Phenomenological Insights into Oppression: Passive Synthesis and Personal Responsibility

Neal De Roo
Dordt College

Drawing on phenomenology's account of "passive synthesis," this paper seeks to provide a phenomenological vocabulary that could be useful in explaining institutional oppression to those who find it difficult to understand that we can be responsible for acts and meanings that we do not intend. Though the main goal of the paper is to justify the use of the terminology of passive synthesis in the discourse on oppression, the paper ends by suggesting how employing passive synthesis in this manner suggests ways of combating oppression.

The idea of responsibility for that which is not intended is key to any structural or institutional understanding of oppression.[1] Such an understanding of oppression claims that one can never understand oppression if "one's focus is riveted upon the individual event in all its particularity, including the particularity of the individual man's present conscious intentions and motives and the individual woman's conscious perception of the event in the moment" (Frye 2003, 186). Truly making sense of oppression requires a "shift [in] the level of one's perception in order to see the whole picture" of societal oppression (Frye 2003, 186).

However, such a shift in the level of perception to societal macro-structures often proves problematic to those who cannot conceive that they could be held responsible by others for things that they do not intend. The idea that I could be responsible for things I do not actively intend to do, therefore, proves to be a main point of resistance, both to the structural notion of oppression itself (when people refuse to shift the level of perception beyond the individual), and to the idea that people have a personal responsibility for oppressive structures. In both instances, people are unable to move beyond the idea that my intentions govern my actions and, especially, my moral and ethical responsibility for those actions. If I can be held responsible only for those actions that I freely undertake, and I freely undertake an action only when I do so knowingly and willingly, then, even if I can acknowledge that "society" seems to work against particular oppressed groups (a rather large "if," given this assumption concerning personal responsibility), I will fail to see my personal responsibility for that oppression, since I would never knowingly and willingly do sexist, or otherwise oppressive, things. That is, while some people may

acknowledge that "society" is oppressive, they cannot acknowledge that they in any way contribute to this oppression.[2] Without being aware of their personal responsibility for the situation, it is next to impossible to motivate people who assume such an individual and voluntaristic account of the (ethical and moral) subject to change oppressive structures.

Challenging the deeply held conviction that I cannot be held responsible for things I do not intend is important, then, to the fight against oppression. It has also proven, at least in my experience, to be immensely difficult. To begin immediately talking about societal structures is off-putting to those who cling to a more individualistic viewpoint, but not talking about societal structures at all makes discussing structural oppression impossible. What is needed is a vocabulary that can discuss structural notions of oppression in a way that is both adequate to challenge people to see their personal responsibility for the situation, and yet familiar enough that they will not be predisposed, from the beginning, to discount the very idea of a structural account of oppression.[3]

It is in beginning to develop such a vocabulary that I propose to show that the phenomenological notion of passive synthesis has something worthwhile to offer to discussions of oppression. While one does have to "shift the level of one's perception in order to see the whole picture" of oppression, phenomenology suggests that that shift does not only have to be from a focus on the individual to a focus on societal structures, but also from a focus on the individual as an acting agent to a focus on the individual as necessarily acted upon by societal forces. By showing how every individual makes sense[4] of the world, phenomenology can help explain how societal structures operate within and upon individuals in a way that is both beyond their control and yet for which they remain personally responsible.

Central to this explanation is the idea of "passive synthesis" and the integral role it plays in how we make sense of the world in which we live. Because passive synthesis is something that is simultaneously accomplished by the subject (which thereby makes it responsible for the results of passive synthesis) and done without the active consent of the ego (thereby explaining how we can do things without intending to do them, and even, at times, do things that run *counter* to our intentions), it clarifies how we can participate unintentionally in institutions (or actions, meanings, etc.) without thereby removing the burden of responsibility from ourselves for that participation. The paper ends by suggesting how this recourse to passive synthesis might also help us begin to *change* our unintentional acts,

and so further contribute to the fight against oppression.

Passive Synthesis and the Constitution of the World

In *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Husserl[5] claims that the "fundamental stratification" of consciousness is its split into passive and active levels (Husserl 1973, 64). The realm of passivity describes those acts that occur within the subject without the ego acting on them, that is, without consciously taking them up. This is in contrast to the realm of activity, in which the subject knowingly directs its egoic regard to a particular object or purposively intends a particular act.

The essential elements of passive constitution[6] are associative structure, affection, and attention (Husserl 1985, §§ 16-18).[7] Attention is a "tending of the ego toward an intentional object, toward a unity which 'appears' continually in the change of the modes of its givenness" (Husserl 1985, 85). This tending occurs because of affecting [*Affektion*], that is, "the peculiar pull that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego" (Husserl 1973, 148), though this pull is different from, and in a sense prior to, the ego's attentively turning toward an object. Just as the heat of a fire is a stimulus that prompts us to remove our hand automatically, reflexively, and without the active involvement of the ego, so the allure of an object stimulates the ego to constitute (i.e., make sense of) that object automatically, like a reflex, before the active involvement of the ego.[8]

But the very process of constituting objects in the world is therefore already discretionary: by exercising an alluring pull on our consciousness, the object not only causes us to take it up (that is, it rather than something else), it also causes us to take it up in a certain way (that is, we take X up as X, not as Y or Z or A). When I encounter a chair, for example, the chair stimulates me to constitute it as a *chair*, rather than as a (rather small) house or a (particularly unattractive and sedentary) person or anything else. It does this without the need of my conscious ego intervening to determine what this thing before me is—I just automatically make sense of it as a chair and sit in it, without thinking about what I'm doing.[9] This ability to constitute the chair as a chair results from association, conceived as a "purely immanent connection of 'this recalls that,' 'one calls attention to the other'" (Husserl 1985, 78). This recalling is done on the basis of similarity: that which is reproduced from the past is like that which is perceived in the present, in some way. This affective similarity entails that, at least at this stage of constitution, the affection is *felt* rather than understood, and is experienced as tendency: this affective pull *tends to* recall that previously

experienced affective pull; also, that previously experienced affective pull *tends to* produce a certain set of characteristics or consequences; the similarity between present affective pulls and relevantly similar, previously experienced affective pulls *tends to* produce similar characteristics in the present as were experienced in the past, and so on. The result of this concordance is what we commonly refer to as a tendency. The chair in front of me affects me in a way that recalls earlier experiences when I have been similarly affected. These earlier experiences, in turn, share some common characteristics that I then infer[10] will apply also to the situation before me: in the earlier experiences, the chair had a solid back, was able to hold weight, etc., and so I infer that this thing in front of me now in the present will also have these characteristics. This, in turn, enables me to expect, with varying degrees of certainty, how the other sides of the chair could be perceived if I were to make those other sides available to me, for example by walking around so that I could see the back of chair directly. That is, because of the tendencies produced in association, I am able to expect other, currently non-present sides of the chair, which allows me to apperceive—and hence perceive—what I see as a chair, a thing like other chairs.

More importantly, from an experiential standpoint, these tendencies enable me to expect certain behavioral characteristics of the chair (e.g., that it will hold my weight, that it is an acceptable thing to sit on) that enable me to interact with the chair in a meaning-full—but still automatic—way. I do not think (at least, not consciously) before I sit in a chair, but this does not mean my sitting in the chair is a meaningless act. That I sit in the chair (rather than trying to live in it, talk with it, or something else) evidences that I have constituted it—made sense of it—in a particular way.

But it must be emphasized again that all of this happens passively, that is to say, automatically. The associative aspects of passive synthesis are not separate moments that follow each other, as if I first perceived A, then related it to B, then remembered what B was like and inferred that A, too, must be similar. Rather, this all happens inherently in the very act of perception itself: I do not first encounter the world, and then relate it to previous experiences; rather, I encounter the world primarily in and out of my horizon of past experiences. Phrased alternatively, meaning is not added to the world after the fact, but rather the world I encounter is always a meaningful world. In Husserl, this notion begins to emerge with his discussion of the "object-like formations" [*Gegenständlichkeit*] that are constituted in passive synthesis. These are what enable us to interact with things in the world without first running those interactions through our active judgments.[11] We need not experiment or consciously think about

whether some object is or is not a chair—rather, we come in and sit on it, without interrupting our conversation. In making us able to do this, passive synthesis not only gives us the seeds for further judgments, but, more importantly, it gives us an "environing world"[12] that makes sense, in which we live and by which we are affected.

Passivity and the Acts of the Subject

The notion of passive synthesis, in addition to being critical to how we make sense of the world, opens up the possibility of simultaneous responsibility and passivity, that is, of being responsible for things we do not actively intend. Levinas takes this up explicitly in his re-reading of Husserl. Levinas notes that the idea of passivity necessarily entails that the subject is not alone and monadic, but is always influenced by a world that "is not only constituted but also constituting" (Levinas 1998a, 118). This is to say that the world is not only constituted by the subject, but also helps to constitute that subject. As subjects, we not only act upon the world, but are acted upon by that world.

By showing that the ego is not purely active, but is also passive (and passively active and actively passive), Levinas' conception of phenomenology paves the way for a re-evaluation of the freedom of the (moral) subject. Instead of being free first, and responsible only because it is free (to make choices, to have done otherwise, etc.), Levinas asserts that the subject is first responsible, and is free (to act, to make choices and do things) only because it is responsible (to an interpersonal world that is meaningful because of other, meaning-granting people within it). The ego is not wholly free to do as it wishes, but is rather primordially constituted by something (and someone) outside of itself. This means, most basically, that the very power and basic functioning of the subject—the subject's ability to constitute the world—is not something that the subject does on its own merit or because of its own inherent capacities. Rather, the subject is able to do what it does only because it has had those abilities bestowed upon it by another (or by multiple Others[13]). In this sense, the most basic action of the self—its ability to make sense of the world—is not the outworking of its own sovereignty, but is in fact the product of the self's relationship with the Other (and with others).[14] The self is not first on the scene, but rather the last. The self decides whether or not to be in relation with others only after it has been given the ability to decide by its relation to others. The self makes sense of the world only after other people in that

world—both individually and collectively—give the subject the ability to make sense. Levinas' entire discourse of the ipseity of the subject as responsibility[15] is the radicalization of this point.[16]

Think, for example, of yourself as a person who is able to make sense of the world, someone who can encounter objects in meaningful ways and interact with them accordingly. You have the ability to go against societal conventions, if you choose, or to go along with societal conventions—but both options presuppose a familiarity with those societal conventions, a familiarity that cannot be learned auto-didactically, but must be taught. You can teach yourself something (e.g., a new language) only because you have first learned at the knee of others. You can make sense of the world only because you have first learned, from others, how to make sense—how to use and apply concepts, how to interact with other people (socially, linguistically, economically, etc.), and so on. Further, you are able to do that only because someone else first kept you alive by feeding you, clothing you, protecting you. And many of the ways in which you now make sense of the world reflect, either positively or negatively, the ways in which those who raised you taught you (implicitly and otherwise) to make sense of the world. Without first yourself being given the ability to make sense, you would now be totally unable to make sense of the world.

In making sense of the world, then, you act automatically (as discussed earlier), but in these very automatic actions you already reveal a certain relationship to those who helped give you the ability to make sense. Building on this point, we see a compelling reason for our responsibility for social institutions: because it is always already engaged in a world that it both constitutes and is constituted by, the subject is always "on the hook" for this world and for its response to that world. If we cannot control the aspects of society that shape and constitute us originally—if we are, in Levinas' language, primordially constituted by something outside ourselves—it is also true that we are not merely receivers of social pressures, but are shapers and transmitters of society as well: we are not just constituted, we are also constituting. As constituting, I (the subject) am responsible, at least partially, not only for the way I myself make sense of the world, but also for the meanings or sense of the world that I communicate to others. Because my passive syntheses make sense of current experiences in part by associating currently encountered things with other similar experiences I have of things,[17] my previous experiences gain not only an epistemological significance (in terms of how they help

me make sense of the world) but an ethical or moral significance as well: they not only help me make sense of some encountered A, but they make me encounter A precisely as (an) A—a chair as a chair, but also a man as a man, a white person as a white person—and therefore subsume a unique individual under categories that make sense of the individual thing by relating it to other things. Because this relation to other things will then shape how I understand *and act toward* A, the experiences which shape my understanding of A as (an) A necessarily have a moral as well as an epistemological content.

But this sense is not merely individual either. That is, the experiences that help me make sense of A are not only my experiences, but are shaped in large part by other people: the way other people have treated me, both as an individual and as a type of something or an instance of something (e.g., a male, a white person), what other people have taught me, implicitly or explicitly, about how to think about or react to things, and so on. In this sense, every subject is necessarily shaped by intersubjective—indeed, by social—forces and institutions. But this is a two-way street, as Levinas has explained to us: we are not only constituted by others in the world, but we also constitute others in the world. That is to say, my reactions to, experiences of, and actions toward things (and people) in the world make up my "horizons," the reservoir of past experiences and affections used in every act of passive association. My horizons, however, are not only used in my own future passive associations, but are also partially constitutive of the horizons of other people's future passive associations. How I react to certain things in the world is observed by other people, and goes into their "repository of experiences," which in turn will then shape how they experience, act toward and make sense of those things in the future.

Though passive association happens automatically, it is still something I do, and hence something for which I bear responsibility. In fact, I can be seen as *doubly* responsible in my passive associations. First, I am responsible, at least partially, for my own passive associations, since I am the one drawing the similarities to previous experiences (even if I do so automatically, that is, passively) and I am the one who had those previous experiences to which I am now making the associations. I and no one else perform my passive associations: I am affected by things in a certain way, I relate these affections to previously experienced affections that I have had, I am the one who had those previously experienced affections.[18] Secondly,

I am responsible for the way in which my actions and tendencies become part of the experiences of other people and shape the way that *they* make sense of the world. Whether I intend to or not, because I am not just constituted by the world, but also serve to help constitute the world—because I not only learn at the knee of others but others also learn at my knee—I impact the way others experience and make sense of the world, and as such I am responsible for what my actions and reactions communicate to others about the world.[19]

The nature of the subject as both passive (in its reception of external stimulus and external influence, including in the very formation of that subject itself) and active (even in the very world that in turn constitutes the subject) therefore makes possible that the subject can be responsible, even for things it may not (actively) intend. If passive constitution is beyond our control, it is no less, for all that, something committed by us, and hence something for which we bear responsibility. Of course, it is not an act we commit "freely" in a modern sense of the term (which presupposes uncoerced purposive consent), but this very notion of freedom is itself challenged by the view of the self as constituted (rather than purely constituting).[20] Furthermore, as agents of (and not merely in) society, we bear some responsibility for the actions of that society. This preserves the possibility of social change that an overly passive view of the subject-society relation might seem to challenge. This possibility of social change seems necessary for any discourse on oppression.

Allow me to use an example to help illustrate how the recourse to passive synthesis helps us make sense of oppression. I have a niece and a nephew who are very close in age. Though I consider myself quite committed to breaking down gender stereotypes, I found myself nevertheless (and much to my horror) treating my niece and nephew in markedly different ways. If he needed something, for example, I would encourage my nephew to get it himself ("You can do it! Come on—just a little farther, you're almost there!"), while, if my niece needed something, I would be far more likely to get it for her. In the big picture, this plays directly into the hands of gender stereotyping, and the oppression of women: by treating my nephew in this manner, I encourage him to be self-sufficient and capable, while my niece acquires a certain learned helplessness that leaves her adept, perhaps, at manipulation, but ultimately dependent on others. How could this be?

The problem does not stem from the fact that I want to encourage

the oppression of women, either consciously or unconsciously. The problem, therefore, is not that I see one as male, and then think "Oh, he can do it himself," while I see the other as a female and think "She'll probably need my help to do it." Rather, in constituting them, pre-objectively (that is, passively), I constitute one as male and one as female. *In this very constitution,* I already smuggle in, so to speak, certain presuppositions. Why? Because I encounter them always already as male or female, and in so doing, I associate them with my varied experiences of maleness and femaleness (i.e., with the sense I have of maleness and femaleness),[21] experiences that occurred in a world that treats (and acts toward) maleness and femaleness in different ways. That is, in encountering them as male (or female), I passively call to mind certain associations I have with maleness and femaleness, associations based in part on previous incidences (both theoretical and lived) in which I was affected by maleness and femaleness. In these other experiences (including, of course, the experience of how I was treated by others), I no doubt experienced males as independent and doing things themselves, and females as more adept at social interaction, using their words to get what they want. I had these previous experiences, in part because the people whom I was experiencing were themselves recalling their earlier experiences and affections, etc., back into history, a history that is, in our part of the world, notably patriarchal; and, in part because of my own experiences, also shaped by that history. While consciously I am aware of this history of cultural and social transmission, *passively*, that is to say, associatively, I make use of this history without the intervention of acts of judgment and critique.

But my responsibility is not only for how I treat my nephew and niece in light of my experiences and affections concerning maleness and femaleness. It is also for the ways in which my current actions of treating them differently in turn shapes, not only their experiences of maleness and femaleness, but also the experiences of all those who see me act this way (their parents and other friends and relatives who are around), and those who are subsequently affected by those who see me act this way (those who, in turn, encounter my nephew or niece, their parents, or the other friends and relatives, and those who encounter those who encounter my nephew or niece, their parents, and so on). That is, formative influence is not only exercised from "the top down" (e.g., from adults to children), but also between peers and from "the bottom up" (e.g., from children to adults). Influence is caught up in a complex social web that is neither fully

controllable nor unidirectional. Indeed, it is precisely the uncontrollable, multi-directional aspect of influence that makes us so responsible in these situations.

Passive synthesis, then, by way of affection and association, helps us see how we continue to pass on and transmit socially learned behavior without doing so intentionally.[22] Further, because the associations made are to my own past experiences, I am still responsible for the content of those associations, even if, to some extent, I was not responsible for how people treated me, and other aspects that went into making up my experiences. If I am clearly responsible for my acts and active judgments (i.e., those things I do purposively), then, given that my horizon of past experiences and affections is itself made up (in part) of my past acts and my judgments upon them, I would seem to be responsible also for my horizon of past experiences and affections. In addition, the society that conditions, not just myself but also those who act upon me, is itself the product of my acts and judgments (though surely not mine alone), and I therefore bear (some) responsibility for it as well. Though I do not intend my passive syntheses and associations purposively, this does not absolve me of responsibility for them.

Conclusion: Changing our Passive Syntheses

So far, I have tried to demonstrate that the language of passive synthesis, drawn from phenomenology, can provide us with a vocabulary with which to talk about the notion of unintended responsibility that is central to most structural theories of oppression. Given its emphasis on individual action and responsibility, this vocabulary, I hope, is familiar enough that it would not immediately off-put those not already inclined to agree with the viability of a structural understanding of society, while still proving challenging enough to get them to see their personal responsibility in and for oppressive structures. Specifically, I hope that the notion of passive synthesis gives us an account of how we might be responsible for things we do not intend (in the strong sense of purposive, freely chosen action). In this regard, I hope the discussion of passive synthesis will be helpful to those attempting to discuss issues of oppression either with those who are not familiar with, or with those who are hostile to, structural theories of oppression.

But I also hope that the vocabulary of passive synthesis can help

shed light on oppression theory in a new and helpful way for those working within the field. In this light, I would now like to briefly examine some ways in which it is possible to *change* our passive syntheses and associations. At first, the possibility of changing those actions that we do not intend to do seems difficult, if not downright contradictory: because they do not pass through our active judgments and decision-making faculties, we cannot change our passive synthesis through a resolve of the will or through a commitment to be more careful. However, the notion that our horizons are determined by the "sedimentation" or "depositing" of experiences into the reservoir of our previous experiences and affections outlines one way in which we can begin to change our passive syntheses.

Because passive association requires a horizon of past experiences, change is possible, if, perhaps, somewhat slow. Though we cannot go back and change our past experiences, we can change aspects about this past: first, we can change our emotional, intellectual, and affective reaction to past experiences; second, we are always modifying the horizon of past experiences by creating new past experiences, as the present continues to slide into the past.

I will begin with the second of these. Our horizon of past experiences results from the sedimentation of previous active and passive acts of the ego. Hence, by changing how we think about and judge things now, we can begin to offer new material for possible future associations within the horizon of past experiences.

If association operated solely according to volume of reactions (i.e., to what happened the most often in previous similar situations), then adding new experiences to the reservoir of our past experiences would take a great deal of time to make a difference in our passive syntheses. However, association operates mainly by way of affection: it is how a thing affects me that calls to mind similar, previous affections, not some inherent similarities in the things themselves. Hence, if we can change the nature of the affection of our previous experiences, we can help to ensure that situations will call to mind more recent (and perhaps more favorable) experiences, rather than others.

Modifying how we are affected by things (or modifying how we were affected by things) is possible, though not easy. Because affection is not the same thing as emotion, changing these affections is not equivalent to changing how we "feel" about them. At the same time, changing how we feel about things obviously changes the manner in which they affect us and

the experiences they recall for us. For example, things that are strange to us call to mind other things that are strange to us, most of which inspire emotions of nervousness and anxiety in us. As such, encountering something with which I am not very familiar—be it a food I have never tried or a person from a racial group with which I do not have significant previous experience—calls to mind, not only those experiences of other things that are strange to us, but also experiences of other things that inspire nervousness and anxiety in us. As such, my automatic response to unfamiliar things will skew in the direction of anxiety, making me less likely to have positive experiences of unfamiliar things.

To begin to change this response, I must first analyze the response, and make myself aware of its constitutive parts, of what is being recalled in these instances of passive synthesis. I can then make myself more familiar with that particular food or with people of that racial group, so that my further experiences of that food or of people of that racial group no longer call to mind previous experiences of unfamiliar things, but rather previous experiences of that food or racial group.

This would not, however, help me in future encounters with other unfamiliar things. To begin to try to change that, I would have to try to have more positive experiences of things that are unfamiliar to me, so that I would begin to associate unfamiliar things with emotions of pleasant surprise, even excitement, rather than nervousness and anxiety. Having more positive experiences here requires not only doing things that are more positive, but also responding more positively to the things that I do (and have previously done). In other words, to have more positive associations with unfamiliar food I need to not only eat more good-tasting food with which I was previously unfamiliar, but I also need to bring to mind previous incidences when trying unknown foods worked out well (the delicious pad thai I had the first time I ate Thai food, or my discovery of strawberry cheesecake flavored ice cream), rather than focusing on those times when it did not (the smoke-flavored beer I tried that time in Paris, or the bubblegum ice cream that was overly sweet). In doing this, I will not only try to override my automatic responses by consciously pushing past them, but I will also begin to change those automatic responses by instituting new habits, which will in turn change how I feel about things I have previously done.

Of course, my reaction of nervousness and anxiety to unfamiliar things is not the result of my experiences alone, but also of the way in

which societal views relating unfamiliarity to terror have been sedimented in my horizon of past experiences. To begin to change my affection toward unfamiliar things, then, I must not only alter the things I do in regard to unfamiliar things, but also make myself aware of and alter the things I do that make me more likely to take on certain societal views rather than others (e.g., watching action movies or reading certain websites or news sources that portray the unfamiliar as dangerous). This involves not just changing how I *think* about things, but changing my actions—especially my habitual actions—to alter my affections. In this regard, I must make myself a more conscientious consumer of social and cultural mores.

So far, what I have suggested bears almost exclusively on our responsibility for our own horizon of previous experiences. But we are also responsible for the ways in which we participate and shape social and cultural mores. As such, we must become also more conscientious *producers* of social and cultural mores, recognizing that our beliefs and actions are never merely private, but always affect the social and cultural horizons in which I (and others) operate. What is needed is not just a change in personal affections, but also in the social imagination[23] that partially conditions and shapes my (and others') affective responses.

It is not easy, then, to change our passive syntheses, but it is, I would argue, possible. The process would be slow, and would require, not just changing active judgments, but also a concerted effort to continually bring to mind the way in which we are passively constituting the world, and critiquing this passive constitution on the basis of its principles, underlying motives, and affections. It would also require reinforcing these changes in judgment with a change in notable affective force—I can't just *think* that the stereotype of the stoic and unfeeling man is dangerous, but I must also regularly bring to mind examples where this is true, and watch movies that valorize sensitive men rather than the unattached loner, and otherwise make myself aware of the pain and sorrow caused by that stereotype. Changing our affections towards things is not just done for ourselves, but also for the social community that we transmit to future generations. In this regard, what is needed, perhaps, is not just social education—which tries to change people's minds—but also a new social imagination that helps shape people's experiences and affections.

One possible application of this notion of social imagination occurs in the complex issue of affirmative action. While this is no doubt a larger issue than can be adequately dealt with here, I would like to point

out the way that the notion of passive synthesis helps us make sense of affirmative action as an attempt to re-inscribe the social imagination. That is, given the role that past experiences play in how we make sense of our world now, one possible justification for affirmative action is that there is a social value to be gained from having persons of different ethnic and sexual groups in various positions throughout society. This would be part of trying to right previous historical imbalances—but *not* by way of some odd numbers game, in which a certain percentage of people occupying a certain position would somehow make up for centuries of oppression.[24] Rather, it would begin to right previous historical imbalances by beginning to foster a new set of experiences (i.e., one in which we see people of those groups in those societal positions) so that our passive syntheses regarding people of those groups can start to be influenced by these new experiences, and not just old ones. That is, the point of giving pride of place (all other things being equal) to, for example, a woman in a philosophy graduate student program[25] is not that having X number of women in philosophy grad programs somehow makes up for centuries of patriarchy. Rather, the idea is that there is a social value (which tips the scales in this direction, all other things being equal) in having women represented in an area they are not currently widely represented in. This social value would be that the more women that are encountered in philosophy (as writers, speakers, students and teachers), the more philosophy becomes a normal and acceptable avenue for women to pursue, the more women are seen as philosophical and rational (rather than emotional and 'flighty'), the more traditional notions of femininity are adapted to include academic success, etc.

By applying the phenomenological language of passive synthesis here, we are then able to reshape the discussion surrounding affirmative action (for example) so that we see that it is not some silly numbers game, but rather as one way (though not the only way) to begin to change the social imaginary, both by adding new sedimentations to the 'reservoir' of people's experiences and by beginning to change the affective force associated with certain meanings and experiences. Not only does this argue against the 'numbers game' view of affirmative action, but it also argues against the 'reverse discrimination' view,[26] which understands affirmative action as favoring minorities merely because they are minorities. Given the impact of experience on the way we make sense of the world, passive synthesis helps us understand that there is another factor, another level of social value, to add to every evaluative process, namely, that of helping

shape future horizons of past experiences by shaping the social imagination. Hence, the mitigating factor in affirmative action is not that a particular person is or is not a minority, but rather the extent to which they can help shape the social imagination in desirable ways. This social value is something else to be considered in reviewing applications, alongside educational background, efficiency with which the candidate can carry out the required task, relevant work history, etc. This is but one example of a way in which the discourse of passive synthesis might be helpful in combating oppression.[27]

I think that this brief sketch of an example suggests the possibility of using the language of passive synthesis to help combat oppression. While there is more work to be done on this topic, I hope what has been accomplished here is enough to at least prove the merit of using the phenomenological language of passive synthesis to discuss oppression.[28]

References

Bailey, A. (2003). "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's 'Oppression'". In Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (eds.), *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism*. McGraw-Hill, 301-315.

Cueva, S. "Affirmative Action must remain illegal." *The Daily Trojan*. September 15, 2011. Accessed April 11, 2012: http://dailytrojan.com/2011/09/15/affirmative-action-must-remain-illegal/.

DeRoo, N. (2010). "Re-constituting Phenomenology: Continuity in Levinas' Account of Time and Ethics," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, Vol.49 no. 2, 223-243.

DeRoo, N. (2013). *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas and Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Frye, M. (2003). "Oppression." in Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (eds.), *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism*. McGraw-Hill, 183-192.

Husserl, E. (1954). *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die ransendentale Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie.* Ed. W. Biemel. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (1973). *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten 1918-1926*. Husserliana Band XI, Ed. M. Fleischer. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. Translated by Anthony J. Steinbock as *Analyses concerning Active and Passive Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic.*Dordrecht/Boston/ London: Kluwer Academic, 2001.

Husserl, E. (1985). *Erfahrung und Urteil*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag.

Levinas, E. (1980). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis.

The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Levinas, E. (1986). "The Trace of the Other." Trans. Alphonso Lingis. In
    Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy. Edited by Mark C.
    Taylor. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 345-359.

Levinas, E. (1995). *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne
    University Press.

Levinas, E. (1998a). "The Ruin of Representation" in *Discovering Existence with
    Husserl*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Evanston:
    Northwestern University Press; 111-121.

Levinas, E. (1998b). "Philosophy, Justice and Love." In *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-
    the-Other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York:
    Columbia University Press, 103-121.

Levinson, M.R. (1982). "Affirmative Action: Is it Just a Numbers Game?" *Police
    Magazine* 5:2, 8-13, 16-21.

Mohanty, J.N. (1964). *Edmund Husserl's Theory of Meaning*. The Hague: Martinus
    Nijhoff.

Ryan, William F., S.J. (1977). "Passive and Active Elements in Husserl's Notion of
    Intentionality," *The Modern Schoolman* LV; 37-55.

Steinbock, A.J. (1995). *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*.
    Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Taylor, C. (2007). *The Secular Age*. Cambridge and London: Belknap Press.

Notes

[1] I have in mind the notion of oppression discussed in the work of Marilyn Frye. For a brief introduction to this understanding of oppression, cf. Frye 2003 and Bailey 2003.

[2] This seems, to me, to be a central motivation for Bailey's analysis of privilege: to show people their personal complicity in oppressive structures; cf. Baily, 2003.

[3] It is also helpful in this regard to distinguish between several types of responsibility, especially if one wants to avoid making one's audience defensive. At the very least, we can distinguish: a) being called on to respond to something (i.e., my response-ability); b) being responsible to someone for something; and c) blameworthiness. The vocabulary of passive synthesis that will be discussed in this paper, I think helps us understand how being responsible in the first sense can lead to a responsibility in the second sense (which is sufficient to inspire action and/or change in us) without necessarily having to lead to responsibility in the third sense. By showing us a responsibility that calls for change without prescribing blame, I believe passive synthesis can remain 'neutral' enough to be acceptable to those not predisposed towards agreeing with it, without thereby letting them off the hook for change. I'd like to thank John Drummond for pointing out this distinction in senses of responsibility to me.

[4] I use "making sense" here in a somewhat technical manner that is distinct from understanding. Understanding requires judgment, and active, theoretical engagement with the world. Making sense, on the other hand, is the way in which we encounter the world first and foremost as meaningful, as having a sense. Since, as I will argue below, this sense comes about via acts of (passive) synthesis carried out by the subject, this sense is

not merely found in the world, nor merely created by me, but is in some sense both: it is made by the subject, even as this making happens passively, automatically, and in response to what gives itself in the world. Sense, then, is not merely objective (found in the world), nor subjective (created by me), but phenomenological.

5   While other phenomenological figures (e.g., Merleau-Ponty) discuss themes of sedimentation, habituation, and other related phenomena, I focus here primarily on Husserl because his discourse is more individualistic than that of many later figures. As such, Husserl provides more 'common ground' with the kind of individualistic moral thinking that we are hoping to speak to, and therefore strikes me as providing a better basis for a vocabulary that could speak to those people with whom we are concerned. I hope to show that the more individualistic nature of the Husserlian discourse does not prevent phenomenology from being able to account for societal structures and institutions.

6 Also called at times by Husserl "prepredicative experience" or functioning subjectivity. These refer to the same basic functions, if from different perspectives.

7 For more on these elements, cf. also Ryan 1977.

8 For this reason, it is not entirely proper to speak here of objects, as only the categorial object is an object according to Husserl (Husserl 1985, 81 n.1). One can say though, as Husserl does, that without affection "there would be no objects at all and no present organized with objects" (Husserl 1973, 164).

9 The automatic naure of such acts of constitution is brought most noticeably to our attention in those situations when the act of constitution is no longer able to happen automatically. When I encounter a new design of chair, for example, if the new design is sufficiently different from my previous experiences of chairs, I do not recognize it as such, and so do not know what the thing in front of me is. Similarly, when I encounter familiar objects in new contexts, I am unable to make sense of their new function, and so do not use them automatically, but must determine their significance in this new context. The first time I encountered carpet swatches on the ground in kindergarten, it was not immediately obvious that these were to function as our 'chairs,' that this is where we were supposed to sit during story time, because this was not a familiar use of carpet swatches to me, nor was a carpet swatch a familiar example of a chair. I had to be instructed that the swatches were to be used for this purpose before I could realize what I was supposed to do with them.

10 One could be tempted to think that induction lies in the sphere of active synthesis, given its use in scientific judgments. However, Husserl will contend that the scientific and philosophico-logical use of induction is in fact founded on an earlier, experiential and passive level of induction (Husserl 1954, 29), which is ubiquitous in all human practices and experience (Husserl 1954, 51); cf. also Mohanty 1964, 142-143.

11 These "object-like formations" can then become the basis for later judgments and (active) acts—but Husserl is adamant that it is only because of passive syntheses that the ego is able to actively direct its regard (Husserl 1973, 120).

12 For more on the notion of an environing-world, cf. Steinbock 1995.

13   Cf. Levinas' discussion of the "third," for example in Levinas 1998b, 106-107.

14   Cf. Levinas 1986.

15   Cf. Levinas 1980, 114-15 and 124-125.

16 For a more detailed explanation of Levinas along these lines, cf. DeRoo 2013 and

DeRoo 2010.

[17] One must be careful to remember here that this similarity is "felt," not objectively present. That is, it is a similarity in how I associate with things, not similarities in the things encountered. While there is, no doubt, a connection between objective structures and my association to them, the significant aspect in passive synthesis is the felt similarity (i.e., how I experience or intend the thing). It is, therefore, a similarity of (phenomenological) sense or meaning.

[18] This would be responsibility in the third sense discussed above ("blameworthiness"), in a manner similar to that put forward by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he claims that we are responsible for the habits that we currently have; cf., e.g., II.1.§ 8 (1103b25).

[19] This, I would argue, is responsibility in the second sense given above: "being responsible to someone for something."

[20] Cf., for example, Levinas 1995, 84-85.

[21] The sense I have of maleness (and this would apply also for femaleness, though obviously my personal experiences of that would be different) would be constructed from a variety of experiences and affections that reside in my horizon of past experiences and affections, including: a) my own experience as male (how others have treated me as a male); b) discussions I have had about being male; c) discourses I have read and/or been a part of concerning maleness; d) my affections of maleness, both in myself and in others; and e) my experiences of other males. All of these would be affected in various ways by the affective relationship I would have between the males I have experienced (including myself) and the masculinity I have read/heard/learned about, both academically and otherwise.

[22] This would be also hold true for people from marginalized groups. That is, it is not only those in the oppressing groups, but also those in oppressed groups, who contribute to the construction of the "bird cage" of oppression, at least in the lives of individual people. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers from *Janus Head* for pointing this out to me. Pursuing this issue further would be interesting, not only in its own right, but also as a potential point of disagreement between phenomenological and structural accounts of oppression. While I am trying to bring the two together in this paper, this topic could potentially prove divisive (hopefully, fruitfully so). Though there will not be time to pursue this topic further in this paper, I hope others will do so.

[23] The literature on social imagination is too vast to be recounted here. In shorthand, let me point to the work of Charles Taylor as one example of social imagination; cf. Taylor 2004 and Taylor 2007.

[24] This notion of affirmative action as a "numbers game" is prevalent among many political and social opponents of affirmative action. A mainstream (rather than academic) example that clearly shows this is the article and the corresponding response section of Cueva 2011. For a more academic exploration of the issue, specifically in terms of hiring practices in police departments, cf. Levinson 1982.

[25] I do not know whether such policies play any role in graduate program acceptance. I use it here merely as a hypothetical example, not because I am claiming that it happens.

[26] Also prevalent in Cueva 2011, especially in some of the responses.

[27] There are, of course, several other factors that would have to come into play to evaluate whether or not affirmative action is an affective policy in addressing societal inequalities,

and whether or not, overall, it does in fact combat rather than perpetuate oppression. I am not contending that the factor I present here (the ability to shape the social imagination) outweighs the others, just that it is another factor to be included in the equation.

28 I would like to thank especially Noah Moss-Brender, David Koukal, Sara Heinämaa, Kascha Snavely and John Drummond, as well as the participants of the 2010 Annual Congress of the Canadian Philosophical Association and of the 48th Annual Conference of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.