

---

Philosophy


---

Winter 2009

## Review of Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies and The Body Problematic: Political Imagination in Kant and Foucault

Dianna Taylor  
*John Carroll University*, dtaylor@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/phil-facpub>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Taylor, Dianna, "Review of Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies and The Body Problematic: Political Imagination in Kant and Foucault" (2009). *Philosophy*. 1.  
<https://collected.jcu.edu/phil-facpub/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact [mchercourt@jcu.edu](mailto:mchercourt@jcu.edu).

with two other black women professors at a mainstream philosophy conference.<sup>5</sup> During the discussion following our presentations, one of the panelists shared her experience teaching a philosophy course on black feminism, which provided her with the rare opportunity to bring to the center of the class texts written by and about black women and black feminism. Like so many women of color teaching and researching in disciplines that marginalize us, she expressed her exuberance at the opportunity to teach a course using texts such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*, which documents black women speaking and writing in their own voices as early as the 1830s.<sup>6</sup> Like Guy-Sheftall's important anthology, the four books discussed in this review are much needed additions to the written records on the contributions of black women intellectuals. Such books must continue to be written, edited, taught, researched, and cited—not only in African American studies or women's studies classes but also in courses on philosophy, history, literature, and sociology, among other disciplines. We must not allow these voices, theories, contributions, and lives to be abandoned and forgotten. ■

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that having three black women on one panel at this particular conference is not a frequent occurrence insofar as there are currently only about thirty black women holding a PhD in philosophy in the United States, while the American Philosophical Association has more than 11,000 members.

<sup>6</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).

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

*The Body Problematic: Political Imagination in Kant and Foucault.* By Laura Hengehold. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

**Dianna Taylor, John Carroll University**

**T**he two books under review here endeavor to conceptualize and articulate possibilities for resistance and the practice of freedom within a context in which subjects are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the same sets of sociopolitical mechanisms. Like Michel Foucault, both authors see bodies as the locus of such enablement and constraint and, hence, of resistance and freedom.

According to Cressida Heyes, prevailing conceptualizations of subjectivity “[obscure] the functioning of normalization” within contemporary Western societies (37). Subjectivity, according to Heyes, continues to be understood in terms of an authentic core that may or may not be accurately reflected by the outward appearance of the body. A sense of mismatch between the “inner” and the “outer” prompts work on the self that is intended to bring its two parts into alignment (20). Insofar as the inner self is considered to be authentic, the techniques or practices of self-work are directed at the body. Such self-practices, Heyes argues, are normalizing. From a Foucauldian perspective, she explains, normalization can be understood as “a set of mechanisms for sorting, taxonomizing, measuring, managing, and controlling populations, which both fosters conformity and generates modes of individuality” (16). As a function of modern power, normalizing practices and techniques have a productive function: they produce different forms of subjectivity and facilitate the development of various kinds of individual capacities.

The point for Heyes, as for Foucault, is that given their productive function, normalizing practices and techniques effectively mask their own implication in relations of power: subjects fail to see the ways in which such techniques and practices promote conformity with prevailing modes of thought and existence and thus perceive them to be purely enabling and even emancipatory. Heyes’s aim, like Foucault’s, is therefore twofold: she seeks to elucidate the normalizing potential of self-practices so that the enabling, emancipatory aspects of self-work can be maximized, their conformist aspects minimized.

Heyes provides concrete and illuminating examples of how normalization works by analyzing three different practices (sexual reassignment surgery, weight loss dieting, and cosmetic surgery) that she believes are motivated by persons’ perspectives that their external, bodily appearance does not represent their authentic self. While each of these practices provides subjects with new capacities, insofar as they are often “co-opted back into” a “field” of normalization their exercise functions to bring subjects into conformity with and thus reasserts an existing oppressive sex/gender system (85). Still, “often” is not “always.” Heyes argues that the practices she analyzes “have a resonance and potential that could exceed the regime of normalization that generated them” (79). Heyes herself found, for example, that the techniques of “observing and documenting self-limiting and self-destructive behaviors” she acquired during her time in *Weight Watchers* increased her overall level of self-awareness (88). These techniques and the awareness they foster can be and indeed are used in the

service of precisely the kinds of feminist (i.e., antinormalizing) analyses Heyes herself performs.

Broadly construed as the simultaneous ordering of reality and the challenging of that order, political imagination for Laura Hengehold provides a way of thinking about the broader context that both enables and constrains subjects, at least in part by showing how that context is itself characterized by both enablement and constraint. Hengehold suggests, on the one hand, that people make sense of the world by “empirically imagin[ing] the unity or coordination of governmental and civil institutions”; they “fill in the gaps,” as it were, of an uncertain reality by way of the imagination (14). On the other hand, people believe they can and in fact endeavor to “improve their own situation, individual or collective,” and, in so doing, they challenge the ordered reality they have created (14). The first form of political imagination implies a sort of reconciliation to prevailing conditions that is aimed at obtaining at least a bit of security; subjects fill gaps in order to create a less troubling picture of reality. The second, by contrast, “consists in an estimation and articulation of *power relations*” (14). Here, political imagination involves eschewing security in favor of what Foucault refers to variously as “thinking differently” and “innovation,” the latter of which he describes precisely as “seek[ing] out in our reflection those things that have never been thought or imagined.”<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of her book, Hengehold turns to Immanuel Kant in order to outline the first form of political imagination. She acknowledges that the imagination as Kant conceives of it is not obviously or overtly political. Following Hannah Arendt, she therefore turns to the *Critique of Judgment* and Kant’s notion of the *sensus communis* in order to illustrate that its gap-filling, ordering function nonetheless possesses political potential. The second part of *The Body Problematic* draws upon Foucault’s work in order to articulate the second form of political imagination. Foucault elucidates the power effects of projects like Kant’s, which attempt to impose unity and order where none in fact exist, while also “affirm[ing] the fractured and plural image of thought revealed in certain Kantian texts” (15). For both Kant and Foucault, Hengehold argues, bodies are located at the interstice of the certainty and uncertainty that characterize human existence and subjectivity. For Kant, “we find [bodies] on the side of both the transcendental and the empirical, obliquely referenced in the

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual,” interview by Michael Bess, November 3, 1980, for the archives of l’Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine, folder number FCL2, A02-06.

doctrine of the faculties . . . and overtly referenced as object[s] of the physical and anthropological domains" (115). For Foucault, bodies possess the potential "to lead out of the anthropological arrangement of discourses and the security paradigm of governmentality to which they correspond" (167). The final section of Hengehold's book illustrates how both aspects of political imagination function within a contemporary context of neoliberalism and in doing so offers a third way of thinking about political imagination.

Both books effectively convey the complexity of emancipatory endeavors within normalizing societies; they also raise issues for further consideration. Hengehold seems to reassert, albeit in a new and careful way, an ongoing concern that Foucault's work effectively facilitates resistance but fails to be able to articulate positive means for practicing freedom. Heyes's book problematizes this assertion while also raising questions of its own. Does refusing to undergo cosmetic surgery, as Heyes suggests, indicate passivity? Foucault identifies refusal as one of his own "moral values" and considers it to be an integral part of an overall "effort to bring things back to their original mobility, their openness to change."<sup>2</sup> Like other self-practices, then, should refusal not be seen as possessing both enabling and constraining potential? How are practices like sexual reassignment surgery and cosmetic surgery, which are performed by physicians on the bodies of patients, experienced differently than a practice like dieting, which is performed on the self by itself? Ultimately, *Self-Transformations* and *The Body Problematic* are thought-provoking books that, through that provocation, make valuable contributions to Foucault scholarship and feminist theory. ■

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues.* By Sandra Harding. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

**Catherine Hundleby, University of Windsor**

**R**esearch from Sandra Harding is always exciting because it ushers into the academy new forms of dialogue. Harding is expert at finding common threads in diverse political epistemologies of science, along with identifying emerging problems and resources in these fields, and at