in and fully engage with the comprehensive philosophical discussions delivered by the authors of the book chapters. Moreover, the editors took helpful steps toward engaging readers, particularly through the thoughtful ordering of chapters and the creation of an interesting and meaningful book structure. Although it is not explicitly acknowledged, the book is divided into thematic parts. The first four chapters are primarily devoted to the Foucault's aesthetics of existence. Of course, Shusterman's somaesthetics is mentioned in them, but not dominantly. The reverse is also true, as the last four chapters are primarily devoted to or inspired by Shusterman's philosophical legacy. Finally, I see the fifth chapter of the book, directly in the center, as a bridging chapter, connecting the first four chapters with the last four.

My intention here is not to provide brief summaries of each chapter, but rather to highlight some significant connections that I discovered while reading and that might not be apparent at first glance. I would like to emphasize points that align best with the title of the book, particularly the subtitle: *Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living*. I admit that my approach will probably lead to the necessary simplifications of the complex intentions of authors, but I believe interested readers will quench their thirst by reading and analyzing the book for themselves.

As I mentioned before, we can divide the book into two parts, with a bridging chapter between them. The first part consists of the following texts: 'Aesthetics of Existence: From Foucault to Stirner, via Baudelaire' by Philippe Sabot; 'The Body at the Limits of Subjectivity. For a Philosophy-Performance as Political Aesthetics through the Thought of Michel Foucault' by Arianna Sforzini; 'Pleasure, Scandal, and the Body: Foucault on Somatic *Askesis*' by Daniele Lorenzini; and '*Leib, Körper, and the Body Politic*' by Martin Jay. Some recurring topics emerge from these chapters, and it is interesting that each author approaches them from a unique analytical standpoint. Sabot's analysis is based on the "discussion" between Foucault and Sartre on Baudelaire's

dandy figure and Stirner's concepts of *Eigenheit* and *Einzig*, Sforzini's analysis is rooted in the "discussion" between Foucault and Butler, with a particular emphasis on the concept "agency". It is also connected to feminism, queer studies, and philosophy performance. Lorenzini's chapter compares two different types of *askeses* found in later Foucault's work: Greco-Roman and Cynic *askeses*.

Although they are very different in context, all three chapters can lead their readers to the following conclusion, which has value not only for our intellectual or theoretical understanding, but also for our self-knowledge. The conclusion is that our body can serve as a tool for our liberation and that, through our bodily practices, we can disrupt the established power structures inscribed in our bodies. While this is not new knowledge, the different contexts, in which the authors work demonstrate its merit. More importantly, these chapters emphasize the creativity and experimentation involved in using our bodies, as this experimentation creates from body a space of freedom, that is necessarily political. This topic is present in the first chapter, where Sabot writes about homosexual relationships; the second chapter, where Sforzini writes about creative performance; and the third chapter, where Lorenzini writes about the plurality of possible *askeses*. Each chapter demonstrates and invites us to consider further contexts, in which we can experiment with our bodies in order to free ourselves from what Foucault called '*biopouvoir*'.

Although I placed the fourth chapter, '*Leib, Körper, and the Body Politic*' by Martin Jay, in the imagined section alongside the previous three due to its focus on Foucault's ideas, it shares some significant similarities with chapter five, '*Care of the Social Self as Embodied*' by Vincent M. Colapietro, which acts like a bridge between the two sections. I would like to highlight these points from an ethical perspective, bearing in mind that both chapters consider completely different contexts of interpretation. While Jay elaborates on the concept of the Body Politic through the phenomenological distinction of the *Leib/Körper*, introducing the idea of the political body as an analogous to *Körper*, Colapietro connects Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Shusterman's somaesthetics to Dewey's

pragmatism. Despite their different frameworks, both chapters contribute an important idea to the discussion: the ethical and social nature of the philosophies to which the book is dedicated.

I cannot say with certainty whether the editors intentionally ordered the chapters in the way that I see it. Nevertheless, the order works very well. If we view either Foucault's aesthetics of existence or Shusterman somaesthetics as tools for liberation from biopolitics, as suggested by the first three chapters of the book, this could lead to the misleading presupposition that the aim of these philosophies is to disconnect their followers from the social context, providing a framework for individualized, unrooted or unanchored existences. Whether it is Jay's political metaphor, leading to the conclusion that the political body should contain even those its parts that could be considered 'pathological' or Colapietro's analysis of the socially situated subject, it is clear, that the individual's desire for freedom and the suggested bodily experiments are never conducted in a vacuum, and that the individual's art of living can have an immersive political impact.

The ethical and political implications of bodily experimentation are emphasized even more in the final four chapters of the book. These are: 'Somaesthetics and the Philosophical Life' by Richard Shusterman; 'Somaesthetics, Foucauldian Aesthetics of Existence, and Living Ethically as White' by Chris Voparil; *'Aphrodisia, Eros, Charis: Holistic Bodies and the Stylistic of Reciprocity'* by Barbara Formis; and 'The Body Must Be Defended: Somapower and the Women's Strike in Poland' by Leszek Koczanowicz.

In Shusterman's chapter, we delve deeper into the realm of somaesthetics. However, the connection to the philosophies of Foucault and Hadot remains evident, particularly in the notion that philosophy can and should be perceived as a way of life or as an art of living, as it was in the ancient times. But the idea that philosophy must be embodied in everyday life and brought to life through our bodily practices in order to improve the aesthetic, ethical, individual, and social quality of life is still undervalued in their philosophies. This concept is changing in Shusterman's consequent approach. The last three chapters

offer concrete suggestions on how to integrate philosophy into our everyday lives, aiming not only to improve our personal lives, but also our societal conditions. For example, Voparil's original contribution is based on an analysis of how somaesthetic practices can make us more mindful of how whiteness is embodied in everyday life. Alternatively, we can find Formis's comprehensive analysis of the Greek concepts such as *aphrodisia*, *eros*, and *charis*. This analysis leads to the issue of reciprocity in sexual relationships. Koczanowicz's chapter, the final one in the book, effectively demonstrates how the body, or soma, can exert power in public demonstrations through agency and the creative uses in public spaces. This was evident in Poland following the ban on abortion. The recurring topic in these last four chapters symbolically connects them into one imagined section. They offer not only theoretical analyses, but also practical examples of how we can create a more ethical, inclusive and open societal space through something that seems very intimate at first glance (and often is): our bodily or somaesthetic practices.

After this brief insight into the book's content, we can conclude that its title is perfectly aligned with its subject matter. Having read it, we can clearly see how the art of living, even if we reduce it to the practice of freedom, will necessarily lead to the co-creation of a social and political environment of which the individual is always an integral part. The book reminds readers that, if we want to change our environments philosophically, this cannot be achieved without bodily practices, despite the fact that for thousands of years we have thought it could be done without them. I particularly like the Koczanowicz's idea of somapower, which creatively bridges Foucault's concept of biopower and Shusterman's somaesthetics. It clearly implies that, in the similar way that power is inscribed in us through our bodies, we can also create forms of counterpower using the same tool. I think this idea is implicitly present throughout the book, creating its inherent seal.

In conclusion, I would recommend this book to any potential reader. It is a book we need. It is not just another contribution to philosophies that have had and still have an

enormous impact on our thinking; more importantly, it could inspire us to create better conditions by using one of the strongest tools for creativity, morality and resistance that we already possess: our own body.

Lukáš Arthur Švihura is a Slovak philosopher and associate professor at the University of Presov. He is also a certified yoga teacher who is interested in the philosophy of pragmatism, practical somaesthetics, and philosophical practice, particularly philosophical counseling and coaching. He is the leader of the civic organization Philosophy in Practice, which offers philosophical activities based on his aforementioned research and pedagogical interests to the general public.

Address:

Lukáš Arthur Švihura

University of Presov

Department of Philosophy

17. novembra 1 Street

080 78 Presov, Slovak Republic

Email: lukas.svihura@unipo.sk