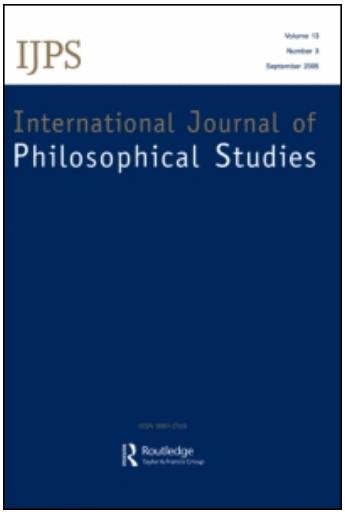

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Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics and Normalized Bodies

Luna Dolezal[a]
[a] University College Dublin,

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Book Reviews

Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics and Normalized Bodies
By Cressida Heyes
Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. vii + 162. ISBN 978–0–19–531054–2. $29.95 (pbk).

In recent years, feminist theorists have become increasingly concerned with the role of normalization on embodied subjects, as certain practices such as dieting, cosmetic surgery and exercise regimes, for example, have become progressively predominant in the landscape of Western culture. The guileful marketing strategy of the commercial entities which stand to gain from an increasing number of people engaging in these practices is to persuade the modern subject, through an image-saturated marketing discourse, to conceive the body as a site of self-transformation. Changing the body, we are shown and told over and over again through various media, can improve one's life. Additionally, the surface of the body is seen to be the site of one's ethical and social worth: beautiful bodies, we see in almost every mainstream medium, make *better* people who amass social and professional success.

The dubious ideologies that sustain these common conceptions of so-called transformative body practices, in particular aesthetic surgery, weight-loss dieting and sex-reassignment surgery, are the subject of critical examination in Cressida Heyes's *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. Foucault's seminal account of normalization, through biopower and disciplinary practices, guides and informs Heyes's analysis throughout the case studies in the book. Her discussion of these practices, and the ethical and philosophical concerns that arise when considering their normalizing tendencies, is nuanced and evocative and engages effectively with recent feminist scholarship. Her prose style is clear and compelling, drawing the reader easily into complex theoretical concerns which are explored alongside riveting descriptions of popular culture, such as the rituals and practices of the Weight Watchers dieter, the audacious narratives of the television series *Extreme Makeover* and Heyes's personal exploration of yoga practices and what she sees as their emancipatory potential.

The book challenges our post-Freudian understanding of individual subjectivity; namely that there is a unique authenticity in an *inner* self, which is somehow obscured by conditioning, repression, trauma and normalization,

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and which can, and perhaps must, be uncovered for the subject to be fully self-realized and autonomous. The distinction between an inner and outer self has important consequences: if the real self lurks within and the outer body is not an adequate visual manifestation of this inner 'truth', then changes can be made to the body in order to uncover and reveal inner authenticity. The diverse case studies of weight-loss dieting, cosmetic surgery and sex reassignment are not analogized, but rather linked through this notion of an emergent inner identity breaking through onto the surface of the body. The thin person trapped inside a fat body, the woman trapped inside a man's body, the beautiful and young person trapped inside an ageing and unattractive body are common narratives which permeate the discourses surrounding these body practices. Heyes wants to examine and challenge the misguided idea that there is an 'appropriately gendered, slender, white or beautiful authentic person living "within" the failed body that one must come to know and actualise' (p. 11).

The book starts by laying a theoretical framework in which we can understand how the body-subject has become so pliant, a fertile ground for self-discipline and normalization. In chapter 1 Heyes turns, somewhat unexpectedly, to Wittgenstein, a philosopher not usually employed in feminist discussions of normalization and embodiment. Heyes uses Wittgenstein in order to demonstrate how we are often 'held captive' by our 'pictures' of the world, which may prevent us from seeing viable alternatives for our lives and ourselves (p. 18). A picture, she argues, which has transfixed Western consciousness is the notion of an inner self which is prior to the outer body, a vessel for that self's expression (p. 21). She employs Wittgenstein's notion of a private language in order to attempt to dismantle this conception of subjectivity. Furthermore, in this first chapter, Heyes offers an analysis of Drew Leder's conception of 'social dys-appearance', as the phenomenological experience of body objectification in the face of the antagonistic and judgemental gaze of another, yielding an important framework to understand the case studies that follow. She argues that 'social dys-appearance has apparently become for many persons in the West the default mode of experiencing the body' (p. 25). This insight sets the scene for a Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary practices and biopower, which yield normalized bodies who engage in a meticulous self-regulation and self-discipline as a result of internalized normative standards appropriated from the social milieu.

The main concern that arises when considering normalizing body techniques is whether these techniques are repressive, rendering 'docile bodies' with compromised freedom, or self-expressive and emancipatory, in that they engender augmented social capital, alleviate social and psychological distress and allow the subject finally to 'be' who they feel they *really* are. Of course Heyes, a student of Foucault, wants to acknowledge the pernicious and compromising effects of normalization, while remembering that biopower is not an external force, somehow outside the sovereign

subject, which produces passive victims, duped into conforming to hetero-normative ideologies. She is careful to show both sides of the coin: while normalizing forces can be compromising in some respects, they also empower and create a sense of inclusiveness and belonging for the subject. She writes: 'The key normalizing paradox I seek to illuminate is the way that choosing to participate in a particular gendered technology may enhance our capacities and make us feel more truly ourselves at the same time as it enmeshes us more deeply in normalization' (p. 37). The case studies explored in the subsequent chapters do much to exemplify this existential contradiction.

The second and fourth chapters, 'Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender' and 'Aesthetic Surgery, Aesthetic Ethics' respectively, yield important insights into the way bodies are subsumed by bio-medicine through a pathologization of deviance from hetero-normative ideologies. The gender-queer body is appropriated by bio-medicine through the classification of 'Gender Identity Disorder' (p. 44); medical intervention can now be employed to 'cure' persons who feel gender incongruity. Likewise, as the beauty industry has become conflated with bio-medicine through the increased proliferation of invasive and non-invasive cosmetic surgery procedures in very recent times, the aged, raced and 'ugly' body can be 'cured', renegotiated through medical intervention to conform to predominant aesthetic norms (pp. 96–9).

The classification and subsequent pathologization of any deviance from the 'norm', Heyes indicates, is a classic strategy of normalization and indubitably problematic (p. 33). However, there is something important about the fact that classification can yield relief and comfort to marginalized individuals, who feel peripheral as a result of their difference. In the case of transgender, classification and medical intervention can offer socially endorsed strategies, such as hormone therapy and sex-reassignment surgery, that can be employed to alleviate psychological distress and enhance quality of life. Furthermore, Heyes engages with recent feminist writings on cosmetic surgery, such as those of Davis and Gimlin, who demonstrate that women are increasingly using cosmetic surgery to lessen or eliminate their experiences of social dys-appearance; they turn to cosmetic surgery to alleviate their 'suffering' (p. 95). Heyes concludes that it is not the case that women and trans-people have been wholly duped or oppressed by consumer capitalism and patriarchal ideologies. She acknowledges that negotiating social and personal success and fulfilment, within the hegemony of hetero-normative standards, demands some engagement with normalizing practices.

Heyes makes similar concessions in chapter 3, 'Foucault goes to Weight Watchers', where she offers a detailed critique of the weight-loss diet industry, and its pseudo-scientific discourse, which offers skewed and, most often, unattainable criteria for the 'healthy' and 'ideal' body. Women are

bombarded with BMI tables, height/weight charts, diet pyramids and so on, most of which have been developed to reflect commercial interests and have no grounding in statistical scientific studies, or concrete health analyses (pp. 33, 68). For feminists, such as Bordo and Bartky, dieting is emblematic of the normalizing forces of tyrannical patriarchy, which render women permanently dissatisfied with their physicality and furthermore disempower and stigmatize those who fail to live up to hyper-real body standards. Heyes's account of her experience as a participant in the Weight Watchers programme reveals that this is not the whole story. Perhaps the most interesting point in the book is exemplified in this chapter, where Heyes argues that the women she encountered in the Weight Watchers programme learned valuable skills, techniques, capacities and strategies for self-care through engaging in dieting practices, *even though* these practices were clear manifestations of disciplinary power. For some women it was the first opportunity to work on themselves, to discover their own habits and deepen a relationship with their bodies. Although disciplinary power has undeniably deleterious effects in many contexts, it shouldn't be forgotten that it also 'enhances our capacities and develops new skills; it trains us and offers ways of being in the world that can be novel, transformative, or appealing' (p. 8).

In her ultimate chapter, 'Somaesthetics for the Normalized Body', Heyes insists that we cannot eradicate normalization, but we must find tactics for living ethically and creatively within its confines. She argues that it is not 'that we lack agency' but rather that we lack 'strategy' (p. 117). Turning to Foucault's later work on technologies of the self, which has come under much censure from philosophers, Heyes endeavours to understand how we might develop strategies of resistance. Foucault, in his later work on the *History of Sexuality* (*The Use of Pleasure*, *Care of the Self*), seeks strategies for enhancing psycho-corporeal agency within the ubiquitous webs of biopower. Foucault turns to practices of self-care and self-cultivation in order to demonstrate the possibility of resistance to normalization, and the opening of an ethical space within the subject through reflexive body practices, reminiscent of the teachings of certain Eastern spiritual traditions (p. 116). There is much philosophical controversy surrounding this turn in Foucault's work, as it is often seen as a betrayal and a retreat from the important and influential work he did in uncovering the networks of power and discipline in institutionalized social structures (pp. 113–14). Heyes, however, offers a generous interpretation of Foucault's later work which yields important insights.

With Foucault, she argues that certain practices that constitute *rapport à soi* and *askeses* – 'the art of living' – can offer a strategy for resistance to normalization and an enrichment of subjective experience (pp. 115, 8). Foucault's novel conception of ethics, as concerning governing the forces that bear on the subject, Heyes argues, albeit without much defence, 'might be the foundation for the psychic security and moral development that culti-

vates compassion, reaches out to serve others without antipathy, and thus enables an ethical life with tremendous integrity' (p. 116). In a discussion of Richard Shusterman's 'somaesthetics', Heyes's book takes an intriguing turn (p. 123). She makes the case that non-goal-oriented, introspective body practices, such as yoga, meditation, the Alexander technique and others, yield an 'an alternative language for interpreting one's body' (p. 131). This language is 'outside' the frameworks of normalization, and therefore it has the potential to lessen the 'insecurity, self-doubt, anxiety and *ressentiment*' fostered by normalizing practices (p. 116). Heyes argues that practices such as yoga can yield 'a kind of joy that feels distinctively and transformatively different from the normalized pleasures we are typically permitted to have' (p. 132). Its emancipatory potential opens a space for an ethical life which cultivates openness and acceptance of others, compassion and integrity (p. 116).

The 'unexpected and unknown direction' to which these musings point, and at which Heyes abruptly concludes the book, certainly leaves the reader athirst for more (p. 132). Indeed, Heyes opens a field of inquiry regarding somaesthetics that is certainly deserving of more philosophical attention. As it stands, however, the book will be of great value and interest to feminist scholars of Foucault and to social theorists. Its clear and engaging prose style makes it also accessible to the more general reader, to whom issues of normalization, feminism and embodiment may be of interest. Writing from the 'common but fraught' viewpoint of the critical, yet engaged, feminist Heyes entreats us not to 'collapse into outright despair at the inexorable grip of bio-power' (pp. 66, 112). She offers an important work that gives us some insight into how we may 'find our humanity in a normalized world' (p. 14).

University College Dublin *Luna Dolezal*

Husserl's Phenomenology: Knowledge, Objectivity and Others
By Kevin Hermberg
Continuum, 2006. Pp. xii + 145. ISBN 0–8264–8958–3. £60 (hbk).

Though recent years have witnessed a great proliferation of books and articles dealing with the topics of intersubjectivity and empathy in the writings of Edmund Husserl, there remains a tendency to present Husserl's work in terms of an attempt to reduce all meaning, knowledge and being to the constituting activity of a single conscious ego. On this reading, the notion of intersubjectivity would be considered as either a more or less unnecessary supplement to an independent transcendental project of meaning constitution or as an internal ingredient of that project.