Anorexia: Beyond the Body Uncanny

Katherine J. Morris

Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, Volume 20, Number 1, March 2013, pp. 97-98 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/511274
Anorexia cries out for a phenomenological understanding, especially one grounded in the phenomenology of the body. Svenaeus’s analysis is very much to be welcomed as a step in that direction. I want to draw out three difficulties, concerns, or lacunae in his analysis as it stands, in the spirit of constructive criticism.

One difficulty is terminological. Svenaeus, according to his title, takes as his central analytical concept the notion of ‘the body uncanny,’ which he ostensibly derives from the phenomenologist R. M. Zaner (1981); for Zaner (as quoted by Svenaeus 2013, 84), this notion refers to the experience of being at the ‘disposal or mercy’ of the body, of being forced to attend to it (as opposed to its usual mode of being inconspicuous, in the background) because it “has its own nature, functions, structures, and biological conditions”, as exemplified in, e.g., fatigue, hunger, or pain. Svenaeus, however, introduces two further terms—‘unhomelike’ and ‘alienated’—whose relations to this specific notion of the body uncanny do not seem altogether perspicuous. On the face of it, Zaner’s notion is narrower than either of the other two (we will see examples of this in a moment), but Svenaeus does not say so; it is furthermore unclear, to me at least, whether ‘unhomelike’ and ‘alienated’ are meant to be equivalent.

Second, Svenaeus’s own multifaceted analysis overspills the boundaries of the (Zaner’s) body uncanny; he actually does an injustice to his own recognition of the richly ambiguous nature of bodily experience by trying to tie his analysis to a single facet of that bodily experience.

He calls attention to ‘the uncanny, being-possessed-like character’ of much anorexia: “[p]ersons suffering from anorexia sometimes describe their relationship to the illness as a being possessed by a ghost or demon” (Svenaeus 2013, 85). Here, however, it does not seem to be the body which is ‘uncanny’ (as indeed Svenaeus acknowledges); it seems rather that the body is in conflict with the uncanny ‘demon’ voice which tells the sufferer that she ‘must not eat.’ (There may be other ways of reading this, and perhaps Svenaeus intends one of them, for example, to the extent that the body is experienced as ‘possessed,’ it may be that it itself—and not merely the possessing ‘entity’—appears uncanny; or to the extent that the sufferer identifies with the ‘demon,’ the body to which the demon is opposed may appear alien, “an obstacle and an enemy which needs to be controlled”, p. 89.)

Svenaeus also notes (with due credit to the Sartrean ‘look’) the fact that many narratives of anorexia begin “with a scenario in which a young girl suddenly understands by way of comments or
behaviors of others that she is too fat” (85), that is, her body is ‘unhomelike’ “in the sense of not conforming to an ideal of slenderness” (86); it is “too fat to be at home with” (89). Here it is indeed the body that is ‘alien’ or ‘unhomelike,’ but this does not sound like uncanniness in Zaner’s sense.

Svenaeus further observes that as the illness progresses, the body of the anorexia sufferer “gradually becomes uncanny to others (the family) in exhibiting a skeletal look” (86). Once again, it is the body that is ‘uncanny’ here too, but once again this does not sound like uncanniness in Zaner’s sense; it is (to use Sartre’s terms) the body-for-others, not the body-for-itself, which is uncanny or alien here.

There is one strand of Svenaeus’s analysis which clearly fits the Zaner notion of uncanniness: he notes that anorexia is often associated with the menarche, and observes that

[t]o experience the body changes of puberty can be an uncanny experience in itself when the body, indeed, takes on a strange life of its own that (initially at least) might feel very foreign and disgusting. (Svenaeus 2013, 86)

(Here, the literature which analyses anorexia in terms of the Kristevan notion of abjection might also be relevant; see, e.g., Warin 2003; Weiss 1999.) However—and this is my third complaint—Svenaeus does not take up the hint that Zaner offers in the very passage he quotes: the idea of hunger as a paradigm manifestation of the body uncanny. Svenaeus does direct our attention to food as “the major foreign thing that enters into your body” (87). On the one hand, despite his use of the word ‘foreign’ here, Svenaeus does not seem to be arguing that food may be experienced as uncanny; yet this idea is well worth exploring. Indeed, Megan Warin argues (on the basis of her multisited study of a number of anorexic women) that anorexia involves not so much a ‘fear of fatness’ as a fear of (the substance) fat, and that this is to be construed as a fear of contamination. (Fat might well be described as not just ‘contaminating’ but ‘uncanny’ in some sense: “is indeterminate in form . . . it seeps, infiltrates, and congeals,” Warin [2003, 86]). On the other hand, hunger itself seems so central to anorexia—“I’m always hungry. I’m hungry all the time and I’m so scared that if I give into my hunger I will never stop eating, that I’ll just keep eating and eating and eating and never be satisfied” (quoted in Warin 2003, 83; cf. Schaefer 2009, 136)—that, I submit, a phenomenology of anorexia demands a phenomenology of hunger.

Despite these reservations, Svenaeus has begun a conversation about the phenomenology of anorexia that, I hope, he and others will continue.

REFERENCES