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O'Connor, Richard & Penny Van Esterik. From Virtue to Vice: Negotiating Anorexia. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2015.

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O'Connor, Richard & Penny Van Esterik. *From Virtue to Vice: Negotiating Anorexia*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2015.

Reviewing *From Virtue to Vice* is an extremely difficult task. While the book contains valuable content – particularly on recovery from anorexia – and a rich set of interviews, it is highly problematic on the whole. The arguments are often poorly evidenced; the methodology is weak; the core theses are not novel; representations of related anthropological and feminist work are deeply flawed, and the book is full of contradictions. I begin with a discussion of the book's two key theses.

The most strongly highlighted argument in the book is that anorexia is an “activity disorder” that befalls the sufferer accidentally. The authors assert that food refusal becomes a disease once it takes on a life of its own: “Sustained starving reorganizes the person bioculturally into a starver. There need be no deeper problem” (p. 6). Many analysts would support the de-pathologizing of anorexia that is a key feature of this argument though this understanding runs counter to many psychological and family systems explanations and assumptions regarding anorexia. Regardless, the idea that anorexia takes on a life of its own is not new knowledge and is uncontroversial amongst clinical practitioners and social analysts alike. There is an undue and poorly-theorized focus on this point as a game-changer. The book's second key thesis is that anorexia is a developmental disorder, or “adolescent development gone wrong” (p. 8). The arguments here are more wide-ranging. They circulate around contradictory socially and historically specific pressures to craft an individual body/self in ways that seem virtuous and that require constant vigilance and self-improvement. On these points, the authors borrow heavily from very well-established bodies of literature.

From Virtue to Vice is quite disorienting to read. It covers enormous ground, ranging from claims that “human ontology has an individualising biocultural core” (p. 59) to statements that all cases of anorexia “move towards a secular asceticism that satisfies religious needs” (p. 149). Throughout the book, statements such as these often lack sufficient evidence or argumentation or are contradicted elsewhere in the text. To cite one example, the authors write that anorexia is “surely ancient” (p. 31), asking readers to take this point on faith while ignoring a rich debate in the literature surrounding it, only to argue later that anorexia is a distinctively modernist phenomenon.

On this latter point, I am oversimplifying the authors' position, but further exploration reveals additional problems with the text. Key difficulties are both methodological and theoretical. The authors state that they “have no stake in any particular theory” and that “culling evidence widely, [they] negotiate theory pragmatically” (p. 10). Claims to avoid cherry-picking notwithstanding, the basis upon which a particular piece of evidence or a given theory is taken to be valid is rarely clear or explained at all. For instance, the reader is left wondering why s/he should accept the statement that “[a]norexia develops out of a prior constitutional makeup” (p. 61) or findings cited from clinical literature that “anorexics appear to either use or have more sympathy than most people” (p. 34). To return to the key distinction between (1) anorexia's ancient (and said to be universal) character – described in terms of a rather mysterious “internal gravity” (p. 9) or “inner pull” (p. 25) – and (2) its “outer energies” (p. 155), which are said to be culturally specific: This dichotomy is simply posited. To complicate matters, it is often asserted in ways that are fuzzy at best. Teasing out the workings of and relationships between these “inner” and “outer” forces would seem central to a project that treats anorexia as a biocultural phenomenon. A useful starting point might be the authors' brief and interesting comments about sufferers interweaving the two modes of mind/body dualism and ‘person/world oneness’ (p. 172).

The original data collected for this book is a rich set of interviews (twenty-two stories). The book's greatest value probably lies here; clearly exceptional interviewers, the authors present stories that are full of experiential detail, and they discern four convincing themes that illustrate different pathways into anorexia. However, the central point the authors glean from the interviews is interpreted in ways that are highly problematic: this point being that interviewees do not have a story for the point at which seemingly healthy or virtuous bodily practices turn deadly, i.e. "morph into pathologies" (p. 40). This "evidence" is taken as the lynchpin supporting the book's argument that anorexia happens accidentally; from their limited data, the authors conclude that there simply is "no story to tell" (p. 107) about why or how people become anorexic. The authors assert this claim in spite of the fact that all the interviews are retrospective accounts (on the part of "recovered" individuals) and that no data were gathered from participant-observation or from people currently practicing anorexia. Of course, as evidenced in many scholarly works, the fact that anorexia can take on a life of its own or that its meanings may be opaque through certain lenses or modalities of account in no way suggests that it is bereft of symbolic meaning. Ironically, the authors state that "[e]xplaining anorexia takes methodical observation, not interpretive leaps" (p. 110). Although they identify as empiricists and stress the value of empirical observation, no original data collected for this book arises from empirical observation; and surely it is an interpretive leap to decide on the basis of their interviews that the onset of anorexia is literally meaningless.

One does not have to read past the book's first page to find such reductionist conclusions: "Anorexia is a practice, not a culture; an activity, not a symbol; an accident, not a statement" (p. 1). This quote, considered alongside many similar claims in the book, reveals a larger problem with the authors' interpretation of social scientific literature. The authors' representations of anthropological work generally, and of feminist work on anorexia specifically, is surprisingly misguided. To suggest, for instance, that human practices (by virtue of being practices) are not symbolic or lack in cultural meaning ignores vast bodies of work, including numerous complex analyses of anorexic praxis. Further, to argue that feminist accounts of anorexia focus on top-down impositions of uniform social structures as well as "beauty-mad dieting" (p. 37) – and apply to women and girls only – grossly misrepresents the state of play within this significant scholarly arena.

The final, brief chapters of the book, which focus on recovery, hold some promise. Unlike the disturbing lack of voice or meaning they attribute to sufferers' experiences entering into anorexia, the authors admirably place their interviewees center-stage when exploring ways to overcome the problem. These suggestions are refreshingly varied and include widening the sufferer's social and bodily activities to include, for example, "activities that integrate mind and body" (p. 210). Perhaps the relative success of the book's ending is due to the fact that the interviewees are "recovered." The cautious notes of hope that are sounded here, while somewhat anecdotal but thankfully not overdrawn, are a useful antidote to the many pessimistic reports one can find about prospects for recovery from anorexia.

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