

Contesting the Norms of Embodiment – Editors’ Introduction

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The essays in this cluster, “Contesting the Norms of Embodiment,” continue the challenges to traditional ethical paradigms begun in our Hypatia Special Issue *Ethics of Embodiment* (vol. 26.3, Summer 2011). They examine the lived relationship between the body and moral life by paying special attention to the ways that current norms of embodiment and bodily comportment produce normalizing rather than liberating ethical principles.

We open this cluster with Gayle Salamon’s close examination of two disability memoirs. Her essay, “The Phenomenology of Rheumatology: Merleau-Ponty, Disability, and the Fallacy of Maximal Grip,” draws on these memoirs to expose the untenability of the view that human beings are continuously, though largely unreflectively, engaged in quests to achieve mastery in specific motor activities. Salamon finds resources in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work to question the ablest ideal of human embodiment and argues that “our deep entwinement with the world can sometimes best be seen in exactly those moments when grip as a physical capacity is diminished, thus suggesting the *insufficiency* of grip as an apposite metaphor for worldly engagement.”

Ami Harbin pursues the idea that the disruption of our comfortable modes of engagement with the world can provide an impetus for reexamining established ethical orientations. Her essay, “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” does not dispute the fact that such disorienting experiences as illness, oppression, bodily transformations, and trauma are painful. However, turning to Sara Ahmed’s work, she argues for a nuanced understanding of disorientation that sees these experiences as morally productive in that they can heighten our sensitivity to vulnerability and reorient our political priorities.

In “Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity in Disfiguring Breast Cancer,” Jenny Slatman turns to the particular disorienting experience of breast cancer to question the assumption that bodily integrity is a matter of physical intactness. Building on the work of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir, she develops an ethics of non-normative embodiment that challenges medical practices that consider disfigured bodies to be defective. Turning from theory to practice, she argues “that processes of (shared) decision-making in *mammae* oncology care should be led and informed by a focus on a patient’s embodied experience of bodily integrity rather than privileging medical and cultural norms of bodily intactness.”

Taking up Slatman’s call to privilege women’s experiences of bodily integrity over cultural idealizations of femininity, Marjorie Jolles’s essay, “Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics” calls for a new form of consciousness-raising. She draws on Michel Foucault’s, Richard Shusterman’s, and Cressida Heyes’s respective ethical, aesthetic, and feminist critiques of normalization to argue that reviving the practice of consciousness-raising as narrative somaesthetics “enables the analytical, genealogical work required to identify and weaken normalization’s constraints on embodied feminist ethics.”

Talia Bettcher's essay, "Full Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth about Gender," identifies these normalizing constraints as a specific instance of the "central thesis of the natural standpoint," namely, the view that "natural sex exists independently of social interactions." She argues that this "natural attitude" not only fails to be truly universal, but also entails problematic moral and metaphysical implications. One of its most pernicious effects, Bettcher claims, is that it "institutes, as part of the moral fabric, a multiple oppressive (transphobic, sexist, homophobic, racist, ablest) construct of intimate personhood."

In contesting established norms of embodiment, these essays alert us to the ethical implications of the existential-phenomenological call to question our taken-for-granted assumptions. They show us how a feminist ethical perspective attentive to non-normative, but nonetheless mundane bodily experiences can provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the moral possibilities for engaging with others, thereby transforming the world.