

Who Is There? Finding the Other in the Self

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Richard Shusterman has written an exemplary essay. Not only does he provide a detailed overview of the philosophical history of his topic, showing the wide range of different views about the virtues and vices of self-knowledge. He also pays detailed attention to the pragmatic dimensions of his topic: the questions of when, where, and how self-knowledge matters. Whereas many of the philosophers and psychologists he discusses point to the dangers of self-examination — particularly that of slipping into melancholia and depression — Shusterman provides us with a more positive outlook, partly by refuting the suggestion of a necessary link between self-examination and depression, partly by distinguishing different modes of self-attentiveness, such as the neurotic and the intellectually curious mode, and partly by distinguishing different foci of self-reflection. It is in relation to the latter that Shusterman makes a case for the role and importance of somatic self-awareness.

In my response I would like to raise three issues. The first has to do with the relationship between self-knowledge, self-improvement, and self-transformation. The second has to do with the main object of Shusterman's discussion, the "self." Thirdly I would like to raise some issues regarding the educational implications of Shusterman's exercise.

Although the title of Shusterman's essay focuses on the term "self-knowledge," this is not the only concept that figures in the discussion. Shusterman also refers to self-examination, introspection, reflection, self-awareness, rumination, self-attentiveness, and meditation. Although these concepts all refer to a particular relationship of the self to the self, they do not all express a *knowledge* relationship. It could be argued that particularly at the meditation end of the spectrum, we do not end up with more or better knowledge of ourselves, but first and foremost with a different *relationship* to ourselves (which may explain the positive effects of meditation listed by Shusterman). The position of *self-knowledge* is different from this. Self-knowledge, it seems to me, is hardly ever an end in itself, but almost always a means to something else. This is already the case for Socrates who, in his dialogue with Alcibiades, sees the purpose of self-knowledge in relation to becoming a better politician. As Shusterman shows, Socrates is not the only one who emphasizes the connection between self-knowledge and self-improvement, although he is one of the few to link self-knowledge to the domain of politics. Self-improvement is also an important concern for such different philosophers as Immanuel Kant, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Halfway through the essay, it also seems an important concern for Shusterman himself when he states that he wishes to defend the value of self-reflection against overly negative readings of its implications, by recognizing, "with Socrates, that any viable program of self-cultivation and transformation needs to start with some grasp of what one is." I am, however, not sure to what extent this concern is still central in the final section

of the essay, where there seems to be a shift away from self-knowledge to self-awareness.

The question this raises is whether self-knowledge should be seen as a *necessary* condition for self-transformation and change, or whether there are other relationships of the self to the self that can bring this about. At this point I just wish to mention Michel Foucault who, in my view, is clearly the odd one out in Shusterman's overview, since for Foucault, as Shusterman writes, "*self-transformation* is the guiding goal of the philosophical life: rather than self-knowledge." Foucault argues that in the development of Western philosophy there has been a reversal of "care of the self" and "knowledge of the self" to the extent that "know yourself" has actually *obscured* "take care of yourself."¹ Foucault thus indicates a road to transformation that is explicitly *not* based on self-knowledge. Depending on where Shusterman wishes to take his argument for self-transformation there may, therefore, be a potentially productive connection with Foucault's ideas, albeit that for Foucault the "critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond" has a more explicitly *political* character than what I read in Shusterman.² This brings me to my second point.

The idea of self-knowledge assumes that there is such a thing as a self that can become the object of knowledge and attention. Shusterman shows that the history of Western philosophy has generated many different answers to the question of what the self "is," ranging from soul, mind, and experience, to the body or, as Shusterman puts it, "our somatic self." There are, therefore, not only questions about how we can know the self or become attentive to it; there are also important philosophical questions about what actually constitutes the self. Although Shusterman covers an admirably wide range of views about the self, there is one approach that I would like to add to the list in order to explore how it might expand our understanding of self-knowledge.

While reading Shusterman's essay a phrase kept returning to my head, a phrase from Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics*, a study of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In the book Bauman gives one of the most succinct summaries of Levinas's philosophy when he writes that for Levinas "responsibility is the first of reality of the self."³ It is important to see that the responsibility Levinas is talking about is *not* a responsibility that we can take upon ourselves. For Levinas it is the "being-made-responsible" by another individual that constitutes me as a self. For Levinas the self does not come *before* responsibility; rather responsibility comes *before* the self. Levinas explains that responsibility is not "a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship."⁴ Such a view only would make sense "if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself."⁵ Responsibility, however, is a "structure" that in no way resembles "the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object."⁶ Levinas does therefore not so much offer us a new *theory* of subjectivity but rather something that I have elsewhere called an *ethics* of subjectivity, an ethics of the self.⁷

Levinas emphasizes that subjectivity-as-responsibility is *not* a different way of being, because "being otherwise is still being."⁸ For Levinas the question of the self

requires us to go “beyond essence” to a “mode” that is *otherwise than being*. Going beyond essence brings one to a place — or better a non-place, a “null-site”⁹ — where the first question is not that of the being of the self, but that of “my *right to be*.”¹⁰ Levinas’s point here is that it is only in the “crisis of the being of a being,” in the *interruption* of its being, that the uniqueness of the self first acquires meaning.¹¹ This interruption is the relationship of responsibility as “being-in-question.”¹² It is this being-in-question, it is the “assignation to answer without evasions” which “assigns the self to be a self.”¹³ This is why Levinas writes that the self is precisely the “not-being-able-to-slip-away-from an assignation,” an assignation that does not aim at any generality, because it is “I and no one else” who is a hostage. The self, therefore, “does not coincide with the identifying of truth, is not statable in terms of consciousness, discourse and intentionality.”¹⁴ While the self can appear in an indirect language, under a proper name, as an entity, it still remains a “no one, clothed with purely borrowed being, which masks its nameless singularity by conferring on it a role.” Against this background Levinas draws the remarkable conclusion that the self is not a being. The self is “beyond the normal play of action and passion in which the identity of a being is maintained, in which it *is*.”¹⁵ Or, as Alfonso Lingis has put it: “(T)he self cannot be conceived as an entity. It has dropped out of being.”¹⁶

The idea that the self is not a being, that it is not a substance, resonates with the Buddhist denial of “the ultimate reality of a substantial, autonomous, full-owned individual self.” But whereas the Buddhist critique of the self-as-substance leads us to the discovery of an assemblage of hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, bones, marrow, and so on, Levinas’s critique leads us to an understanding of the self as *relationship* and, more specifically, to the self as a relationship of responsibility. It leads us, in other words, to *the discovery of the other in the self*. Even if Levinas is not right — and I do not have the space here to argue for the plausibility of his ideas — he does at least add some important questions to our understanding of the self by suggesting that we should understand the self as a relationship of responsibility that is not initiated by the self but that comes to us from the outside in the form of an interruption of our being. Like Foucault, Levinas thus questions the primacy of self-knowledge, but whereas for Foucault the care of the self that precedes knowledge of the self can still be understood “egologically,” as an “obsession” of the self with itself, Levinas indicates that there is first of all the care for the *other* that needs to be attended to in order for the self to be(come) a self. I do not think that the upshot of Levinas’s line of thinking is that there is no longer a place for self-knowledge. Levinas does question the *primacy* of self-knowledge, but not self-knowledge as such. He does help us to see, however, that any reflection of the self on the self that does not take the ethical relationship with the other into consideration, fails to appreciate what makes the self into a self.

This brings me to my final point: the question of education. Shusterman writes relatively little about the educational implications of his argument, although he does acknowledge that the question of pedagogy and the idea of self-knowledge as a learning process are important “themes” in the history of the philosophy of self-

knowledge. I do not know whether Shusterman would advocate meditation in classrooms or would argue that self-knowledge should become part of the curriculum. In a sense this is not what really matters. For me the more important question is whether education should ultimately be an *affirmation of the self* or whether it should be an *interruption of the self*, an interruption of the being or the “sovereignty” of the self. I am inclined to emphasize the importance of the latter.¹⁷ This is not because I believe that the self is an illusion, but because I believe, with Levinas, that the self should always be understood in relation to the other, and more specifically in terms of an ethical relation to the other. The critical question, therefore, is whether the road to self-knowledge will allow for the discovery of the other in the self. It is here that I see an enormously important task and responsibility for education.

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1. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
 2. Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 49.
 3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
 4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1985), 96.
 5. Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 107.
 6. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96–7.
 7. Gert Biesta, “Pedagogy with Empty Hands,” in *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason*, ed. Denise Egéa-Kuehne (London: Routledge, 2007).
 8. Levinas, “Substitution,” 100.
 9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 8.
 10. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in Hand, ed., *Levinas Reader*, 86 (emphasis added).
 11. Levinas, “*Otherwise than Being*,” 13.
 12. *Ibid.*, 111.
 13. Levinas, “Substitution,” 116.
 14. *Ibid.*, 96.
 15. *Ibid.*, 104.
 16. Alphonso Lingis, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, xxxi.
 17. See Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).