

## Thinking through the Body: Yoga, Philosophy, and Physical Education

NATALIE HELBERG  
CRESSIDA J. HEYES  
JACLYN ROHEL  
*University of Alberta*

*Abstract:* Philosophers sometimes hope that our discipline will be transformative for students, perhaps especially when we teach so-called philosophy of the body. To that end, this article describes an experimental upper-level undergraduate course cross-listed between Philosophy and Physical Education, entitled “Thinking Through the Body: Philosophy and Yoga.” Drawing on the perspectives of professor and students, we show how a somatic practice (here, hatha yoga) and reading texts (here, primarily contemporary phenomenology) can be integrated in teaching and learning. We suggest that the course raised questions about the ethics of evaluation as well as about the split between theory and practice, which have larger pedagogical implications.

How could philosophy redeem the deepest promise of the discipline to offer an education in which all aspects of the student—intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical—are brought to bear on learning and self-development? This grand—even grandiose—question has been asked in various forms by philosophers from Socrates to Henry David Thoreau to Edmund Husserl to Martha Nussbaum. It also finds a political register in critiques of the discipline as it is institutionalized in contemporary universities; feminist, postcolonial, critical race, queer, interdisciplinary, and many “continental” thinkers (who are often—and not coincidentally—marginally positioned with regard to Philosophy departments) have all argued that mainstream philosophy polices its own boundaries in ways tacitly and overtly designed to maintain a narrowness of perspective and constituency that precludes any deeply self-critical analysis of its own investments, partiality, or pedagogical limitations.<sup>1</sup> Ask most faculty at most universities to discuss together their vision for educating the whole person, or for making philosophy self- and socially transformative, and few will have a ready model.

And yet Philosophy, more than many disciplines, feels to many students as if it has a potential that extends beyond the memorization of facts, beyond transferable skill acquisition, and so beyond preparation for successful entry into a career or the capitalist economy. It can feel (perhaps only at some moments, or only in some courses) like a space into which students enter in order to find things out about themselves, to be transformed by the activity of thought, or to be (dare we say) empowered. The course this paper discusses, then, takes place against the backdrop of this discipline, and this hope. It also takes a very specific form that emerges from one teacher's specific experience and concomitant concerns. Cressida Heyes, the professor who initiated the course, would spend her days teaching philosophy of the body to eager, smart students who rarely referenced any of their own physical (dis)abilities, likes and dislikes, anxieties, neuroses, or desires. It seemed as though they were reading cultural critic Susan Bordo from the head up, her insights into the disciplining of the contemporary body gaining an intellectual purchase that was only wheel-spinning—gaining knowledge, but, as Bordo herself points out, not a “usable knowledge” (Bordo 1993: 104). The professor's evenings, on the other hand, were spent taking yoga classes, and, eventually, teaching them. She was continually amazed by how much people could learn about themselves through physical movement—often including things they would not have been able to approach via a theoretical undertaking. The gap between theory and practice (whatever those terms might mean) came to have huge pedagogical significance for her. Developing a philosophy of the body course cross-listed between Philosophy and Physical Education aimed to make something of the idea that movement could be philosophical, and that philosophy could be learned through movement, using the disciplines of *yoga* and contemporary phenomenology as its touchstones.

This experiment thus represented a double novelty. In most forms of Westernized yoga one does poses (*asana*) and more poses; rarely will a teacher pause to explain yoga's history of ideas or ask students to have a conversation about what they are doing. Maybe one learns meditation techniques and practices meditation, occasionally asking questions about one's experience, but mostly just doing it, repetitively and without inquiring into the theory that motivated the practice. In fact, some yogis strongly discourage students from asking theoretical questions; guru K. Pattabhi Jois is famous for his saying that yoga is “99% practice, 1% theory.”<sup>2</sup> Yoga teachers love to quote this line to scholars: the philosopher is perhaps uniquely vulnerable to the charge of “thinking too much” or “being all in his head.” For a philosopher, however, the casual Western erasure of the long and complex textual and scholarly traditions of yoga (*jñāna* yoga, in Sanskrit) can be le-

gitimately troubling, and one might come to see a kind of ethnocentric arrogance in the appropriation of the “mindlessly” physical from a very rich Eastern wisdom tradition that has an oral and written lineage.<sup>3</sup> A “thinking” practitioner may also quickly see that students of yoga sometimes use the physical practice against itself—perhaps as another opportunity for self-criticism or one-upmanship, or to entrench less-than-optimal physical and mental habits. Even in Physical Education courses taught at the university level there is typically a gap between the “theoretical” material of, for example, kinesiology, and physical activity courses that teach sporting skill-sets. It is more commonly *outside* higher education—in some corners of the martial arts world, in the practice of the Feldenkrais method, or with yoga teachers who take the richness of the tradition more seriously, for example—that there is real integration of mental activity and physical movement.<sup>4</sup>

More motivating for this course, though, was the exclusion of the body from philosophy. What is “doing philosophy”? Many people have opinions, both reactionary and revolutionary, about, for example, “the canon” and who gets to be counted as a “canonical” figure, how the canon should be re-read, who might be added, or why we might throw the idea away altogether. That is, we seem to disagree in familiar ways about the *content* of philosophy, while agreeing in deeply unquestioned ways about the methods we apply to that content. That’s an exaggeration, of course. Some teachers favor pedagogies that invite students’ critical conversation on topical issues, while others are committed to lecturing about the minutiae of classic books. But the idea that philosophy centers exclusively on texts—and thereby on reading and writing and talking—is largely taken for granted. When we told colleagues and peers that we wanted to teach and learn *asana* for credit, their responses were predictably perplexed. Although a lot of people could see that Socrates’ endorsement of athletics as necessary to the development of the virtuous citizen might be relevant, or agreed with the proposition that “the body” is neglected in higher education in a variety of ways, few could imagine in detail how such a course might proceed in practice.<sup>5</sup> Standing between these two institutionalized camps, and between practices and theories, the course was designed as an experiment in seeing how a physical undertaking might lead students to theorize differently, and vice versa.

Following the first instantiation of “Thinking Through the Body,” a small group of participants (professor and students) met to talk about the experience of the course, its implications for our larger aspirations for philosophy and for education in general, about how it had provoked or transformed us, and about how it might do so differently for future students. The writing of this paper has been undertaken collaboratively using some of the same insights and methods that the course itself

aimed to develop (free-writing without the oversight of a hostile inner critic, for example), and can, in that sense, be considered a part of the course itself rather than only a description of it. Our work here, then, is a joint attempt to explain, first, how the course functioned so that it can serve as a model for others interested in similar attempts at curriculum transformation. Second, we draw attention to some of the contentious aspects of the course. In section 2, “Evaluation,” we examine the challenges of evaluating and being evaluated in a course that uses both contemplative methods and somatic practices, suggesting that although both writing and movement can be evaluated using consistent and reasoned principles, there is a tension for both evaluator and evaluated between the contemplative goal of detaching from judgment and the institutional demand that students be assessed on their merits and relative to each other. In section 3 we look more closely at the split between theory and practice (or among different forms of knowledge) that the course both reified and aspired to rethink. We suggest that the course’s disconnection from larger practice traditions and its institutional location created tensions between developing and exploiting practices of thought, and observing or prescinding from thought; that it brought to the fore an interesting counterpoint between learning as the accumulation of knowledge, and learning as repetition; that it rendered the traditional classroom more embodied and drew students’ attention to their built environment and their own bodies’ relation to space; and that it made the abstract ideas of philosophical texts more real and invited deeper critique and analysis of their phenomenological claims in light of students’ own lived experience. We end with a brief look at the prospect of teaching the course again in a more fully integrated way, and a plea for more such pedagogical projects as a part of philosophy’s mission.

### *1: Setting Up the Class*

The course was a final year undergraduate seminar and was titled “Thinking Through the Body.” As the syllabus explained:

This new interdisciplinary (Philosophy/Physical Education and Recreation) course will bring together philosophy of the body and yoga—a somatic practice with its own philosophical bases. Educators often talk of healing the mind/body split in contemporary western cultures, which is often taken to have a variety of negative intellectual, physical, and political consequences. Yet few teachers in higher education have undertaken interdisciplinary projects that make good on this aspiration: philosophy of the body is typically taught in a conventional classroom setting, without experience of physical activity or even reference to embodied practices, while most activity courses in physical education faculties do not undertake challenging phenomenological reflection.

This course is thus an innovative venture bringing together theory and practice, mind and body, while refusing the artificial splits between the two.

One 90 minute class per week will consist of a yoga practice to include meditation techniques, breathing (pranayama), and postures (asana). This will be taught using mindfulness techniques and contemplative pedagogy to invite critical reflection on proprioceptive and kinaesthetic experience. The second 90 minutes of weekly contact will consist of a meditation practice and classroom discussion of texts as they relate to practice. The literature for the course will focus on: phenomenological accounts of physical activity and lived experience, philosophical discussion of the practice of yoga in the west, critical comparative analysis of the psychological, philosophical, and phenomenological bases of different exercise and movement modalities, and the politics of bodily aesthetics.<sup>6</sup>

Organizing the space of the course presented dilemmas: for some of the time we would need a studio space with yoga props suitable for a group of sixteen to practice. For some of the time we would need a space where everyone could sit in reasonable comfort and discuss ideas, including reading and writing and perhaps listening to a teacher or looking at a whiteboard. Although the professor was reluctant to divide the twice-weekly course so starkly into “theory” and “practice,” or “Philosophy” and “Physical Education,” in the end there seemed no better alternative than to have the Tuesday class in a typical neon-lit tables-and-chairs room in a humanities building, and the Thursday class in a dance studio with wood floors, a wall of mirrors, and several cupboards full of equipment in the Physical Education facility. As we’ll discuss, this promoted an evolving, uneasy split between the different parts of the class, which was only slightly mitigated by introducing the odd physical activity on Tuesdays (as well as a regular ten minute sitting meditation), and occasional overt connections to the texts on Thursdays. By and large, the weeks proceeded in a predictable way: on Tuesday we briefly meditated (a very simple Buddhist practice involving watching the breath), then launched into discussion of an article or section of a book, peppered with short periods of lecturing or taking questions. On Thursday we sat in silence waiting for the start of practice, when we learned a simple *asana* sequence loosely based on parts of the Ashtanga-vinyasa primary series (see Swenson 1999) but taught in a slower, Iyengar-influenced way, using props (see Iyengar 2001). The practice started with pranayama (*ujjayi* breathing—a controlled deep breathing technique sounding the breath in the throat—and occasionally a couple of other techniques such as single-nostril breathing) and ended with *savasana* (relaxation lying in the supine corpse pose).

The course’s assignments were correspondingly varied. Students were expected to submit a short research report (20 percent), maintain

a course journal (30 percent) and prepare for a practice assessment (30 percent). The balance of the grade (20 percent) reflected attendance and participation. The small research assignment required students to scout out and summarize potential literature for the course. In a 1000 word report, they were asked to describe why the material might enhance the course and how they might go about teaching it. Each student was also required to keep a journal for the duration of the course, using it to summarize weekly readings, take notes on the Thursday practice sessions, and most importantly, to reflect on their private practice as well as on the experience of taking the course in general, recording any critical thoughts, musings, or epiphanies that arose as it evolved. The journals—with which students synthesized ideas drawn from theoretical texts, ideas drawn from classroom discussions based on these texts, as well as their own personal experience with yoga and meditative sitting—functioned as a place where theoretical and practical facets of the class merged. Given that the journal assignment was a writing assignment that involved, for the most part, reflecting on and synthesizing texts, it was well suited to the skills humanities courses typically require. The course's intrepid quality, then, had much to do with the explicitly physical course requirements. These were its truly pioneering aspects, and served to transform the conventional writing exercises and discussions. The practice assessment was divided into two components: students were evaluated on an awareness exercise they developed for themselves and then were required to teach to the class, and on their ability to move independently through a sequence of *asana*.

This kind of practice (which in its Ashtanga-vinyasa variant is called “Mysore” practice) is done at the student’s own pace without instruction from the front of the room (and without an instructor’s body to follow), with the teacher circulating. Students were required to memorize the poses and the order of the poses, but more significantly they were required to implant the practice in the memory of the body—becoming habituated to knowing-how to move, rather than knowing-that a certain pose takes a certain form. The students were told throughout the course (and in the syllabus) that the last practice class would be undertaken as an independent practice. It was also, however, to be a “practice evaluation,” where individual students would be marked. The criteria for this grade did not include physical prowess per se, although it was clear that the athletic students who were more experienced with aware movement (especially those with yoga or dance backgrounds) were able to assimilate the poses and grasp the kinetics of the practice more quickly. Students were instead evaluated on the basis of their embodied knowledge of the poses, their ability to move effectively between them, to understand which variation of each

pose was most appropriate to their physical ability, to self-correct, to construct a sequenced practice appropriate to the time available, and to challenge themselves without over-reaching.

## 2: *Evaluation*

The professor was obliged to evaluate all students taking the course for credit on the full range of skills the course intended to teach. Early on in planning she noticed an interesting asymmetry in her attitudes toward evaluating theoretical, humanistic work, and physical activity. She anticipated (correctly, as it turned out) a diversity of bodies in the classroom and that some students would be very challenged by yoga poses that others would find effortless. There would also be, as ever, diversity in students' levels of reading comprehension, writing skills, and ability to parse complex ideas. The class was final-year undergraduate level and concomitantly high expectations were implicit for both philosophical and physical skill-sets. Yet the professor was initially unwilling to judge students negatively for their inability to get into a shoulder-stand due to chronically tight shoulders and weak core muscles, for example, while habituated to (even if not happy about) giving students low grades for written assignments (even when it's clear that given their prior education and experience they could not have done any better). This was partly due to the initial difficulty of designing clearly articulated and reasonable criteria that could be applied to evaluating a yoga practice—but then, individual practice evaluation is not completely alien to yoga, so this was clearly due to lack of imagination and ethical reluctance on the part of the professor, rather than the innate impossibility of evaluation.<sup>7</sup> With hindsight, any reluctance to evaluate yoga came less from technical difficulties or fundamental differences between evaluating postures and evaluating writing, and more from the professor's experience teaching philosophy in a thoroughly institutionalized context, in which progress through the degree ranks, grading, justifying grades, setting up evaluative criteria, and, above all, relentlessly applying these criteria to individual students was the norm. Teaching yoga, by contrast, usually happens outside formal educational contexts, where adult learners come to stretch and strengthen their tired bodies and rest their busy minds. In this world the teacher stresses the avoidance of judgment, both as her own pedagogical strategy, and as an integral part of the practice she is teaching.

Evaluation also proved to be a persistent source of unease for students taking the course for credit. It seemed to go against the spirit with which yoga is typically undertaken—i.e., that one should accept one's physical integrity, and work from and with one's own capacities



without constantly judging these capacities as deficient. The home practice was for this reason unlike a typical yoga practice, the aim of which is not success in the sense that success is commonly (and perhaps perversely) understood in the classroom: a good mark. It was difficult to forget that one was practicing at least partly for the reason that *not to practice* would amount to effective self-handicapping during the practice evaluation. This altered the nature of the practice. To cite just one example, often, while practicing alone, Natalie would suddenly find herself in the middle of a worry concerning the evaluation—“What if I forget this nuance of the posture, or forget this whole posture in the sequence, or forget the sequence”—or in other words, she would suddenly realize that her concentration, a pivotal part of the practice, had buckled and strayed. Self-consciousness and nervousness on the part of students under the evaluator’s gaze had the potential to effect similar disruption.

The practice evaluation thus stimulated a range of affect, from anxiety, to unease, to intrigued anticipation, even exhilaration. For example, one student, Sarah, who expressed confidence when it came to the written course requirements, was strangely diffident about her physical practice: as an Arts student she was sure her writing would come along if she persisted with it, accustomed as she was to getting words down on the page to meet specific deadlines. When it came to yoga, however, she feared that for all her effort she might nonetheless fail. For Natalie the practice evaluation was akin to an unveiling: the home practice was somewhat personalized (students omitted too-challenging *asana*, selected appropriate variations of poses, and made up a coherent sequence to fit the time allotted), and, because Thursday’s sequences were guided by the instructor, unexhibited. What was particularly nerve-wracking about the independent practice, then, was that it involved bringing out into the public for display, scrutiny, and evaluation what had until then existed privately.

On the other hand, Jackie, who audited the course, recalls entering the gymnasium on the morning of the evaluated practice with a combination of excitement and relief: she looked forward to doing her practice in the company of her fellow students, and she was able to concentrate on her practice, rather than on the difficulties she sometimes experienced with *ardha chandrasana* (a standing balance pose), for example.<sup>8</sup> Without the emotional baggage of a grade, the class became more centrally about learning for its own sake. Kara, who took the course for credit, also looked forward to practicing Mysore-style; she was eager to move through her yoga sequence in class without the instructor’s direction, as she conceived of the opportunity as a pivotal step along a path of personally directed growth. The instructor’s feedback, moreover, as she saw it, could only empower her: it would function



to allay the worry that she had incorporated bad habits into her home-styled practice. In short, any advice would only allow her to continue to develop her practice with confidence. Matt had yet another relation to evaluation. Sometime after the course ended, he commented that he had not been anxious or apprehensive about being assessed. PHIL 488 was, for him, similar to a senior-level gym class in high school, in the sense that everyone in the class wanted to be there, and came to have fun in an environment where others participating were motivated to engage. The very desire to be in the course mitigated preoccupations with achievement and grades, and shifted the emphasis from evaluation to enjoyment. The course also had other pleasures. Morning meditation was a joy, a beautiful silence, space, and rest. We laughed together during class discussions, sometimes on topic, sometimes off, and gave voice to our disquiet, allaying it with the thought that, in it, we were not alone, but always among others. During the practice sessions the joy experienced was more private, and more silent. This was the joy of movement and physicality, the joy of finding a posture you could do, or of staying with one you couldn't, the ache and the stretch, and satisfaction and amazement of finding, one day, that you *could do* a posture, or a postural variation, that you previously could not.

If the course challenged the students in a peculiar way—by asking them to refrain from judging themselves while nevertheless being judged—it also provided them with the tools needed to negotiate their unease. During meditation students learned not only to focus on the breath and to distend awareness, spreading it throughout the body, but to witness the thoughts that occurred to them without engaging in them. They learned to merely watch, to release. One possible response, then, to the agitated state of consciousness brought on by either the presence of an evaluator or, less tangibly, an anticipated evaluation, is, as one student, Navid, put it, to treat the institutionally coerced practices of evaluation as another opportunity to watch one's own reactions, and to move towards detachment. In this sense, then, the course content in conjunction with institutional constraints—namely, the fact that students needed to be given a letter grade—produced the rare and, if seized upon, invaluable, opportunity for students to alter their relation to evaluation itself.

Of course, altering one's relationship to evaluation is not a matter of sheer intention, and success in this regard can in no straightforward way be attributed to forceful application of the will. Developing a witness consciousness—or more specifically, learning to remain a witness rather than a participant in one's thoughts for an extended period of time—takes time, where time takes the form of repeated practice. Thirteen weeks of meditation was not enough to enable students to gain a reconfigured relation to academic assessment. Nevertheless, at least a

handful of students have affirmed that they persist with their meditative practice even now that the class has ended; it is not unlikely that they might go on to encounter and respond to future evaluations in alternative, more salutary ways, even if they were unable to do so during the running time of the course (belated understanding being, after all, more common than not in a setting that favors high-speed instruction). Further redemption lies in the fact that while typically students leave a course with new information, new theoretical acquaintances, new tools for thought, or new skills, participants in this course were also subject to a more thoroughgoing form of transformation, a process more akin to restructuring than to addition or acquisition. While meditation is, in a sense, a form of skilled knowledge, students were quick to discover that it should not be thought of exclusively as one more thing a person is able to do (and in this way is unlike, say, knowing how to whistle), but rather alters a person at the level of approach. Its effects, then, are pervasive and not parochial—meditation affects *how* you do, behave, respond, and so on. Knowing how to whistle does not alter how you pick up a kettle, perform, write or read something; meditation, which fosters mindful awareness and focus, does. It is likely that most students experienced these effects to some degree, regardless of whether this experience was reflected in the way that they approached the practice assessment.

### *3: Theory and Practice*

Still, the professor speculated that the students might approach the more theoretical, textual-based discussions as the real philosophical substance of the course; that they might think of the practice as a mere opportunity to apply or enact certain skills; or take the *asana* as the “raw” material that they could then use as ingredients for the textual cooking class. Moreover, the demand to write, to capture their experience in journal entries that would be graded, placed the students in a situation that would inevitably alter the form of attention they brought to their practice: they needed, in however subtle a way, to come into practice “looking for material.” Several students commented that thoughts like “maybe I could write about that” tended to shape their experience of practice. And while cultivating awareness by definition involves noticing things about yourself, the students in this class were additionally vulnerable to a certain pressure to remember and interpret their experience. Here, then, is a contradiction embedded in the course: the journal, like the course in general, demanded that students, first, have thoughts about their practice and, second, put these thoughts to use, while immersion in meditative practice is geared to observing

and detaching from our typical habits of mind. Laura captures these tensions in a perspicuous journal entry:

A marked tension exists between the demand that the mind be still and emptied—or, at least, that it not attach to thoughts—and the academic demand to produce. Given that my meditation is performed within an academic context, how is this tension to be avoided and what effect does it have on my ability to move forward with contemplative practice? Meditative practice, it seems, is sabotaged before it begins. How am I to loosen my grip on thoughts, allow them to float past, while aware that I must wrench useful reflections from this experience of letting go? *How*, when productivity is demanded against a background of the looming spectre of grading? (Laura)

Such tensions were the unfortunate result of the fact that the techniques students were engaging with were largely deracinated, lifted from the larger spiritual and philosophical context in which they have meaning. A whole theory of mind, for example, had to be pared away for the purposes of the course (see Whicher 1998, esp. 89–149). In part because it was taught in a secular university without the overt support of a *sangha* (spiritual community) or *guru* (spiritual teacher), students also had ample opportunity to see the practices they learned as opportunities to reinforce many of the old lessons that higher education at its worst conveys: be critical of yourself and others, compete for scarce grades, maintain a façade of polished confidence, don't take risks, act enthusiastic and don't voice your discontent, and so on.

In general, we can say that the weekly readings and class-based discussions gave students a way to contextualize what they were doing on mats on a gymnasium floor. The weekly *asanas* provided a forum for the students' continual engagement with themes that they had discussed in the classroom; it allowed them to return to these themes and issues multiple times over. By introducing these two mutually supporting and informing components, the course's pedagogical model strayed somewhat from the one that characterizes traditional philosophy courses. On the one hand, it retained a cumulative orientation towards study—just as the students read and discussed the texts in sequence, they learned the *asana* poses in sequence and thereby worked towards a cumulative practice. On the other hand, however, the practice sessions permitted, and encouraged, a form of repetition that fostered new and varied insights into the course material throughout the term.

To be more specific, the course's components were complementary in several respects:

- i. On one level, the cultivation of a mindful somatic practice encouraged the students to approach the texts, as well as their classroom experience, as embodied subjects. It was evident that the influence of *asana* and *pranayama* exercises on the level of students' body-focused attention extended even into Tuesday's more conventional classroom.

Kara recalls observing that her peers became increasingly attentive to their seated postures throughout the course, for example. She noticed that her own positive or negative reactions to claims and comments made by her peers during classroom discussions were displayed by her body: she would find herself, for example, crossing her arms and tipping back in her chair when she strongly disagreed. Occasionally the professor also invited the students to participate in movement exercises during discussion. For example, in practicing moving in the ways Iris Marion Young describes as stereotypically gendered in her classic article “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” (Young 2005), students and professor walked and jumped around the whole classroom space, which alerted several class members to the ways they tended to move straight to their self-designated seat or space in the room and resist leaving it (for unconscious reasons of spatial security, perhaps).

ii. The students’ experiences of *asana* and *pranayama* provided them with the opportunity to cultivate a uniquely informed perspective from which they could interpret and critique a body of literature that is susceptible to being studied in the absence of such exercises. As the course progressed, and as students learned to engage in their own mindful somatic practice, students became more able to reflect on their embodied experience and to bring it directly to bear on textual discussions. For example, Megan commented that she felt particularly comfortable doing yoga (as opposed even to other feminine-coded physical activities such as dance or figure-skating) because the space of the individual’s practice is circumscribed by the mat. Young, she reminded us, draws our attention to Erikson’s famous psychology experiments that conclude that girls’ play tends to focus on enclosed, inside spaces, while boys’ play is oriented around space that is open and outwardly directed. Rejecting his psychoanalytic explanation, Young instead suggests that this is a reflection and reification of the ways girls and women (are socialized to) live their bodies in space, as existentially enclosed (Young 2005: 39–42). Thus yoga is perhaps feminized in the west not only because many more women than men do it and teach it, or because it is perceived as gentle, safe, and physically undemanding etc., but because of a more subtle gendered relation to spatiality entailed by its practice. The question, then, is whether yoga can contribute to a project of liberating women from the learned tendency to keep their bodies close and their reach short, timidly refusing the allure of the “yonder,” as Young describes it (following Merleau-Ponty). Megan’s insight raised the specter of a practice that might contribute to women’s embodied subjection by encouraging a circumscribed and conservative approach to movement in space, its “comfortableness” notwithstanding; on the other hand, encouraging women to develop strength and

flexibility, and to explore the subtle limits of their physical capacities from a spatial zone that is psychologically familiar and safe might have more transformative meaning for those women more firmly lodged in Young's phenomenological model.

iii. Classroom discussions also provided a theoretical base that, in conjunction with students' personal practices, could enable them to build their understanding of key themes and issues. For instance, though some students initially considered themselves to have had a sound understanding of the philosophical themes and theories they formally studied in the classroom, they claim to have achieved a whole new level of clarity and understanding when they interacted with the themes on mats in the gymnasium. To give philosophical substance to this point it is useful to précis one of these themes, "corporeal absence," as it appears in some of the course literature.

The class read chapters of Drew Leder's phenomenological study *The Absent Body*, which delves into the highly paradoxical nature of bodily presence. The body, he notes, is "rarely the thematic object of experience" (Leder 1990: 1), but rather tends to recede from it; corporeal presence, then, is essentially characterized by absence, where absence nonetheless implies being. This is because the body is, so to speak, lived as absent, as away from itself: the lived body, or, as Leder says, "the ecstatic" body, by its very nature, projects outward from the place it stands (*ek* meaning "out" and *stasis* meaning "to stand"). We perceive *from* the body, depending on various cues, conditions and sensations in the body, of which we are generally unaware, in order to perceive the object of our focus (the "to"):

When I gaze at a landscape I dwell most fully in my eyes. Yet this is only possible because my back muscles adjust my head into the proper position for viewing. My feet, my legs, my arms, all lend their support. My other perceptual senses flesh out the scene I witness with sound and warmth, even if my attention is centered on visual characteristics. My whole body provides the background that supports and enables the point of corporeal focus. (Leder 1990: 24)

The body is thus not merely a nullpoint—a single absent center around which the perceptual field is arrayed—but is rather "an organized field in which certain organs and abilities come to prominence while others recede" (Leder 1990: 24). The body as corporeal field, then, gives rise to a play of disappearances, or vacillates between "focal" and "background" disappearance. The former denotes the disappearance of organs which constitute the center point of a perceptual field (i.e., the eye does not see itself, and the hand, similarly, does not touch itself); the latter denotes the disappearance of bodily regions which recede precisely because they do not constitute such an origin, and so

are “relegated to a supportive role, involved in irrelevant movement, or simply put out of play” (26).

Note that “disappearance” is only one form of the more encompassing “absence.” In a chapter on problematic bodily experience, for example, Leder situates his discussion of absence (“awayness”) “within modes of self-presence” (Leder 1990: 70): “Dys-appearance” refers to those occasions during which the body presences, demanding direct and focal thematization, in a *dys* state—where *dys* connotes “bad,” “hard,” or “ill” (its Greek significations), as well as “away” or “apart” (according to its Latin origin). The painful body, for example, hauls us out of the world and monopolizes our attention. More than this, because pain imposes itself against our will, threatening our identities in curtailing the activities and goals through which these are defined, the painful body is experienced as foreign, as separate and opposed to the self. Leder argues that, contrary to other critiques, our bodily experience itself thereby supports and encourages the Cartesian (dualist) paradigm that dominates our culture. Without endorsing dualism, he attempts to account for its pervasiveness in our lived experience; only in giving such an explanation, he maintains, can the Cartesian grip be broken, while its experiential truths are nonetheless reclaimed (3).

One student had prior knowledge of Leder’s theory of “corporeal absence.” Reflecting upon her initial attempts to perfect the downward dog, however, she notes that her physical practice actually allowed her to achieve a somewhat more intense, personal understanding of the phenomenon:

During my initial attempts at the downward dog [a standing forward-bending pose], I attended most to my feet and to my calves: I attended to my feet when I put my head down to take a quick peek back, thereby ensuring that they looked to be doing what they were supposed to be doing; I attended to my calves when they warmed and tingled with a somewhat disquieting and attention-calling tension. My hips, on the other hand, fully receded from my attention: not only were they outside of my visual field, but they also resisted calling themselves forth to my attention because, unlike my calves, they did not seethe with pain or tension. I had forgotten that they were there, and that they too could be engaged. Upon following our professor’s suggestion to engage our hips by lifting them up and outward, I became fully able to ground my feet into the mat, and I felt a healthy sensation run from my hips down to my heels. This new insight permitted me to play with the pose’s possibilities and subtle variations. It signified the first point in the course that my movements did not mimic those of the professor or those surrounding me. The stark contrast between my two very different attempts at downward dog reminded me of Leder’s account of corporeal absence, and his correlative notions of dis-appearance and dys-appearance. I not only understood, but I also experienced, the ways in which we are disposed to attend to certain bodily parts and capacities at certain times, and I learned to build this understanding into my practice. (Jackie)

The classroom discussions on absence gave Jackie the tools with which she was able to parse her embodied experience, and in parsing her experience this way, she retrieved corporeal absence from a realm of abstraction. In contrast, Natalie noted that even other phenomenology courses are often taught solely by inviting students to *imagine* perception (“the text uses the example of looking at a tree”) rather than by actually perceiving (“let’s step outside and look at that tree, as the author describes”), and that the addition of experiential learning to phenomenology in particular has the potential to make its lessons more vivid and true to its intended method.

iv. Finally, students also report that classroom discussions—the theories, concepts, and ideas these discussions appropriated, developed, and generated—helped orient or guide their practice. To appeal to a by now familiar notion, Natalie’s approach to the yoga postures was, for instance, altered substantially in view of her theoretical acquaintance with “corporeal absence:” she was amazed the day she realized that she could attend to her back arm in *virabhadrasana II* (a standing pose in which both arms reach out to the side at shoulder height) without actually having it in her visual field. This moment was anticipated by one of Cressida’s comments during practice, when she flagged students’ tendencies to let their unseen arms go limp behind them; in fact, the back of the body in general as well as whatever body parts are either not actively involved in the pose, or are out of the visual field, tend to be forgotten by students in ways Leder helps to explain. Bodily disappearance remained a concern throughout the term, as the instructor both explicitly and implicitly encouraged students to take up yoga as a practice of corporeal presence-ing. This is evidenced by the very nature of some of the awareness exercises. The following excerpt is from some early practice notes included in a student’s journal:

We started the class in meditation, doing some ujjayi breathing as well as an awareness practice. The awareness practice involved scanning our bodies to see which parts of the body were present, or alive for us, and which parts we didn’t have experiential access to. [We attended] to the area just above the lip, over which the air must traverse in entering the body, and over which it again passes once it has been used and released. We paid attention to the tops of our heads. We continued the scan, moving lower through the body. I noticed I was acutely aware of my lower body, from my feet to my waist; my legs felt tense in the pose. My shoulder blades were equally distinct: two smooth, oblong stones jutting from a river of mist; I could feel nothing where my back ought to have been, so I imagined a white vacancy. I found, during this exercise, that it was sometimes difficult to discern whether a body part was really being felt, or whether I was just imagining a body part to be felt and feeling it. (Natalie)

Students, then, were prompted to keep two sorts of questions before themselves: (a) did certain parts of their bodies tend to either fall out



of awareness, or simply seem to exist in that state, and, if so, which ones?, and (b) was it possible, through practice, to bring a greater proportion of their bodies—the elusive space between the shoulder blades, the top of the head, etc.—into awareness? Natalie was thus given an incentive to practice against corporeal absence, and later focused on “seeking out” her back arm. The day the physical experience of her back arm brought the meaning of extended corporeal awareness home to her—allowing her to retrospectively grasp the experiential meaning of that arm’s disappearance—moreover, was a crucial moment in her practice, such awareness being the root of her very ability to perform any of the *asanas*, or, as she would say now, to experience yoga at all. Thus we can say that for some students, success with regard to the course’s goals was contingent upon their ability to incorporate the theory into themselves in the most immediate sense, while also continually reflecting on it.

#### 4: *Limitations and Prospects*

Would it be possible to achieve a seamless fusion of the course’s components? Might tearing down the walls of the traditional philosophical classroom facilitate the students’ engagement in a philosophy of the body? Ideally, hosting the entire course in one neutral environment could motivate the students and the professor to leave their implicit and explicit associations at the door. Such an option may not always be feasible within an academic setting, however. The most likely alternative would see the whole course take place in a gymnasium, directly challenging the common (and phenomenologically and politically significant) assumptions that philosophy must take place in a classroom setting and that theorizing must be done while seated at a desk or table.<sup>9</sup> Classes could then require that students be positioned on a mat, surrounded by texts, discussion notes, yoga props, and other bodies. If students were to engage in discussion and critique while, for example, sitting in a meditative pose (with legs folded over one another, little back support, and their heads balancing atop their tall spines), they may have a greater potential to engage in self-awareness, and so be more disposed to recognize some of their bodily habits, capacities and limitations; they may also be less inclined to privilege intellectual knowledge over embodied knowledge, or vice versa.

Such a way of structuring the course would of course present challenges. Even if, for example, the whole class were to take place in a gymnasium, the professor would still have to determine how each class would operate. Would students be encouraged to arrive at each class prepared to discuss a certain philosophical theme or issue based on a set of readings? How could class discussion be fused with *asana*

and *pranayama* without diminishing the quality of one or the other? One option would be to begin class with *pranayama*, following it up with *asana* and then discussion (based both on a new set of readings and on students' embodied experience). The professor would then be obliged to consider whether to organize the *asana* practice and weekly readings so as to connect them directly (in however implicit a way). A potentially fruitful variation might call for readings, discussions and writing exercises to be revisited throughout the term, just as a cumulative *asana* practice permits a return to the same poses multiple times over.

Finally, what makes this way of doing philosophy a necessary complement to existing teaching methods and a legitimate contribution to broadening our conception of the discipline? The cross-listing of the course between Philosophy and Physical Education validated the dual emphases on textual and corporeal learning, but it may also have functioned to distance the course from the former, so that the physical aspect could be tolerated by faculty members who would otherwise have been skeptical of its place in the curriculum. Students didn't seem to share this skepticism: there was enormous interest in the course among Arts students (including Philosophy majors), but only one Physical Education major, a student in Kinesiology, was enrolled.<sup>10</sup> Thus there is a danger that the course might not survive as cross-listed, and hence might not survive at all. This article, then, is also a plea to philosophers in particular to create institutional and pedagogical spaces for this kind of course to flourish. We hope to have shown in some detail how sometimes what is learned by reading ideas transfers to embodied knowledge, and vice versa, in ways that enrich both. In many ways our discussion relies on a prior set of commitments—to the generic importance of critical reflection, self-knowledge, and enlarged perspective—that most philosophers, in theory, share. Contemplative practices of reading, writing, and sensing (as well as meditation *per se*) seem to improve students' comprehension, retention, and enjoyment of ideas in uncontroversially positive ways (DeLuca 2005), and “help us lead fuller lives” (Dustin and Ziegler 2007: ix). Philosophy of this kind may even have a contribution to make to students' health (Stock 2006: 1762–64), construed broadly to include their awareness of their own psychosomatic “self-organization” and their psychological capacity to deal with increasingly manic and inattentive environments. Student interest, should, we feel, also be worth something, and indicates in our opinions a real hunger for a philosophical education that is attentive to individual students' diverse needs, and promises self-exploration of a more personal kind. Clearly this course would be difficult for other teachers to replicate, premised as it is on a very specific instructional skill-set, but its pedagogy and its content enact Richard Shusterman's

repeated calls for a “somaesthetic” philosophy that is attentive to the relations between knowledge, aesthetic experience, and corporeality (e.g., 2006). Despite its challenges and limitations, we hope that it might open up a new avenue for practical collaboration between parts of the university, and parts of human life, that are too rarely brought together.

*Appendix A: Reading List*

## Required books:

- Iyengar, B. K. S., *Light on Yoga* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).  
 Leder, Drew, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

## Recommended book:

- Jeremijenko, Valerie, ed., *How We Live Our Yoga: Personal Stories* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).

## Articles:

- DeLuca, Geraldine, "Headstands, Writing and the Rhetoric of Radical Self-Acceptance," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Living* 11 (2005): 27–41.
- Kaplan, Laura Duhan, "Physical Education for Domination and Emancipation: A Foucauldian Analysis of Aerobics and Hatha Yoga," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Power and Domination*, ed. Laura Duhan Kaplan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).
- Markula, Pirkko, "'Tuning into One's Self': Foucault's Technologies of the Self and Mindful Fitness," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 21 (2004): 302–21.
- Morley, James, "Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," *Philosophy East and West* 51:1 (2001).
- Sarukkai, Sundar, "Inside/Outside: Merleau-Ponty/Yoga," *Philosophy East and West* 52:4 (2002).
- Shusterman, Richard, "A Body of Knowledge," *The Philosophers' Magazine* (2006).
- Smith, Benjamin Richard, "Body, Mind, and Spirit? Towards an Analysis of the Practice of Yoga," *Body and Society* 13:2 (2007).
- Stock, Brian, "The Contemplative Life and the Teaching of the Humanities." *Teachers College Record* 108:9 (2006).
- Young, Iris Marion, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

## Notes

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1. See, e.g., Butler 2004; Gilroy 1993, esp. 1–71; Outlaw 1996; Turner 2006.

2. Widely quoted by teachers in Jois' lineage, including David Swenson (1999, 249). See also Jois 1999 for his own description of his method.

3. Indeed, one major criticism of the course described here is that it did not include primary source material from the yogic textual tradition (*The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, or Patañjali's yoga sutras, for example), or secondary reading on these texts. The instructor agrees that such a course would have been more illuminating of the yoga tradition for students, and that teaching asana, meditation, and pranayama with only marginal reference to the texts of this tradition risks appropriating, decontextualizing, or misrepresenting aspects of Hinduism, as well as failing to integrate theory and practice in one of the ways the course hoped to overcome. However, the instructor's expertise lay in the practice of yoga and in Western philosophical discussion of the body; in purely pragmatic terms it simply was not possible or advisable for her to teach a course outside her current training and knowledge. There are also significant political issues that would attend even an attempt to read yoga texts and practice asana together in a Western context, where the yogic philosophy of mind, of the body, of action, rebirth, ethics, and so on represent a paradigmatically different, and unfamiliar, worldview; the discipline of Religious Studies in Western universities—where the yoga tradition within Hinduism is most commonly taught—also has a long and fraught relation to religious practice and belief that inclines contemporary professors away from teaching anything that might smack of partisan religious participation or indoctrination (be it asana or prayer). Thus although the juxtaposition of Western philosophy of the body and yogasana did raise significant pedagogical, political, and intellectual issues (some of which were discussed in the class as well as in the course readings [e.g., Sarukkai 2002]), we do not think it can be argued that integrating the practice of yogasana with Western philosophical traditions is per se to meld an Eastern practice with the “wrong” (Western) theories, or that existing courses on yoga as Hindu doctrine are necessarily better positioned to understand asana practice, or that a course that included yoga texts would have been de facto less orientalist.

4. See, for example, Wendy Palmer (2001) for discussion of aikido; Feldenkrais 1990 on the eponymous method; Iyengar 2001 for a classic presentation of yoga's intellectual and spiritual tradition in conjunction with asana instruction.

5. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates emphasizes that training in physical endeavors can cultivate important virtues, such as steadfastness. He contends that training in athleticism and war, with training in music, educates the character and prepares one for a life of dialectic (Plato 1997, 537b–540a). Socrates says to Glaucon: “Then if someone continuously, strenuously, and exclusively devotes himself to participation in arguments, exercising himself in them just as he did in the bodily physical training, which is their counterpart, would that be enough? . . . And after that, you must make them go down into the cave again, and compel them to take command in matters of war and occupy the other offices suitable for young people, so that they won't be inferior to the others in experience. But

in these, too, they must be tested to see whether they'll remain steadfast when they're pulled this way and that or shift their ground" (539d).

6. See also Appendix A for the reading list for the course.

7. There is even a movement for competitive yoga, which aspires to have yoga become an Olympic sport. See Nikkhah 2006.

8. It may be helpful to the reader unfamiliar with *asana* to access images of the poses mentioned in this article, especially *ardha chandrasana*, "downward dog" (*adho mukha svanasana*), and *virabhadrasana II*. See the index of poses provided by *Yoga Journal*, available online at [http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/finder/browse\\_index](http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/finder/browse_index). Last accessed December 19 2008.

9. For a provocative discussion of the role of the table (and other objects) in the phenomenology of doing philosophy see Ahmed 2006, esp. 25–63.

10. This may be because of anxiety about taking a "theoretical" or humanities course (most students in Phys Ed reportedly have either a sports science or an activity education orientation), an unfamiliar instructor from another part of the university, or difficulty fitting a new course into an existing program of study.

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*Natalie Helberg, 15912-105 Avenue, Edmonton AB, T5P-0T9, nhelberg@ualberta.ca; Cressida J. Heyes, Department of Philosophy, Assiniboia Hall 3-70, University of Alberta, Edmonton AB T6G 2E5, cressida.heyes@ualberta.ca; Jaclyn Rohel, Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, New York University, 35 West Fourth Street, 10th Floor, New York NY 10012, jackie.rohel@nyu.edu.*