

Introduction

Sara Heinämaa · Lanei Rodemeyer

Published online: 10 April 2010
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For much of its history, Husserlian phenomenology has been taken as an individualist and subjectivist philosophy. However, recent studies of Husserl's manuscripts have proven this notion wrong: The constitutive ground of all objectivity is found in intersubjectivity—and in intercorporeality, as Merleau-Ponty has argued. Phenomenology as a whole, then, is being reconsidered with regard to its grounds and on the basis of its analyses. More specifically, Husserl's published introductory discussions about transcendental intersubjectivity, found primarily in the *Cartesian Meditations* and *Crisis*, are now being fleshed out with rich descriptions and analyses of intersubjective and intercorporeal relations.

Nevertheless, in these analyses, the subjects that are described as acting and living together in communicative interrelationships are usually characterized as simply human. Most contemporary commentators in phenomenology take human subjectivity as a unitary starting point and proceed in their descriptions and analyses, as if mentioning men and women would risk slipping into empirical or merely mundane concerns. Gender is taken as a factual issue, an empirical problem, which belongs to the sciences of anthropology, psychology, and biology, far from transcendental phenomenology or fundamental ontology.

This is the case in spite of the fact that Husserl included the “problem of the sexes” among the transcendental problems to be studied by genetic phenomenology and urged us to inquire into the constitution of its meaning as a “worldly occurrence”.¹ Beyond Husserl's remarks, existential phenomenologists have

¹ Husserl (1954, p. 192).

S. Heinämaa (✉)
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: heinamaa@mappi.helsinki.fi

L. Rodemeyer
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
e-mail: rodemeyer@duq.edu

questioned the Cartesian and Kantian notions of consciousness and emphasized the constitutive role of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty perhaps most radically: “If (...) we define man in terms of his experience (...) [then] a man without hands or a man without a sexual system is as inconceivable as one without the power of thought.”²

This issue of *Continental Philosophy Review* challenges the standard view of the sexless subject of transcendental and existential phenomenology and argues that problems of sexual difference and gender are relevant, and even crucial, to phenomenological analyses concerning the constitution of sense and the meaning of being. The volume offers a series of original articles that urge us to question the received notion that the groundbreaking subject of phenomenology is a sexless pure ego or a neutral *Dasein*.

It is important to note, however, that such a phenomenological discourse on sexual difference is not a completely new invention. Rather than a first opening, this volume presents a creative rediscovery and a critical reassessment of topics and arguments that were present already at the beginning of the last century. As an introduction to this set of original new articles, we would like to offer a brief review of the history of feminist phenomenology, and an overview of the methodologies employed and themes taken up in this line of inquiry.

1 Historical starting points

Phenomenological inquiries into the sexually differentiated aspects of human experience and conscious life date back to the 1930s and 1940s. These early inquiries are not limited to the excursions of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or Lévinas, but consist of the rich and detailed descriptions and analyses developed by female phenomenologists, most prominently Edith Stein and Simone de Beauvoir.

Stein developed an original theory of human types, based on her interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology and Thomist theology and anthropology. Her main interest in the question of women was educational and religious, but her philosophical anthropology and her theory of personality include conceptual innovations and methodological insights that are interesting to a contemporary phenomenology of sexual relations.³ Most importantly, Stein’s descriptions and analyses of feminine and masculine types of consciousness, with different vertical structures, imply unsettling questions about the unity and homogeneity of our intersubjective life.

Simone de Beauvoir used Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of embodied consciousness to account for the structural differences in women’s and men’s experiences of temporality and materiality.⁴ These existential accounts of embodiment rested on Husserlian distinctions, most importantly the distinction between the

² Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1993, p. 198); cf. Jean-Paul Sartre ([1943] 1998, p. 423).

³ For Stein’s philosophical anthropology and for her theory of personality and gender, see Stein (2000, [1932–1933] 2004, 2004). For an introduction to Stein’s philosophy, see Calcagno (2007).

⁴ For an explication of Beauvoir’s existential-phenomenological arguments, see Heinämaa (2003); for the philosophical aspects of Beauvoir’s novels and autobiographies, see Björk (2008); cf. Holveck (2002).

lived body and the physical object (*Leib-Körper*) and the distinction between three attitudes that we can take towards such bodies, i.e., naturalistic, personalistic, and phenomenological. However, Beauvoir's indebtedness and contribution to the tradition was not restricted to an account of sexually differing bodies. Recent scholarly work has shown that she contributed, by her ethical essays and novels, to contemporary philosophical debates concerning the phenomena of mortality and futurity, and the relationship between the self and the other.

Both Stein and Beauvoir were outspoken feminists: Stein developed her feminist insight in her lectures on women's education, and Beauvoir presented a feminist account of sexual hierarchies in her classic, *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1949). But there were other phenomenologists who refrained from taking any feminist stand, or who attacked such stands, but who thematized, interpreted, and analyzed phenomena which later became central for feminist phenomenologists. Hannah Arendt's original and inventive discourse of natality and the event of birth is perhaps the best known of these conceptual innovations, but there is also interesting material in Scheler's ethical works, in Fink's philosophical anthropology, in Schutz's theory of cultural and social types, and in the existential psychoanalysis outlined by Binswanger—as well as in Husserl's own research notes on generativity and drive intentionality.⁵

In the 1970s and 1980s, phenomenological accounts of embodiment and sexuality were connected to, and merged with, other theoretical approaches. French feminists, most importantly Irigaray and Kristeva, developed new combinations of existential phenomenology and psychoanalysis, based on Freud's and Lacan's accounts of the unconscious.⁶ Canadian and Australian feminists, such as Dorothea Smith, Lorraine Code, and Genevieve Lloyd, presented strong feminist critiques of epistemological universalism, influenced by several different sources—Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Schutz included.⁷ In the USA, feminist thinkers became familiar with Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies through the critiques of emigrated phenomenologists such as Arendt, Schutz, and Aron Gurwitsch. Another context was provided by American interpretations, advancements, and critiques of classical and French existentialism.⁸ Here continental sources were connected to

⁵ See, e.g., Lee (1993), Bernet (2006, pp. 38–53).

⁶ See, e.g. Irigaray (1974, 1977, 1984) and Kristeva (1983). For an account of the theoretical connections between “the French feminists” and phenomenology, see Heinämaa (2010a). On Irigaray's phenomenological background, see Chanter (1995), Sandford (2000), and Cimitile and Miller (2006).

⁷ Smith (1979, pp. 135–187; 1987).

⁸ The 1950s witnessed a flourish of existentialism in America. In 1956 there appeared two volumes which became broadly influential: Hazel E. Barnes' English translation of Sartre's *L'être et le néant* and Walter Kaufmann's collection of primary sources in English, *Existentialism from Dostojevsky to Sartre*. Several new interpretations and critical commentaries also came out, e.g., Collins (1952), Reinhardt (1952), Wild (1955), and Barrett (1958). These works studied and assessed existentialism in relation to pragmatism, logical positivism, marxism, and the tradition of Christian theology. Young women scholars, such as Barnes and Marjorie Grene, had a significant role in the development of this new philosophical alternative. Academic positions in the traditional and canonical fields of philosophy were occupied by male scholars and their male proteges, but existentialism both required and offered a new type of expertise that was free of male dominance (Cotkin 2005, p. 138). Grene's constructive and critical account of existentialism *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* appeared already in 1948. In 1957, she published a book on Heidegger, and two years later an introduction to existentialism. Later she

pragmatist and postpragmatist currents, and new theories of women's experience were developed on this heterogeneous basis.⁹

Such fusions are not surprising, as phenomenology shares several central topics—experience, subjectivity, duration, and intersubjectivity—with psychoanalysis, pragmatism, and social theory. Methodologically, however, these developments involved problems, as they neglected or abandoned the distinction between transcendental or ontological inquiries and empirical investigations. “Phenomenology” was taken in a non-technical sense and was used to refer to any philosophical or human scientific discourse on experience,¹⁰ and many propagators of the approach lost contact with the transcendental aspirations that originally had motivated the undertaking.

2 Methodological tensions

An obvious argument against any attempt to include sexual difference among phenomenological topics proper builds on the distinction between the transcendental self and the mundane person. The idea is that, whereas sexual difference characterizes us as mundane subjects, i.e., as subjects living in the world and being involved in all kinds of practical and theoretical positings, this difference is completely alien to the transcendental self, and to *Dasein*. The pure ego cannot die, or be born, and clearly it cannot have any sex; and *Dasein*, too, even if it lives toward its own death, lacks a sense of sexuality. Thus, the argument proceeds, the concept of sexual difference may be, at best, operative in phenomenological anthropology or eidetic psychology, but it has no role in transcendental analyses that inquire into the constitutive basis of experience.

Despite its apparent persuasiveness, and its long history, this line of argumentation has become problematic. During the last few decades, the traditional

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focused on philosophy of science and biology but wrote also extensively on Descartes and Cartesianism. Barnes continued working on existential philosophy and published two important works on Sartre and also two original studies in existential aesthetics and ethics, *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* (1959) and *An Existential Ethics* (1967). The first volume includes an interpretation of Beauvoir's feminist existentialism based on *The Second Sex* and Beauvoir's novels. For detailed accounts of this intellectual history, see Fallon (1999) and Cotkin (2005); compare also to Barnes' autobiography (1997), and her response to Eleanore Holveck's essay “The birth of American existentialism: Hazel E. Barnes, a singular universal,” both published in 1998 in *Philosophy Today*.

⁹ Young has published several influential essays which combine existential-phenomenological insights with critical theory and pragmatist social philosophy. Young uses existential and phenomenological concepts primarily when analyzing female embodiment, its spatiality and temporality. The best known works are “Throwing like a girl” (1980), “Pregnant embodiment” (1984), and “Breasted experience” (1990), all included in her collection *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (1990). More recently, Weiss has developed a powerful combination of phenomenology of embodiment and postmodern identity theory in her volumes *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (1999) and *Refiguring the Ordinary* (2009).

¹⁰ See e.g. Barkty (1978, pp. 22–34); cf. Alcoff (2004). A parallel development can be tracked down in the field of race studies. Lewis Gordon's work, for example, is influenced by phenomenology and existentialism (Husserl, Schutz, Sartre) but also by Franz Fanon's psychoanalytic discourse.

interpretation of the transcendental field has been questioned in several ways and from several different directions. New studies of Husserl's unpublished manuscripts have brought to light puzzling statements. We find Husserl arguing, for example, as follows: "I, the human being in the world, living naturally only as this human being and finding myself in the personal attitude as this human person, am accordingly not another ego as that which I find in the transcendental attitude."¹¹ On the basis of such passages, and similar ones, it has been argued that the distinction between the transcendental ego and the empirical ego is methodological, without any ontological implications, and that the transcendental ego is not a separate being but a reflective modification or possibility of the mundane self.¹²

In light of these arguments, we must ask which structures of our mundane life, if any, endure the transcendental modification and the process of eidetic variation, and if any aspects of our sexual specificity belongs among them. In so far as gender is defined by anatomic and physiological features, it seems obvious that the reflective attitude can disclose it only as a worldly object; but if we do not shy away from the idea that the reflective activity or practice itself may be gendered, then the issue of sexual difference proves more complicated. Edith Stein points in this direction when she argues that women, more easily than men, are able to assume the personalistic attitude toward other selves, and to suspend the objectifying attitude belonging to the natural sciences. Both attitudes allow an access to the transcendental phenomenological stance, but in Stein's account, the routes remain separate, and also unequal, with respect to the goal of true self-knowledge. She argues: "in the small flock that approaches the goal of full humanity there seems to be more women than men."¹³

The methodological distinction between static and genetic inquiries also brings with it new principal questions.¹⁴ In the genetic perspective, the transcendental ego is not an empty pole but a process of habitation. Experiences build upon each other, are sedimented, so that the ego gains a certain temporal depth and an integration into its past. The differences, actual and possible, between these genetic processes remain to be studied. Moreover, it has been argued that the generative relations between the lives of temporally separate, diachronic subjects have constitutive significance.¹⁵ Phenomena that once seemed to fall outside transcendental phenomenology—death, birth, genesis, drives, the unconscious, and the sexes—are now being rediscovered and reassessed within its limits.

3 The rising of feminist phenomenology and its themes

The recent feminist turn toward traditional or classical phenomenology, and the combining of phenomenological insights with critical feminist queries, is not yet an

¹¹ Husserl (2002, pp. 200–201); cf. Husserl (1973, pp. 42–44).

¹² See, e.g., Rinofner-Kreidel (2003).

¹³ Stein (2000, p. 257).

¹⁴ For this distinction, see Husserl (1929, 1939); cf. Bachelard ([1957] 1968, Chaps. 4–6) and Welton (2000, Chaps. 7–8).

¹⁵ Steinbock (1995) and Donohoe (2004); cf. Schües (1997, pp. 243–252), Rodemeyer (1998, pp. 76–84), Oksala (2004, pp. 16–22), and Heinämaa (2010a, b).

organized movement or a systematic school of thought. The situation is very similar to that of the last century: Individual scholars operate separately without much support from permanent institutions and without systematic or continuous connection to each other's work. Over the past few decades, several young philosophers, usually trained in classical phenomenology and/or existentialism as well as feminist theory have, on the one hand, applied phenomenological methods to feminist topics and, on the other hand, proposed critical feminist questions concerning unrecognized prejudices operative in the canon of phenomenology. Mirroring the institutional dispersion of feminist phenomenology, the articles presented in this volume come from philosophers working in different scholarly environments across the globe (Austria, Canada, Finland, Hungary, Sweden, and the United States) and while each contributor recognizes and refers to the work of other philosophers struggling with similar questions, it is clear that we are still at the beginnings of what could be called an established "movement" or a school of Feminist Phenomenology.¹⁶

However, all contemporary feminist phenomenologists have at least one shared characteristic: In order to explicate the experience of sexual difference, they all turn to the conceptual and methodological resources of the tradition, despite its neglect of feminist concerns. One could perhaps say that these scholars believe more in the letter of Husserl's program of a rigorous, unprejudiced science than what can be seen in its execution in the tradition. While recognizing that most canonical works bypass feminist questions about subjectivity and being, and while admitting that some of these texts are simply hostile to women and/or the feminine, feminist phenomenologists claim to find powerful concepts and methods, as well as fruitful questions, in original phenomenological works and in their unprejudiced interpretations. Specifically, they see these sources as indispensable in their attempts to answer fundamental questions concerning the meaning of sexual difference, the gendered body, and equality in difference.

Despite their common indebtedness to original sources and the methods of inquiry established in them, feminist phenomenologists have many different thematic concerns and interests. Their works address a great variety of topics, from the constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, to expressivity, language, spatiality, temporality, and embodiment, and they cut across the different subfields of philosophy, from epistemology and logic to ethics and political theory. When developing their accounts of sexual difference and embodiment, feminist phenomenologists also address classical feminist issues, such as sexuality, desire, maternity, education, and the assumption of gendered roles. In each case, however, they carry

¹⁶ Collections of articles in feminist phenomenology started to appear at the turn of the century: Stoller and Vetter edited the collection *Phänomenologie und Geschlechterdifferenz* that appeared in Vienna in 1997; Fisher and Embree prepared the volume *Feminist Phenomenology* for Springer in 2000; and Fisher, Stoller and Vasterling put together a bilingual collection *Feminist Phenomenology and Hermeneutics for Königshausen and Neumann* in 2005. Phenomenological essays on embodiment and sexual difference have also appeared in collections with broader scopes, such as *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings* by Welton (1999), *Verhandlungen des Geschlechts: Zur Konstruktivismusdebatte in der Gender-Theorie* by Waniek and Stoller (2001), and *Sex, Breath, and Force: Sexual Difference in a Post-Feminist Era* by Mortensen (2006). In 2006, Ute Gahlings published an extensive systematic study of the specificity of women's bodily experiences entitled *Phänomenologie der weibliche Leiberfahrung* (2006).

out analyses that touch on the phenomenological core of the issue at hand: the lived experience of the gendered subject.

That said, we would like to argue that contributions to feminist phenomenology, no matter what their specific interest and approach, usually fall into one of two categories: First, feminist phenomenologists can work simply through rigorous analyses of constitution. While the concept of constitution may be defined in several different ways, these analyses always aim to explicate the static and/or genetic formation of sense involved in consciousness or human life. What makes this type of phenomenological analysis *feminist* is that it rejects the assumption of a neutral—homogenous or unitary—subject and proceeds from the concreteness of sexual difference or gendered life. Thus, one can, for example, analyze the objectification of the other in light of gendered experiences of embodiment; inquire into one's own self-constitution as a woman or a man (or both); study the sensual experience and expression of the body without abstracting from sexual difference; or work critically through the re-presentations that racist and sexist communities and cultures impose on human individuals—to name just a few approaches.

Developing this line of argument, papers in this volume offer constitutional analyses and interpretations of subjectivity, selfhood, otherness, and sensibility: Alia Al-Saji's essay studies Husserl's account of touch and works through its implications for feminist questions concerning selfhood and otherness. Ulrika Björk's paper addresses the questions of self-constitution, intersubjectivity, and love through Beauvoir's existential philosophy and literature. Lisa Käll's essay explicates the constitution of the other in light of Sartre's existential phenomenology and shows how questions of gender and race can be interconnected within the Sartrean framework. Linda Fisher thematizes voice as an aspect of expressive embodiment, and asks how sexual difference is given in our auditory self-experience.

The second category of feminist phenomenology can best be characterized as engaging in close dialogue with other areas of contemporary philosophy, such as the history of philosophy, postmodern theories of identity and power, or postpragmatist and postanalytical inquiries into perception, knowledge, justice, and the good life. The fields of these dialogues range from ethics and aesthetics to metaphysics and ontology. This type of feminist phenomenology usually includes detailed analyses and interpretations of experiences, but it also carries out extensive comparative work between phenomenology and other philosophical approaches. The comparisons concern concepts used and developed, methods defended or presupposed, as well as arguments and their implications. Often, such studies lay the groundwork for showing the strength of feminist phenomenology in the analysis of gendered experiences.

In this volume, comparative approaches relate phenomenology to postmodernism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and analytical ethics. Silvia Stoller argues that Judith Butler is incorrect when she claims that Merleau-Ponty's concept of expression is essentialist; instead, the contributions that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can make to feminist issues are more in alignment with Butler's approach than Butler recognizes. Anne Van Leeuwen studies Heidegger's ontology of *Dasein* in light of Luce Irigaray's critical comments and constructive work, both of which

accentuate the inevitability of sexual difference. Janet Donohoe offers an original reading of Husserl's remarks on motherhood and the ethical meanings involved in the child–parent relation.

As a whole, this volume is meant to document some of the innovative work already being carried out in the area of feminist phenomenology, and to support the mutual recognition of scholars in this area. The possibilities of interchange and cooperation depend, as always, on institutional parameters and working conditions. This compilation aims to support the establishment of such structures, and to function as a reference to the future, showing or anticipating directions for developing work in the field. The essays here bring to the fore new topical areas and sets of problems in which phenomenological methods can be employed—and are already being employed successfully. At the same time, the volume thematizes issues that will motivate new critical questions concerning the adequacy and tenability of phenomenological philosophy and its viability in the arena of competing philosophical approaches. In doing so, it demonstrates the validity of feminist phenomenological work and the engagement of the scholars carrying it out.

The editors would like to extend their sincere gratitude to *Continental Philosophy Review* and Springer publishers for making this Special Issue possible, and more specifically, for providing a space where recent work in feminism and phenomenology can be represented and acknowledged. A special thanks goes out to Anthony Steinbock, for his faith in our project, his patience, and his continuous support of the idea from the very beginning.

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