

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: The abject borders of the body image

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Readability: Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

Thesis:

There is no clear-cut or obvious way to distinguish ‘normal’ body images from ‘distorted’ body images. Processes of abjection are involved in the construction of all body images, and body images are always multiple. As a result, body images are, in a certain sense, always already distorted, and accordingly, so-called ‘distorted’ body images of, e.g., ‘pathological’ subjects are not ‘distorted’ in virtue of being multiple, contestatory, or contradictory. So, how can we understand the nature of that ‘distortion’? In the case of anorexia, the individual’s body *image* is ‘distorted’ in virtue of its singularity and coherence; the individual’s body image is gotten through her abjection of her own multiple and contradictory body images. This inverts the standard way of parsing ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ subjects. The nature of the anorectic’s ‘pathology’ is directly related to her own *rational* appropriation of cultural ideals related to appearance, slenderness, etc.

Key Definitions:

- **Mirror Stage:**
 - “In his famous essay on the “mirror stage,” Jacques Lacan argues that as the young child comes to identify with her specular image in the mirror, the “form of its totality” that is acquired obscures a certain constitutive loss, or, more accurately, series of losses that make the coherence of the body image possible.” (41)
- **Body Image:**
 - Interesting not explicitly defined. As will be noted again just below, what is body image is a central question of the paper. The working definition of body image seems to start with a notion of body image as it figures in Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage and seems to end with the notion of body image as it figures in Weiss’ account that is deeply influenced by Kristeva, Butler, Grosz, and Bordo, more specifically, an account according to which the construction of body image involves the construction of (tenuous) boundaries or bodily borders and the constitution of identity.
- **Abjection/Abject:**
 - The question of what is abjection and what is its relation to body image is more or less the focus of the first half of the paper. Some key moments within that consideration can be found below.
 - Abjection vs. Abject (57)
 - “For present purposes, I am distinguishing abjection from the abject as follows: abjection refers to a process of expulsion, whereby that which has been designated as abject (this can include other people, food, vermin, body fluids, rodents and an infinite number of phenomena) is rejected and, at the same time, the rejection itself is disavowed.”

- Abjection: Kristeva's 1980 formulation (46)
 - “an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so—whence the element of crisis which the notion of abjection carries within it. Taken to its logical consequences, it is an impossible assemblage of elements, with a connotation of a “fragile limit” (Kristeva 1988:135–136)”.
- Abjection: Grosz 1990 formulation (49)
 - “is the body's acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections—effects of desire, not nature. It testifies to the precarious grasp of the subject on its own identity, an assertion that the subject may slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed”
- Abjection: Butler (48)
 - While deeply influenced by Kristeva's notion of abjection but also importantly distinct (see footnote 1 on page 56), Butler's notion of abjection brings out the sense in which
 - Abjection plays a constitutive role in the formation of the subject by simultaneously forming the constitutive outside.

Brief Summary:

Weiss explores the relation between abjection and the construction of body image and constitution of identity. After surveying some of the central literature on abjection and body image (most notably, Lacan, Kristeva, Butler, Grosz, and Bordo), Weiss develops an account of body image according to which one's body image is constructed through multiple and continual constitutive abjections of certain aspects of one's self. In other words, she argues that what is involved in having a body image at all is (a) having multiple body images and (b) having body images that are contestatory and contradictory. In light of this, what is involved in having a distorted *body image* cannot be a matter of one having (a) multiple body images or (b) contestatory/contradictory body images. In support of this claim, Weiss considers the case of anorexia. She claims that anorexia, an often cited case involving distorted body image, does not involve one having multiple or contestatory/contradictory body images but, rather, a dominating singular body image that is *too coherent*.

Abstracting from the knitty gritty, this article is super interesting in the context of diversifying philosophy syllabi for the following reason: In philosophy, mental illness is often figured as a breakdown of agency, in other words, as a sort of diminished agency. However, on Weiss' picture body image distortion is part of the 'normal' construction of body image and constitution of identity. Put another way, Weiss rejects the hardline between the 'normal' and the 'pathological' by showing that so-called pathological elements are at play in normal development and vice-versa.

The anorexic, for example, is not 'distorted' in her body image. Rather, her body image is 'too coherent'. Interestingly, this way of framing the phenomenon of anorexia by attending to the

lived experience of anorectic subjects inverts the standard way of viewing 'pathological' subjects (championed, e.g., by practitioners of the medical model) by figuring the anorectic as the subject who is more 'rational' than the 'normal' other.

Possible Applications:

Bioethics

Feminist philosophy

Continental philosophy, Europhil

Identity, Self

Philosophy of the Body

Internalization of Oppression, Moral Psychology

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Bordo, "Unbearable Weight"

Merleau-Ponty work on phantom limb

Hays, Self-transformations

Butler, Introduction to Bodies that Matter

De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, passage on "the flaws of women"

Sartre, excerpts from Being and Nothingness

Iris Marion Young, Throwing like a Girl

Schusterman, "Soma Aesthetics"

Gould, corollary on intelligence "The Mismeasure of Man"

Possible Class Activities:

- Reflection on multiple body images, discourses used to talk about the body, incompatibility of language and images.
- Popular article on orthorexia- eating disorder about health.