

PANEL 10

Extreme Bodies: Norm, Excess, and Transgression in Western Medicine

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/ Samstag, 18.9.2021, 14.30–15.30 Uhr

/ Themenstrang „Human Scales“ (Einwahllink)

Long before being measured, the body has been a unit of measurement and a canon in that it defines the norm within which health can be maintained and life can persist. As all in-formal parameters, whose existence and value predate their conceptual manipulation – their apprehension being individual, private, implicit, and prelinguistic – the body-canon has defined the range of what is normal and abnormal in terms of excess and defect. However, the existence of different ways to express the normal and the abnormal across societies and cultures, in learned as well as in popular literature, inevitably plays a role in how the body is experienced, generating an array of cultural presuppositions, stereotypes, and expectations. Amongst these, a moral and political component should also be taken into account. Indeed, violating a norm implies an ethical stance towards perfecting, challenging, or transgressing accepted conventions. An example of this is how corpulence and fat have been dealt with across the ages, being used to highlight the belonging to the upper class, or - on the contrary - gluttony, intemperance, and incapability of abiding by shared societal mores. Sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Medicine and the Body in the Renaissance (CSMBR), this panel presents some of these entanglements, showing how the implications of the ‘nature vs nurture debate’ have been a constant preoccupation in Western medicine and culture more generally.

/ Yijie Wang (University of Cambridge)

‘Ticking Bodies’ Idioms, Numbers, and the Measurement of the Pulse

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Since antiquity, pulse diagnostics had been erected upon the awareness that the pulse tells not a body in undoubted excess of agitation, but one naturally normal yet subject to alternation in pathological conditions. Such a notion attached to the examination of pulse frequency an emphasis on assessing the norm, that is, the periodicity of the pulse in perfect health, in the first place. The primary enquiry about the normal pulse lingered in *The Physician’s Pulse-Watch* (1707 & 1710) written by the English physician John Floyer (1649-1734), but the way in which he conducted it is of striking epistemological hybridity. This paper discusses the multiple methods of Floyer’s designation of the normal and abnormal pulses through his use of idioms and numbers. It first compares Floyer’s glossary of pulse characteristics with those in the Galenic pulse doctrine and later commentaries, and examines Floyer’s strategy of adapting the ancient pulse-lore and squaring it into the spectrum of his own sensation. It then pays attention to the numbers of pulsebeats per minute that Floyer observed, recorded, and, more important, categorised and paired with corresponding qualitative idioms. By considering his pulse numbers in the deep lineage of pulse-counting technology, it elaborates their epistemological plurality in which the pulsating body stood as a subject to observe as well as a canon to represent the regularity of the macrocosm. Based on these analyses, it investigates the relationship between the numbers and the idioms. We will see how Floyer, by designing the binary form of pulse rendering, attempted to incorporate earlier philosophical conceptions of health into the principle of empiricism. In this context, numbers were not enlisted to establish a standard of body measurement to overcome the uncertainty of experience, but to testify experience itself as such a standard.

/ Holly Fletcher (University of Sussex)

'Transgressive Bodies': Bodyweight and Excess in Early Modern Germany

/ Samstag, 18.9.2021, 14.30–15.30 Uhr

In this paper, I will examine understandings of the excessive body in early modern Germany, focusing in particular on the role of bodyweight within ideas about excess. Scholars have shown that the excessive body could be imagined as an overflowing vessel in this period, as the body would expel superfluous food and drink through the bodily fluids of sweat, vomit, urine and excrement. This understanding was closely connected to contemporary medical theory, as excessive consumption disrupted the balance of the humours, and the body's reaction to excess would also depend on a person's complexion. Whilst offering a fascinating insight into the bodily consequences of excessive consumption, existing studies have neglected the ways in which this consumption, and the understanding of the body as a vessel, could implicate the size and shape of the body. I will question therefore, how far the transgressive acts of gluttony and drunkenness could be connected to ideas about bodyweight in this period. As well as considering medical perspectives on excess, I will focus my discussion on the cultural associations of the excessive body, exploring how such bodies could take on moral, religious and even political meaning. Ultimately, I will connect this discussion of excess and transgression to the focus of scales and limit values, as I question what constituted excessive behaviour in this context? What were the 'norms' of bodyweight and consumption, and in turn, how far were fat bodies characterised as excessive or transgressive?

/ Marsha Wubbels (University of Exeter)

'Heavy bodies': Understanding Body Weight and Weight-Watching in Eighteenth-Century England

/ Samstag, 18.9.2021, 14.30–15.30 Uhr

Today, body weight plays a tremendous role in our defining, diagnosing, and curing of excess fat. This connection between body weight and unhealthy fatness was not always so intrinsic, however. This paper will discuss eighteenth-century concerns with and interest in body weight and weight-watching and argue that these differed significantly from our own. It will demonstrate that eighteenth-century English society did not share our concept of 'overweight', but that many individuals pursued a perfect balance between their ingesta and excreta. Weight-loss, however, was not the motivation behind these weight-watching practices. It will also argue that for the much of the eighteenth century, body weight did not yet play a significant role in the medicalisation of corpulence, and that corpulence was generally defined and diagnosed using other criteria.

/ Alexander Pyrges (JMU Würzburg)

Scaling Size? Measuring and Quantifying Corpulence in Medicine

/ Samstag, 18.9.2021, 14.30–15.30 Uhr

While in contemporary discourses, both medical and lay, corpulence is primarily differentiated by measurable degrees, early modern and modern popular and learned discourses centered on different types or qualities, rather than degrees or quantities, of corpulence and associated personalities. This paper will explore how the physical form of the corpulent body was translated into numbers and which role the numeric understanding of corpulence played in the medical literature. The numeric assessment of bigness entered the medical literature through the case studies of corpulent individuals, which first appeared in late 17th century learned periodicals and multiplied during the course of the 18th century. Providing detailed measurements of individuals, not always patients, such case studies arguably replicated early modern reports on persons considered "monsters" or wonders of nature due

to their particular bulk. In both kinds of publications, a variety of different vertical and lateral as well as mass measurements was explored. However, while standard in case studies, such measurements bore no diagnostic or therapeutic relevance in the specialized literature on corpulence well into the 19th century. Even renowned early 20th century specialists remained skeptical of the practical diagnostic or therapeutic value of weighting individual corpulent patients. An established but marginal phenomenon for about two hundred years the translation of physical form into numbers gained prominence as the medicalization, pathologization and therapeutization of corpulence continued (and intensified). Initially case-based it was more and more frequently employed in hygiene and public health debates and from there became instrumental in the hegemonic shift from a horizontal classification to a vertical scale of corpulence in medicine.