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REVIEW

Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) ISBN: 0195310543

A stunning array of references burgeon forth from this text. Heyes has clearly done her homework. If the stated purpose of Oxford University Press's "Studies in Feminist Philosophy Series" was to showcase cutting-edge feminist approaches to philosophy, then it has accomplished this goal with Cressida J. Heyes's *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. For the most part the book utilizes a Foucauldian understanding of ethics that is not less concerned with producing a moral judgment of rights and wrongs, than it is with producing an "askesis of freedom." This means creating a notion of self-becoming that is a product of what we desire ourselves to become, implying a power relation that is productive rather than repressive. As Heyes tells us, transforming the self entails a disciplined, meditative perseverance that is less achieved by turning the body into a perfect form than it is by an affirmation of the process itself. Heyes says that she rejects "teleological conceptions of the body," and this book approaches ethics in this provocative, cutting-edge manner. Rather than evaluating whether or not weight loss programs are "good" or "bad" Heyes challenges readers to view the dieting process as being an expression of great self-control. Fusing her text with Buddhist thinking, Heyes says that if there is such a thing as a human essence it is a "vessel of joy-- a joy that comes not from the ego's achievements, but from a deep sense of unity and connection with all things." (p.4) Obsessing over one's body often distracts from this basic human desire to experience joy, but the process of self-transformation can often result in an extremely intense focus of the mind and body that can both generate and deepen feelings of joy. She remarks on the great sense of relief in accomplishing a goal after a long, concerted effort. The dark side of this approach is that it can turn into a monomaniacal obsession.

Heyes has a deep sense of empathy with the transgendered subject, the weight-watchers subject, and the vulnerable woman who chooses to undergo the radical transformation that accompanies plastic surgery. She does not lump all of these subjectivities under one classification, as she is aware of difference; more importantly, Heyes is unafraid to explore the biopolitical underpinnings of these transformative phenomena. She shows how people are guided by doctors and health offi-

cialists into believing that without these life-altering self-transformations their psychological well-being, even their lives, may be at stake. The message doctors too often give to patients pressuring them to shave off poundage is often, "lose weight and your future morbidity may decrease." (p.5) She also shows how with the recent invention of online discussion boards, these varied subjectivities are becoming a species all to themselves. Keeping track of one's weight loss progress and knowing the nuanced art form of calorie counting are ways of gaining acceptance in the world of dieters.

Confronted by a deluge of books discussing "normalization," Heyes is also extremely careful in the way she uses the term. She sees this term as being a manifestation of disciplinary power, which is not a substance, but rather a series of circulating relations that cannot easily be located in an individual or an institution. Disciplinary power is constitutive rather than external to the subject it creates, rather than being imposed upon a type of individual. Its functioning is based on a productive power relation, creating the self, rather than being a repressive hypothesis, and there is a power relation that consists of liberating a person's inner-self: saying "yes" to what is within rather than "no." This disciplinary type of power holds the possibility of exhilarating people to the point of incredible joy and euphoria while achieving one's goals, or to obsessions that manifest in subjects who can think of nothing but changing their body. She insists that obsessing over transforming one's body is most often the result of a culture industry that insidiously permeates society with images of what the desirable female body type should be. The problem is that she insists on the one hand that women are not "mere dupes" of a patriarchal culture, yet also insists that media play a crucial role in shaping social norms, media that are still predominantly run by men. From here she goes on to show the fallacies in glamorizing a skinny female body type because it limits a woman's ability to defend herself, presumably from the aggression of stronger male bodies, and also limits a woman's ability to take on manual labor, traditionally a male line of work. Although a cardiologist would undoubtedly disagree, Heyes shows how desiring a thin female body is not causally related to health problems. Surprisingly, Heyes says that there is no link between obesity and poor health, which runs contrary to dominant medical and governmental discourse on the subject. These institutions presumably form a power/knowledge nexus that propagates a message that there is an obesity epidemic, and that weight reduction leads to better health. For Heyes, obesity is instead linked to social functionalism regarding what is a proper woman's role within a patriarchal society, even if we are not to believe that women are dupes of this system.

One of the bright spots for scholars of Foucault comes toward the end of the book. Heyes holds steadfast to the legacy of Foucault as a thinker who was deeply concerned about the way technologies of the self constitute a subjectivity within a nexus of power/knowledge, but from the perspective of an ethical agent who must establish a relation to his or her own subjectivity as a supplement of a larger histori-

cal viewpoint. Heyes is rightly disturbed by various culture warriors working inside and outside of the academy who have made a cottage industry out of slandering Foucault in the hopes of discrediting his entire body of work. She says, "some *ad hominem* and possibly homophobic readings of Foucault's biography generate the impression that he became, eventually, a decadent dilettante (i.e., promiscuous, unremorseful, eclectic, queer), rather than a serious scholar (i.e., dogged, earnest, narrowly focused, straight). As a colleague in philosophy once rhetorically asked me, "Foucault? Wasn't he some kind of crackpot?" Undoubtedly, most Foucault scholars have more than likely dealt with this uninformed view of the Foucault, which is based more on gossip than serious engagement with his texts. Heyes meets this critique by saying, "By remaining feisty, unpredictable, radical and critical, Foucault exemplifies a political personality and an ethical attitude that does not crumble in the absence of self-certainty." In her view, Foucault stands in stark contrast to other canonized philosophers such as Nietzsche, who, Heyes says, epitomizes a certain type of academic aura-building that goes into creating a "heroic male intellectual." Foucault is a different kind of philosopher, whose writings, according to Heyes, are absolutely conducive to a feminist interpretation primarily because of his concern regarding transformations of all bodies. That makes Foucault's work anti-programmatic and a joy to interpret and discuss.

As a feminist scholar Heyes is disconcerted by the lackadaisical manner in which early feminist interpretations explained such self-transformations as dieting and plastic surgery in simplistic terms. Often these feminists concluded that the female was an oblivious dupe of patriarchy and then proceeded to paint a bleak picture of society with broad brushstrokes that showed it to be male-dominated. Heyes, inspired by Foucault, instead proposes that feminists and intellectuals in the social sciences and humanities take into account the personal narrative behind a self-transformation. Such an approach will help us better understand why an individual desires to alter her/his body, instead of producing universal theories to encompass all vaguely similar alterations. She is also sympathetic to the view that subjectivity is always created out of inter-connected relations of power.

The self is always caught up in these interconnected networks of gender normalization, but that is not to say the subjects are simply victims without hope of extrication. There is hope, Heyes maintains; in fact, one of her own ethical tenets is that feminists must not give in to intellectually-inflected despair (p. 112), and to realize that hope cannot be generated by means of a discourse of political or ethical condemnation.

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