

BOOK REVIEW

## Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge

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### Overview

Cressida Heyes's interesting and exceedingly original, *Anaesthetics of Existence: essays on experience at the edge* addresses an astonishing variety of experiences; some of these are so far on the edge, or over the edge, that they might not be considered to involve "experience" at all. The book discusses experiences on the boundary of experience, and itself pushes the boundary of what should be considered experience.

Many philosophers, especially phenomenologists, have reflected upon experience, especially *lived* experience, but they have not thought much about non- or partly conscious experience. Experience is generally understood to involve conscious awareness, especially time-consciousness in phenomenological analyses. But Heyes addresses the fact that "...some things happen to us, but don't seem to count as experience..." (20). She goes beyond asserting that certain experiences are disregarded, dismissed, and devalued—something long noted by feminists. Rather, Heyes asserts that some events are not considered to constitute experience at all because they are not, or are only partially, conscious. Heyes asks "how the interruptions of consciousness can be thought for a politics of experience" (24). The book looks to "experience" that is *anaesthetic* in three senses (44–51): first, in terms of the lived experience of time; second, in terms of transforming the subject; and third, in coming up against the limit of oneself, notably in childbirth.

All human existence includes *anaesthetic* experiences. For example, we have all been asleep with activity occurring in the background that we are only marginally aware of, but not totally unaware of, words or sounds that neither waken us nor are incorporated into dreams. But to say that anaesthetic experiences are universal is not to say they don't have particular valences. Regarding sleep, we might want to ask, for example, how a child might be affected by the sounds of domestic abuse even though they apparently "sleep through it." Or we might wonder about effects on the sleep of people who have no choice but to live near noisy train stations or loud 24-hour factories that they seem to "tune out." I would suggest that such *anaesthetic* experiences might lead to low-level anxiety that is difficult to articulate or perhaps even be aware of, but persistent, nevertheless. More important, Heyes discusses the fact that those who have been assaulted while asleep (72–73), or after having been drugged and assaulted while partly conscious, have difficulty falling asleep, difficulty finding the anonymity

of sleep that everyone needs (61). She also notes that nursing mothers, although exhausted and sleep-deprived, still sleep with an ear attuned to their child's cries (119). Lived *conscious* experience, then, is not the only experience phenomenologists and political philosophers need to think about.

Additionally, at some point we have all tried to anaestheticize ourselves, to numb our experience in some way. *Anaesthetics of Existence* also addresses the fact that the inclination to anaesthetize consciousness undeniably plays a role in human existence. Philosophers, the book proposes, would do well to note that human beings inevitably both have anaesthetic experiences and sometimes seek them out.

### Phenomenology and genealogy

*Anaesthetics of Existence* goes further than insisting that the concept of experience be expanded to include anaesthetic experience. Feminists have long argued that phenomenological accounts of lived experience need to attend to the historical structures and power relations that inform such experience. Indeed, feminist phenomenology generally regards itself as *critical* phenomenology because, as feminist, it is critical of the politics and social systems that shape lived experiences of oppression.

Heyes makes this clear in her analysis of the “Mommy wine,” marketed to middle-class white women who are encouraged to “check out” a little after a long day of multitasking and balancing work and childcare responsibilities. A glass of wine (or two or three) at the end of the day is presented as the least these women—coded as white—deserve. Simultaneously, Heyes notes, men and women of color who use drugs to check out a little are simply regarded as criminals. Here an interesting historical comparison might be made, I would suggest, with women who were encouraged to take Valium in the 1950s and 1960s, including, perhaps, how this was contrasted with the dangers of the youth drug culture at the time. There are always acceptable and unacceptable drugs. Moreover, certain drugs are seen as especially acceptable for women, Heyes notes. These are not the drugs that power up, such as coffee and cocaine (98) but the ones intended to help cope with anxiety and depression, to assist women in getting through the day (109). Indeed, Heyes reminds us that such drugs are disproportionately prescribed *and* marketed to women (109).

Phenomenological accounts of anaesthetic experience, like those of lived experience, are insufficient in themselves. Experience is never transparent and is never a self-evident “ground of politics” (29). This is something Heyes stresses in her first chapter, which discusses feminist theorists and Foucault. In that chapter, she provides an extensive analysis of responses to Foucault's Jouy case. Foucault saw the treatment of Jouy as indicative of a historical change resulting in “deviant practices solidified as sexual subjectivities” (34), whereas many feminists saw an instance of child abuse, and disability theorists something else altogether. The chapter concludes with the important reminder that “no individual's experience is simply given, or can function *prima facie* as a signpost to politics” (51). This I take to be the philosophical implication of Heyes' book: neither anaesthetic experience nor the attempt to anaestheticize ourselves can function *prima facie* as a signpost to politics. Foucault, Heyes's main interlocutor, advocated genealogy, which “tries to understand how certain kinds of subjects came into existence without necessarily considering ‘how those persons experience their world’” (19). Indeed, emphasizing how persons experience their world would seem especially difficult when we are considering experience that is not conscious or not fully conscious.

The reason we nevertheless need to retain the notion of “lived experience,” even for *anaesthetic* experience, Heyes makes very clear in the disquieting second chapter, “Dead to the World: Rape, Unconsciousness, and Social Media.” Heyes discusses drugged assault, including its filming and circulation on social media—an experience that drove a number of teenage girls to suicide. But even without photos of the assault circulating on social media, drugged date-rape is doubly violent, Heyes asserts. The feeling of powerlessness is “compounded when the rape victim has been unconscious or semiconscious during her rape,” knows that she has been assaulted but cannot recall the details of the event or perhaps even the event itself (64). The horror of drugged assault is, nevertheless, widely believed to be mitigated by the fact that the victim cannot recall or can only partially recall it. (This misapprehension, this diminishing of the assault, I would argue, makes it triply violent.) Respecting the subject of experience means retaining the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience, even when that experience is not “lived” in a conscious or fully conscious way. Heyes writes:

Historical or structural analyses of ... injustices are certainly key to making sense of the relations of power that undergird them, but to keep analysis only at that level is to ignore the texture of individual undergoing that conveys the wrongs done and respects the subject of that experience (13).

Retaining the phenomenological emphasis on experience, then, respects victims, including when they are the subjects of, or subject to, *anaesthetic* experience.

At the same time, we need genealogy’s analysis of the historical and discursive emergence of the subject. Subjects are continually constituted and re-constituted by discourses, and by regulating powers that inhabit bodies. The subject is not the basis for anything, Foucault insists, but is the object of increasingly controlling norms. Foucault encourages us instead to regard our self as something we can create along the lines of a work of art, as a project in which “the self is understood as an aesthetic product” (3). This is his “*aesthetics* of existence.” Instead of trying to discover who we are, to find our “authentic truth” (4), especially as defined by experts, Foucault encourages us to engage in self-creation. Our freedom, Heyes writes, “lies in being open to unanticipated transformation, including of the very identities we have come to hold dear” (4–5). Heyes further writes: “genealogy is one part of a larger commitment to *critique*, understood as a radical challenge to our certainties about ourselves, and to our ways of knowing those certainties” (15). But committing to the self in the way an artist does to a work of art, treating the self as an aesthetic project, Heyes notes, can be an exhausting endeavor (7). Foucault himself sought out limit-experiences (6), but these experiences, and even just the quest for new experiences, can be depleting. Furthermore, this is currently precisely what neoliberalism promotes.

### Neoliberalism and anaesthetic time

Ultimately—and this is a key point in the book—although neoliberalism encourages us to seek new experiences and to develop our selves, its long-term effects may be a desire to *relinquish ourselves and to disconnect from experience*. Neoliberalism increasingly draws us into its demands and infiltrates our lives in such a thorough way that we are more and more inclined to want to escape it, or at least temporarily to extract ourselves from its clutches. Heyes discusses neoliberalism’s creation of “postdisciplinary time.” Whereas the clock time-discipline of industrial and postindustrial society also

focused on productivity and insisted we not “waste” time, postdisciplinary time pushes us to work ever faster and multi-task more and more. Most noteworthy, in “postdisciplinary time, work and life are reconflated by virtue of work entering into all of life” (86), for example, as we respond to or at least check our email at all hours. Heyes provides an extensive discussion of how neoliberalism increasingly dissolves the boundary between work and life, making us ever on-call, with paid labor pervading “almost every waking moment” (86).

Many women who are employed are also responsible for care work (Heyes refers to child-care, but elder care and caring for the ill also often fall to women). In these cases, women frequently find their paid work infiltrating their care work, creating barely manageable temporal stresses (91). And under neoliberalism, individuals themselves are rendered responsible for balancing the pressures of paid and non-paid work (87). Moreover, when we do have any “extra time,” there is pressure to be careful not to let it slip away, but instead to “do” something with it, to develop ourselves in some way, learn something new or experience something new. Heyes writes: “...not wasting time becomes an individual virtue,” as leisure is “brought within the purview of time-discipline” (21). Simply put, we are expected to be “working” on ourselves. Heyes quotes Andrew Jackson’s statement: “There is no pleasure in having nothing to do; the fun is having lots to do and not doing it” (122). Under neoliberalism this fun is gone. Whether one has all too many things to catch up with or new things to do, deliberately not-doing simply leads to guilt. It may even lead to a feeling that we have somehow let ourselves down, missed an opportunity. How is it, the book wonders—and I would stress—that we’re all so crazy busy, but we don’t even see this situation as crazy?

Given postdisciplinary time’s increasing invasiveness, along with the fact that responsibility for time pressures is placed squarely on the individual, the attraction anaesthetic time holds is not surprising. Anaesthetic time encourages us to “check out,” at least for a while. It provides a much needed respite (105). Postdisciplinary time exerts pressure, Heyes writes, it “pulls us away from the present moment: it is forward-looking, connecting the now to a future reward, achievement-oriented, and prone to disappointment” (123). Anaesthetic time, to the contrary, suspends our rational, future-oriented projects, including of bettering ourselves: “Anaesthetic time ... doesn’t care about the future” (22). Anaesthetic time is the shadow side of neoliberalism. Indeed, Heyes writes that the neo-liberal demands on the self are sometimes so strong that “the only possibility of resistance (or the only viable response) might be to detach from experience, to evade pain and fatigue, to slow down and ... to alter or even to lose consciousness” (7).

Heyes’s argument is that “many of the habitual, emotional uses of substances that change sensory experience are ... a tacit response to postdisciplinary time...” (123), which does not recognize the “value of non-doing” (22). Alcohol and drugs, in other words, become a way to escape neoliberalism’s usurping of our lives: “With its cultivation of anxiety and downloading of risk management onto individuals, much in the experience of postdisciplinary time ... makes addiction into a meaningful response to a cultural temporal condition” (108). Indeed, Heyes suggests that the addict’s junk time, their lost time, the time that has disappeared, is simply “a much more extreme version of the temporality many ordinary people experience with everyday anaesthetics” (108). Just as Freud did not see a clear division between “normal” and neurotic behavior, but thought there was a spectrum, I would note, so Heyes writes that the “understanding of anaesthetic time” she “wants to articulate sits uneasily in the space between addiction and the everyday” (105). Anaesthetic time seeks to deactivate postdisciplinary

time but risks becoming the lost time of the addict. As well, the “gendering of postdisciplinary time ... finds a corollary in anaesthetic time” (109). Many women are “eager to be momentarily relieved of the psychic tasks of future planning, imagining, or managing lives...” (108). Anaesthetic time is, therefore, philosophically and sociologically important for its ability to “disclose to us the reality of postdisciplinary time by virtue of their contrast...” (105).

In my view, we should consider collective ways of resisting postdisciplinary time, ones that Heyes’s critique of postdisciplinary time implicitly encourage. For example, in 2016, France passed a law that attempted to guarantee employees the “right to disconnect” by limiting the afterwork times during which employers were permitted to send emails or texts. Those of us who work at universities, for example, could demand that university administrators limit the time they contact us or include a statement in their communications such as: “My work schedule may not be your work schedule. Please do not feel obliged to reply outside of your usual working hours.” This would at least acknowledge that we are not available 24/7, and that our working lives have boundaries.

I’m not naïve about neoliberalism, however. It can easily incorporate resistance, including organized resistance. Insisting on the “right to disconnect” would probably result in the demand that we take on more work, work faster, and further multi-task when we are on the job. Marx and Foucault have taught us, Heyes writes, that “the emergence of the modern liberal self as an intellectual idea comes hand in hand with the emergence of forms of power that diminish and manipulate human beings in new ways” (11). Nevertheless, I think that trying to carve out a space that resists neoliberal, postdisciplinary time is a worthwhile collective endeavor.

### Future directions

*Anaesthetics of Existence* explores many complex, often opposed, instances of anaesthetic experience. One further topic for exploration, in my view, would be traumatic experiences we have but cannot remember. According to Freud, the conscious ego represses any situation in which it is threatened with its own annihilation. Obviously, this frequently occurs in cases of deliberate violence, such as child abuse or war trauma, but one can also repress the experience of being in a car accident if one thought one might die, or when one feels one’s life is threatened, even if one is not harmed. Because women are more under threat than men in their daily lives, I would suggest that the repression of experiences—rather than the repression of wishes and desires that is frequently the focus of psychoanalytic theory—also has a gendered aspect. This might be a further direction the study of anaesthetic experience could take.

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