

## ***Thinking Queerly: Race, Sex Gender and the Ethics of Identity***

David Ross Fryer. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012.

*Reviewed by Paul Reynolds*

What does it mean to think queerly? David Ross Fryer's slim volume seeks to explore how we think ethically about identity through a reflexive discourse that self-consciously explores how he constructs his queer critique of the problems and possibilities of an ethics of identity. Fryer is very clear that he is problematising both the idea of a queer approach to thinking as something distinctly delineated, and the idea of ethics and ethical thinking as conventionally articulated. What he seeks to avoid is apparent: a queer theory that undermines the identity politics through which lesbian and gay rights have formed and developed; and a sexual politics that retreats into conservative inclusionary aspirations and so loses any sense of the queer radicalism that should challenge and disrupt heteronormativity.

The text itself, as Fryer explains, began life as a series of essays and cohered as he recognised a broader sense of their reflecting his approach to queering – or perhaps querying – how we think about the ethics of identity in a post-human age (my hyphenation). To an extent, it is clear to see those roots, and it is questionable as to whether the text deliberately eschews of clear narrative as a feature of thinking queerly or this reflects shortcomings in developing the text. It starts with a discussion of what Fryer regards as the emergent possibilities of post-humanism and the ethics of thinking queerly within the context of an Anti-black world, before expanding on the particularities of African-American queer studies. For Fryer, this involves a recognition that the key battleground for new thinking is between essentialised humanist positions that become constituted in dominant normative values and anti-humanist de-essentialised alternatives which lose the centrality of the human ethical subject. Fryer's intention is to posit a post-humanist queer subjectivity that develops its ethical impulse through phenomenological roots and a creative synergy between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. This provides a base – to a point – from which he develops an alternate conception of queer thinking, supplanting phenomenology for post-structuralism as a root. This is probably the most important part of the book. This leads – not altogether coherently – into an assessment of the possible conjunctures between Levinas, representing a phenomenological approach, and psychoanalysis before concluding with an exploration of phenomenology and subjectivity in Levinas and Sartre through a study of responsibility of *The Hours*, a book by Michael Cunningham turned into a play and film by David Hare.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the claimed coherence of the text is open to question. Whilst there are clear linkages made between successive chapters, and there is some sense of this extended reflexive essay following particular themes and ideas in exploring an ethics of identity, what is lost is a sense of balance and focus in the analysis. By the end of the text, whatever pleasure and provocation comes from the sum of parts frustrates in the sense that the parts are not necessarily developed and explored, particularly the main claims of the text.

The most critical feature of Fryer's thinking is a queer theory that arises from phenomenological rather than post-structuralist roots. The motivation behind this, thoroughly laudable, is to retain to critical insight of queer whilst not losing sight of the subject as more than a vessel for discursive. It certainly has the potential attraction of theorizing contingency, the possible rebalancing of plasticity and fixidity and the balancing of an ethics of subjective making with an ethics of communal living within late modernity and its discursive and material contexts. It avoids the afoundationalism and endlessly transgressive claims of those who wish to take draw their queer theory from Foucault and post-structuralism and dissolve material inequality, oppression and injustice into discourse that reifies contingent subjectivity over normative social and political constraints. Yet here it is suggested rather than developed. A discussion of the merits and limits of Foucault and Butler that suggests that the phenomenological tradition from Husserl might offer a critical step forward is never really adequately developed, though its resonances through subsequent discussions of Levinas and Sartre are evident. What is needed is a more elaborated and exploratory treatment of the nature and consequences of this rethinking of queer theory that take in the phenomenological tradition in greater depth. Such a discussion may well have drawn from an extensive literature on embodiment, affect and subjectivism using such authors as Rosalyn Diprose, Rosi Braidotti, Cressida Heyes, Drucilla Cornell and others who have married post-structuralism, particularly Foucault, feminism and themes and ideas from the phenomenological. An extended discussion might also have traced the interplay of post-structuralist and phenomenological thinking and its relationship with psychoanalysis, which become the central focus of chapter four on the constructive synergy between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. This is not to say every theoretical reflection requires the backstory of western philosophy to be elaborated, and Fryer does represent this as a reflective exercise, but the lack of a sustained articulation of these ideas make the discussion, however thought-provoking, somewhat impressionistic.

This is reinforced by Fryer's tendency to present his core concepts in a quite limited and unnuanced way – so his conception of normativity is drawn from psychoanalysis, and outlined as describing those dominant orthodox values in society such as heterosexuality and monogamy, where ethical practice might be oppositional. The problem with this conception is instantly recognisable as he specifically seeks to disassociate his criticisms of normativity as criticism of ethics. Yet this easy usages does tend to fall short when the question arises as to what post-normativity, for example, looks like, and the juxtaposition of psychoanalytic meanings in the context of philosophical-theoretical studies of queer and phenomenology is untidy. The claims for a post-human and post-normative positions seem to be little more than rejections of contemporary forms of oppression and fixidity without a deeper sense of what

such terms might represent in and for themselves (hence the hyphen in this text). Again, Fryer does give a brief schematic of humanist (foundationalist), anti-humanist (anti-foundationalist) and post-humanist (within the tension between the two) positions as he defines them, but these sketches require considerably more development to underpin a phenomenological queer that sustains the human without either rooting them within orthodoxy and ideology or dissolving them into discourse.

These criticisms are not, as they might appear, simply scholarly dissatisfactions, though any text that initiates such a broad philosophical discussion with such trenchant claims opens itself up to such objections. The problem – and Fryer might not see it as a problem – is that whilst the limits of queer theory and identity politics as a basis of ethical conduct might be agreed, the practice and development of this new ethics of identity is elusive. Fryer might legitimately claim that the task of this ethical development has to be made within the subject, from their own engagement with the sort of synergistic observations he makes, for example, on phenomenology and psychoanalysis. The problem with that, however, is that if thinking queerly is an open-ended subjective process which can only be represented in this sort of reflective narrative that draws from western philosophy to make its subjective claims, the possibility for collective insight and mutual and reciprocal relations is rendered more difficult. As such, whilst Fryer has begun a dialogue for thinking more ethical relationships, his claims are provisional and underdeveloped.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Fryer's text is an interesting exemplar in thinking queerly. What we see is how Fryer's different concerns coalesce and gestate towards critical insight. Fryer maps his terrain, presents his insights in gestation and applies them in theoretical reflection and literary criticism as application. Whilst incomplete it is also open-ended, and encourages the reader to think with Fryer on the central task of the text, which is how to think queerly towards ethical self-engagement and engagement with the other, where human relations are freed from orthodoxies which impede the constitution of free and ethical relationships. In this, for whatever criticisms can be raised, Fryer's insights are worth reading and reflecting upon.