

Ressentiment, Agency, Freedom: Reflecting on Responses to Self-Transformations

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In a generous and perceptive review, Shannon Winnubst observes that my treatment of transsexuality is at philosophical odds with my larger argument and with the case studies of weight-loss dieting and cosmetic surgery. She suggests that my reading of transsexual body modification as overly implicated in *ressentiment* implies a liberated, cisgendered,¹ feminist interpretive position—ironically, when that is precisely my critique of Raymond and Hausman. Like most academic books, *Self-Transformations* was written over several years. The first chapter to be drafted (in 2000) was “Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender.” It originated with my first book, *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice*, which made the metaphysical case that “women” should be understood as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance category. I was writing *that* book at the height of heated but rather pointless debates within feminist theory about who got to “count” as a woman (and who didn’t)—with MTF transsexuals a flashpoint at a time when there was surprisingly little theoretical work by transgendered intellectuals to counter the various projections the debate encouraged. This textual history in part explains the tension between the case studies: much of the work that Winnubst cites as more germane to the pleasures of transgender experience was published after I had developed the analysis that eventually appeared in *Self-Transformations*.

For that reason I would write that chapter quite differently now, including by making more space for the literatures that Winnubst appositely cites. Nonetheless, I would still argue that transsexual body modification *does*, even in 2009, remain deeply—although not exclusively—entangled with discourses of inner authenticity, psychological suffering, and hence with *ressentiment*. Indeed, in a recent conference presentation I showed how trans surgeries are often rhetorically presented as ontologically and ethically different from cosmetic surgeries (Heyes 2008), although this disanalogy is by no means self-evident (see Heyes 2009). Both cosmetic and trans surgeries have common origins in the same medical subspecialty (plastic surgery), are performed by surgeons with the same basic training, often using many of the same techniques, and even in the same clinics. Both alter the body’s soft tissues in the name of changing psychosocial life. To further complicate matters in the other

direction, both the categories “cosmetic surgeries” and “trans surgeries” are internally heterogeneous, as are the people who have them and the stories they (and their surgeons) tell about why they are having them. Thus although surgical acquisition of traditionally gender-appropriate genitals might be understood as a kind of transformative project quite different from getting a facelift, for example, this case tends to be assumed rather than made.

Despite these ontological complications, defenders of the right to change sex often draw an undertheorized disanalogy with cosmetic surgery, averring that sex reassignment is medically and psychologically necessary, central to personal integrity and mental health, outside history and driven by a universal struggle, and motivated by a kind of suffering beyond the control of the individual. Cosmetic surgery, by implication, must be a self-indulgent luxury, instrumentally undertaken, driven by fad and fashion, peripheral to individuals’ well-being, and frivolously self-interested. As *Self-Transformations* shows in its discussion of the representation of cosmetic surgery as a solution to individual suffering, this an implausibly facile and univocal view of the psychology of cosmetic surgery recipients—whom I do suggest, contra Winnubst, are also potential victims of *ressentiment*, including when they identify as feminists. When the disanalogy is drawn this way it both generates and entrenches a discourse in which “sex change” must be justified by a language of authenticity and wounded suffering in order to be adequately explained, garner sympathy and support, and (most important) be funded and endorsed by health-care systems. This discourse has perhaps *least* purchase in the artistically inflected, humanistic queer scholarship that Winnubst cites, which tends to value playfulness, multiplicity, and ambiguity—or, to cite Jose Esteban Muñoz’s 1999 book title, “disidentifications.” In legal, political, and most of all clinical research, however, it holds a great deal of sway. This disjunction is partly attributable to the perceived strategic effectiveness of appealing to suffering within the biomedically essentialist model of transsexuality that dominates medicine and influences legal cases and political demands. Attempts to criticize this model are often countered within the trans literature with charges of elitism or insensitivity to “ordinary” transsexual experience.² Thus ultimately I think Winnubst highlights an important but unfocused and unresolved debate within feminist and queer studies about the relative meanings and merits of pleasure and pain—and of playful disidentifications versus wounded attachments—that *Self-Transformations* signposts but actually does not resolve to the benefit or disadvantage of any particular party.

Kimberly Leighton’s review is a deeply insightful interpretation of *Self-Transformations* as offering a critical perspective on the conditions of possibility for certain ethical problems in contemporary philosophy. I’m very glad to have a reader recognize this agenda. In my view the academic practice of philosophy contains too much telling and not enough showing, and this is a particularly

poignant gap in ethics. As Leighton points out, this gap motivates the method of *Self-Transformations*, with its emphasis on case studies and a practice of critique that is not (or not only) a practice of judgment. Of course, “judgment” understood broadly as part of a range of “epistemic capacities” is, as she says, indispensable to my project, and to doing philosophy at all. Throughout the book, however, I struggle with the limits of judgment as a mode of ethical practice and the exclusion of genealogies of specific judgments from ethical arguments. This exclusion is most marked in contemporary analytic ethics (where there is an extraordinary reliance on “intuitions” that seem manifestly normalized but that there is rarely space to question³). However, even in the most reflexive ethical work there is often a lack of engagement with the problem of how the author herself is both constituted through and engages with the conditions of possibility for her own critique. Feminist philosophy has been unusually self-conscious about this problem, but I wanted the book to push at the boundaries of even that discourse. I wanted to ask whether there is something to be shown about freedom that might be able not just to neatly restate the Foucauldian dilemma of *assujettissement* but also to make it seem like a productive dilemma that suggests strategies of resistance even as it refuses a space fully outside norms.

As Leighton points out, this project has “an ambivalent relationship to philosophy,” which may be a polite way of saying that it is necessarily self-contradictory. I certainly struggled deeply with the problem that philosophical writing is a mode of transformation that works both through and against itself, and doubly so when embodied practices are at stake. I have recently been emphasizing “showing” in my teaching, where I’ve introduced yet more experiential learning, contemplative practices, and physical movement to engage students with what it could mean to work our way out of some of the sedimented assumptions we have about who we are and the conditions of possibility for our action. Even an emphasis on praxis, however, cannot substitute for undoing the philosophical tangles provoked by my discussion of agency. In *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood takes on an ethical project similar to mine, although her ethnographic example is the piety movement among Muslim women in contemporary Cairo. Mahmood’s central point is that Judith Butler’s appropriation of a Foucauldian model, although largely correct, conceptualizes agency through an “agonistic framework,” in which norms are “consolidated and/or subverted” (Mahmood 2005, 21). Mahmood suggests, however, that norms can also be “performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways,” and that investigating possible ethical relationships to norms outside the binary logic of “doing and undoing” (22, 23) that Butler’s model implies can enable better understanding of the functioning of norms in their specific contexts, and hence ground an account of agency “within the grammar of concepts within which it resides” (34).

Mahmood's work has been helpful to me in thinking about how the final chapter of *Self-Transformations* remains committed to norms of self-government, just as the case studies implicitly value acts of subversion even as they recognize that resistance is inextricably linked to subjugation. My book was written self-consciously from within the form of life of secular liberalism, but Mahmood's examples are drawn from a world that has a much more ambivalent relation to it. This contrast enables her to show more clearly than I do that even a feminist theoretical model as critical of liberal values as Butler's is still offering primarily immanent critique. Leighton's gentle hints at my own struggle with ethical self-reflexivity, then, might be engaged through examination of the role of rebellion against norms, of a certain kind of transgression that my project values above others (even as it is critical of the "aggressively heroic" language that treating life as a work of art sometimes provokes [134]). To bring the two reviews together, my interest in suffering is perhaps indicative of my unease with feminism-as-martyrdom and my (unfulfillable) desire to challenge authority and break free of docility in the name of a kind of liberation that I am ostensibly arguing against. In the end, how to make sense of the claim that agency and freedom have multiple grammars within the context of my own feminist political commitments is a genealogical project that may just be the subject of my next book.

NOTES

I am very grateful to both Shannon Winnubst and Kimberly Leighton for their clever and careful reviews, and to Diana Tietjens Meyers for her editorial initiative in proposing this symposium.

1. Cisgender: identifying with a gender that matches one's initial assigned sex; someone who experiences hir gender as consonant with hir socially assigned gender. This increasingly popular term is back-formed from "transgender," where "trans" means crossing or changing, while "cis" means the same as, on the same side as.

2. Viviane Namaste is perhaps the most vocal academic defender of the strategic value of the biomedical model and the "conservative" implications of opposing it; see Namaste 2005, especially 1–11. Riki Ann Wilchins and Dean Spade have both been vocal in challenging it; see Wilchins 1997, especially 63, and Spade 2003, especially 21. See also Valentine 2007 for a broader discussion of the politics of the gap between academic readings of transgender and working-class transsexual lives. I am also grateful to Lucas Crawford for hir insights on this debate.

3. At a panel on *Self-Transformations* held at the Western Canadian Philosophical Association meeting in October 2008, Leighton cited David Velleman's argument for the epistemic and ethical significance of biological family resemblances to personal identity and hence against Anonymous Gamete Donation as a legitimate method of conceiving children who would not know their biological kin (Velleman 2005). She suggested that the process of *assujettissement* through which one's "genetic identity"

becomes the truth of oneself (and hence something one has a right to know) remains unexamined in this paper and in other work in bioethics. The panel then joked that Velleman's paper deserves a riposte, in which the traumatizing effects of *knowledge* of one's resemblance to one's biological relatives could be presented as reasons for arguing that the normative biological family should be abolished. I worry that too few contemporary ethicists would get the joke, or its serious implications.

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