

“Somaesthetics,” Education, and Disability¹

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Pleasure is as integral to learning as effort. It is an emotive sign of achievement and a source of motivation for further learning. Learners do not exist separate from their bodies; they are biological entities with basic needs for sustenance and stimulation. John Dewey understood this in his writings on aesthetics. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey refers to a person as a “live creature” interacting with an enveloping environment. Dewey argued that all qualities of the live creature’s experiences have aesthetic roots, combining sensory perception with cognitive function.² Hence, an aesthetically pleasing experience interweaves the body and the mind with the environment. If pleasure is critical to learning, it is no less important to persons with disabilities who are also live creatures. Yet, persons with disability may experience environment, in its broadest sense, as presenting obstacles to pleasure. This poses an educational question, since some pleasures may be especially useful for the most basic learning of persons with disabilities. Through the sensory modes that inhere in the body — touch, smell, and proprioception (that is, the neuroanatomical feedback necessary for movement and balance) — the live creature takes stock of itself and the surrounding world.

While disability may modify how the world is available, the body remains the medium through which the live creature gains both self-knowledge and knowledge of its enviroing conditions. Understanding persons with disabilities as live creatures for whom education is important requires a further theory of the body. Along with Dewey, philosophers Michel Foucault and Richard Shusterman treat the body as a theoretical location for inquiry.³ For these three philosophers, practical regimens of somatic engagement with the environment have educational importance. In this essay, I will engage theoretical tools drawn from each of these thinkers in order to show how some forms of pleasure are critical to the education of persons with disabilities.

WHICH PLEASURES? POSSIBILITIES FOR LEARNING

Pleasure is an aspect of body that is rarely associated with disability. Yet, pleasure requires consideration of its somatic roots, along with the *body’s* experience of everything that surrounds it and envelops it. Like Dewey, Foucault and Shusterman associate aesthetic experience with bodily well-being, where the body itself is both the subject and object of aesthetic pleasure. Shusterman, in fact, proposes a new discipline for the study and applications of aesthetics for bodily well-being that he calls “somaesthetics” (*PA*, 262). Shusterman “provisionally” defines somaesthetics as

the critical meliorative study of the experience and the use of one’s body as the locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore, also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care of can improve it (*PA*, 267).

What can somaesthetics mean for persons with disabilities, and especially for persons with significant cognitive and physical impairments? Again, returning to Dewey's conception of the "live creature" and its basic needs, satisfaction of those needs involves pleasure. A human being's experience of pleasure begins in infancy with the sustenance of basic needs: nutrition, rest, warmth, and familiar touch. The maintenance of these needs occurs in cycles of interaction between caregiver and child that include emotional content. In all children, whether regarded as normally able or as disabled, environment colors the qualities of experience in the same way. What significance could this have for the education of persons with disabilities? The answer I believe lies (1) in considering the body's quality of experience and (2) in considering ways in which the body is the means of subjective experience. Shusterman argues that the body has aesthetic potential "as an object grasped by external senses (of another or even one's own) that can provide beautiful sensory perceptions" (PA, 262). The emotional content of early experiences establishes the foundation for all further learning, enabling both communication and cognitive efficiency.

Pleasure is something that registers on all the sensory modes of the body, even those that are not generally considered in learning, such as proprioception and touch. Moreover, these capacities of the body are central to the live creature's development of agency, in learning, first, to trust the environment and, second, to engage in acts with favorable consequences. The tonality of experience is "read" through the body: both one's own and the bodies of others. Italian neurologist and researcher Vittorio Gallese cites studies that demonstrate that neonates who are only eighteen hours old engage in facial imitation of caregivers.⁴ Infants thus display abilities to generalize from one sensory modality (that is, vision) and transfer this knowledge to a completely different one (motor activity). Hence, the whole body participates in learning. Gallese writes,

Early imitation appears to constitute a further example of infants' capacity to establish equivalence relations between different modalities of experience. The importance of early imitation for our understanding of social cognition is that it shows that interpersonal bonds are established at the very onset of our life, when no subjective representation can yet be entertained by the organism, because a *conscious subject* of experience is not yet constituted.⁵

Imitation is the first sign of an infant's learning, and the foundation on which the conscious subject constitutes "itself." Such developmental steps are clues for the content of education of persons with disabilities. Answering the question of "which pleasures" requires attention to the most basic relations with the environment that favor a sense of wellness. Such an attunement of environment with somatic experience of the body perceptibly results in a feeling of harmony. Tangible signs of pleasure for all people include smiles and sounds of laughter, abilities that do not require expressive verbal skills.

Growth is an adaptation to the demands of the environment that, when successful, is often a source of pleasure. Growth requires stimulation by the environment, but not in degrees that overwhelm the "creature." Growth requires a successful alignment of function with the demand. A pleasurable feeling of wellness signals that the live creature has established a provisional harmony that is necessary

for facing further challenges. Most importantly, from the perspective of somaesthetics, pleasure is evidence from “within” that the body has the means to live well.

WHICH USES OF PLEASURE? POSSIBILITIES FOR
EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The kinds of pleasures I have discussed thus far are by no means gratuitous. I am drawing attention to forms of pleasure that are necessary for the survival of the live creature. Enough nourishment, enough sleep, and enough stimulation all promote conditions in which it is possible to speak of enjoyment. The *uses* of pleasure for persons with disabilities therefore involve engagement, trust, and agency. All these “uses” of pleasure are integral to a sense of wellness. Wellness is never, of course, a permanent state, but it can be a motivating one, in the sense that the live creature comes to desire it. Trusting the environment requires a sense that the “world” is not simply disinterested, and that one can effect a favorable response from it. Only reciprocal relations with fellow live creatures, from the very beginning of one’s life, can instill an interest in engaging the environment. Such engagement promotes experiments in communication, creating feedback loops that color particular experiences with importance. The promotion of engagement requires appeals to all of the senses. Even when one or more of the senses is impaired, appeal to senses that we seldom consider, such as proprioception, are crucial to learning to trust the environment as safe, yet predictably stimulating.

The sensory-aesthetic dimension of experience that is described by Dewey requires a *consciousness* of relations that intensify a moment, giving it significance.⁶ Yet, even the most mundane experience for the so-called normally abled might be critically important for persons with disabilities, as a sign of successful engagement with the surrounding environment. Broadly conceived, therefore, education for persons with disabilities must address the conditions under which growth and development occur. Furthermore, I wish to claim that aesthetic-sensory emphases might broaden educational practice from narrow, instrumental concerns to richer, experiential ones. Indeed, an examination of the original circumstances of learning demonstrates how reciprocities derive from the dependencies of the live creature and her environment. My emphasis on early experiences is not meant to patronize persons with disabilities, particularly those persons with severe cognitive impairment, in order to keep them in a state of permanent childhood, but rather to underline how certain basic needs function as the substructures for adaptation for all persons, no matter their degree of ability or disability.

To explore further which uses of pleasure are important for the education of persons with disabilities, I shall briefly turn to Foucault, who, in his later works, sought to establish a conception of the self that privileged self-possession and self-improvement.⁷ To this end, Foucault drew inspiration from ancient philosophy, particularly from Epicurean and Stoic texts that describe regimens of physical and mental exercises. No doubt, Foucault’s interest in “self-possession” occurred under the shadow of his own suffering from the disintegrative power of AIDS, to which he ultimately succumbed in 1984. Foucault describes the ancients’ enthusiasm for exercise and rigorous self-monitoring in practices that were often promulgated by

schools. However, ultimately, the ancients hoped to learn self-mastery in order to become autonomous and self-contained, whatever one's historical or biographical circumstances.

For many persons with disabilities, such self-initiated regimens to "cultivate the self" are simply not possible.⁸ Dewey's aesthetic interpretation of experience offers an alternative approach that allows education for persons with disabilities to arrive at "self-possession," unhampered by the requirement of becoming an island of self-mastery. Notions of self-mastery are highly contestable, because agency involves not only what one can do, but also what one can do with the help of others. Engagement with others requires that one learn and apply many skills that depend upon bodily attunement with others. For example, one of the most critical developmental steps for persons with autism is to learn to regard others as intentional agents in the same ways in which the autistic person regards himself.⁹

For all persons, learning to distinguish self from others is part of the foundation of learning. But another phase of basic learning is to understand that others are like us in many crucial ways. Gallese characterizes empathy not only as understanding when another person is happy, sad, or frustrated, but also as understanding what it feels like to touch (or be touched) and experience pain or pleasure.¹⁰ I am not proposing the infliction of pain, nor am I arguing that learning is not possible under unpleasant conditions, but I am proposing a connection of feeling and bodily expression as the proper use of the body in education. Moderate exercise, such as stretching and deep breathing, as ways of recovering from frustration and anxiety, are as educationally important as the skills involved in problem solving. As Shusterman writes, "there is also experience of one's body from within," enhancing an awareness of the vitality of life at its best (*PA*, 262). In sum, to answer the question of "which pleasures," I am highlighting pleasures that foster engagement, trust, and agency. In the next section of this essay, I will discuss obstacles to pleasure that are experienced by persons with disabilities, all of which are inimical to engagement, trust, and agency.

OBSTACLES TO PLEASURE: DISABILITY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The concept of disability covers a range of phenomena. Disability can refer to many impairments of function, whether congenital or acquired, and permanent or temporary. Ultimately, however, the meaning of impairment is socially constructed. Function, as an ability to meet one's needs or the needs of others, changes as the environment changes; adaptive technologies and manipulation of the physical and social contingencies of environment can transform a disabling circumstance into a manageable one. As this transformation occurs, the meaning of disability shifts as well. Just as the construction of disability's meaning is social, so the construction of normality is social as well. In addition, many other considerations such as race, class status, and gender enter into the construction of disability's meaning. Moreover, conceptions of normality fluctuate with the forces of market consumerism. Thus, there are cultural attributions of disability that limit, from the start, any emphasis on capacities. Disability challenges our notions of the desirable life. As a result, responses to disability vary from strategies that are designed to normalize, to those

that are designed to segregate or, at the farthest extreme, excise.¹¹ What all of these responses lack is a means for encouraging the agency that is already present in all live creatures possessing self-consciousness. Returning to the foundations of early development can aid in our understanding of how agency is a symptom, and not the cause, of satisfying experience.

To thrive as a human being requires a steady yet varied stream of sensory input through the available modes of somatic experience.¹² This somatic need for stimulation is a need that all people share in common, despite their relative levels of functionality or impairment. Persons with disabilities are subject to circumstances that hamper their abilities beyond the obvious sensory or cognitive impairments. Among these circumstances are social and physical isolation, inadequate nutrition, poor health care, and lack of exercise. In fact, given limited opportunities, and perhaps a reduced repertoire of pleasuring activities, persons with disabilities are at risk of either sensory deprivation or self-absorption in ways that might be somatically dangerous. Overreliance on certain kinds of stimulation can even be harmful, such as in cases where limited sensory input from the environment leads to the picking of the skin or the hitting of the head.¹³ There are even some instances in which individuals with severe cognitive deficits resort to self-harm in order to induce stimulation, just to feel alive. Some research suggests that these situations can be alleviated by removing potential sources of pain, and also by sufficiently varying the environment in order to stimulate the sensory modes that are intact.¹⁴

MORAL DIFFICULTIES: CARING FOR SELVES

The emotional components that accompany cognition are deeply ingrained in bodily experiences that are shared by persons with significant cognitive impairments. Hence, at the level of emotional life, experiences are connected viscerally with feelings of pleasure and displeasure that precede functions of reason or judgment. The felt *realness* of somatic experiences even precedes articulation in speech.

The moral questions that arise from introducing aesthetic-sensory experience into education concern not only what Shusterman calls “creative self-fashioning,” but also the way in which embodiment raises questions of ethical obligation. If my thesis that agency is a symptom, and not a cause, of satisfying experience is correct, then education for persons with disabilities receives moral justifications that current educational practices ignore. Reviewing prominent special education journals, such as the *Journal of Special Education*, *Exceptional Children*, or other disabilities-related education journals, yields few references to aesthetics or pleasure as part of the recommended curriculum. Instead, there are reams of articles addressing the identification of learning disabilities, curriculum-based assessments, and learning strategies for literacy skills and mathematical problem solving. While all of these areas of the curriculum are important, they do not address the basic needs of persons with disabilities, which are so important for acquiring a sense of well-being. Education for persons with disabilities, therefore, requires considering how their quality of experience might be improved. To this end, I want to suggest an intervention technique that can engage even persons with the most severe cognitive and physical impairments in more fully developed somatic relationships with the environment.

SENSORY INTEGRATION: SOMAESTHETIC EDUCATION
FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The occupational therapist A. Jean Ayres conceived the theory of sensory integration over thirty years ago. Ayres defined *sensory integration* as "the neurological process that organizes sensation from one's body and the environment and makes it possible to use the body effectively with the environment."¹⁵ My interest in Ayres does not depend upon her hypothesis that sensory integration explains learning disabilities in the absence of frank impairments. I will, however, accept the neurological underpinnings of Ayres's theory, and assume that the stimulation of sensory modalities is consistent with neurological theories of development.

Integral to Ayres's theory are hypothesized relations of how the neurophysiology of the brain and sense organs organize input, allowing the body to orient to the environment. All of these relations have functional implications. From the perspective of Shusterman's somaesthetics, regimens drawn from sensory integration can induce a feeling of well-being from within. Shusterman divides what he calls *pragmatic somaesthetics* into "representational" and "experiential" forms (*PA*, 272). While the representational form involves philosophical thought concerning the representations of body image, the experiential form directs concern to the experience of the body from within. While forms of exercise such as yoga and Tai Chi may not be somaesthetic practices for all persons with disabilities, Ayres' theory does suggest activities that can improve the quality of somatic experience. Examples include tactile experience with objects of various textures, densities, or sizes, and devices, such as swings, that stimulate the parts of the brain that deal with vestibular processing and proprioception (balance, orientation of the body in space, and the feeling of being grounded).¹⁶ Crucial to the execution of these exercises are the relations established between the therapist, or educator, and the individual. In these reciprocal loops of activity, individuals learn to read intention, signal beginning and ending, and communicate pleasure and displeasure. All of these skills enable the development of trust, agency, and the desire for further engagement. Is this not the core of educational practice, and the goal of every educator?

Various developmental and neurological theories (among them theories proposed by Stanley Greenspan and Antonio Damasio) describe reciprocal relations tied to *affect* that characterize cognitive growth.¹⁷ Crucial to my appropriation of somaesthetics for persons with disabilities are the affective tonalities attached to one's relationship to oneself, others, and the physical environment. Antonio Damasio, a leading neuropsychologist and neurologist, proposes that bodily engagement with the environment results in "somatic markers" that qualify experiences as helpful, positive, and enriching, or challenging, negative, and threatening.¹⁸ These markers infuse cognition with a visceral base from which the live creature assesses the qualities of felt experience.

The body of the live creature is a "minded body" that confounds a Cartesian division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, or thinking things (minds) and extending things (bodies). For Dewey, no such Cartesian division exists between mind and body. Instead, a qualitative evaluation adheres to all experiences of the live

creature. A key educational question that arises from a consideration of persons with disabilities is how educators might improve the experience of the body. Ayres proposed that certain exercises could develop neurological capacities that promote an individual's orientation in space. Motor planning (that is, the intentional sequencing of movement) requires a secure position from which movement can proceed functionally.¹⁹ However, even where frank physiological deficits impede self-initiated movement, educators can still improve students' potential for engagement. Twenty years ago, I witnessed the result of a change in orientation, when an occupational therapist worked to change gradually the positioning of several residents of a large institution. It is important to note that the residents involved had spent the bulk of their lives supine in bathcarts. The results of these positioning changes allowed these residents to engage with the environment in ways that were never before possible. Physical flourishing occurred as well, both in the management of oral secretions and in improved respiratory efficiency. Even these basic physical functions are captured by Shusterman's conception of somaesthetics as "a body-centered discipline" (*PA*, 262).

Returning to Dewey's conception of the live creature, his writings on aesthetics discuss the integration of the affective and cognitive structures that unify experience in ways that anticipate the experiential somaesthetics of Shusterman. Advancing knowledge in the fields of neurophysiology and neuropsychology supports a Deweyan conception of transactions between creature and environment that are both biological and social in nature. Shusterman's somaesthetics supplies useful conceptual tools with which to consider educational practices for persons with disabilities. I regard it as imperative that the so-called normally abled, and educators especially, expand their views of self-fashioning to include pleasure as it is relevant to *all* people, including persons with disabilities. Somaesthetic education requires concern for the embodied experience of persons with disabilities through activities that promote satisfying physical experience.

1. Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (1999): 299–313.

2. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Penguin, 2005), 1–19.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1986); Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). *Pragmatist Aesthetics* will be cited as *PA* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Vittorio Gallese, "The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Experience: The Search for a Common Mechanism," *Philosophical Transactions: Biology Sciences* 358, no. 1431 (2003): 517–528.

5. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

6. Dewey, *Art as Experience*. See Chapter 3, "Having an Experience," 36–59.

7. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*.

8. *Ibid.*, 65.

9. Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

10. Gallese, "The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Experience," 519.

11. Michael Mostert, “Disability as Genocidal Marker in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Special Education* 36, no. 3 (2002): 157–170.
12. Jerome Bruner, “The Cognitive Consequences of Early Sensory Deprivation,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 21, no. 2 (1959): 89–95.
13. Sinclair A. Smith et al., “Effects of Sensory Integration on Self-Stimulating and Self-Injurious Behaviors,” *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 59, no. 4 (2005): 418–425.
14. Ibid.
15. A. Jean Ayers, *Sensory Integration and Learning Disorders* (Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1973), 11, quoted in Anita C. Bundy, Shelly J. Lane, and Elizabeth A. Murray, *Sensory Integration: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: F.A. Davis, 2002), 4.
16. Bundy, Lane, and Murray, *Sensory Integration*, 9–10.
17. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2006); Serena Wieder and Stanley Greenspan, “Climbing the Symbolic Ladder in the DIR Model Through Floortime/Interactive Play,” *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 7, no. 4 (2003): 423–435.
18. Damasio, *Descartes Error*, 165–201.
19. Bundy, Lane, and Murray, *Sensory Integration*, 9–10.