The Flesh of the Body Image

A Phenomenological Approach to Anorexia Nervosa

People diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa face the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses. The DSM-V names a distorted, incorrect perception of the body as a principal diagnostic criterion for anorexia. This view, however, cannot accommodate the complex experience an anorexic person has of their body. In response, philosophers and psychologists have turned to phenomenology, discounting the role of the body image. I argue that the body image plays a vital role in the lived experience of anorexia by introducing a novel understanding of the body image based on Merleau-Ponty. I start with describing Osler's phenomenological understanding of anorexia as a project of controlling the demanding body. Then I present the fleshed-out body image for the ideal body and someone's own body. The fleshed-out images encapsulate not only the perceived physical dimensions of the body, but also the body's habits, emotions and visceral demands, in short someone's being-in-the-world. I add the habitual and emotional demands coming from the image of the ideal body to the anorexic project of controlling your own body. This comprehension of body imagery in anorexia bridges the gaps between the DSM-V, phenomenological and psychological studies, to connect the lived experience of anorexia more to the diagnosis and subsequent treatment.