

## Introduction: Concepts and Methods in Interdisciplinary Feminist Phenomenology

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### *Feminist Phenomenology*

This volume showcases some of the current developments in interdisciplinary feminist phenomenology. The notion that phenomenology belongs to the field of feminist concerns and benefits from an engagement with other disciplines hinges on a progressive and broad understanding of what phenomenology is. Phenomenology is *feminist* as long as it includes questions related to gendered experience and sexual difference within its field of study. Contrary to the conservative and narrow view of phenomenology as being confined to the stance of a (presumably) sexless, individualistic ego, gendered embodiment and sexual hierarchy do not fall out of the pure transcendental domain into the contingent and the empirical; they belong to the aspirations of phenomenology to describe concrete, lived human experience in its richness and complexity.<sup>1</sup> One notes therefore a veritable resurgence of publications in the field of feminist phenomenology within the last two decades (it includes notably Stoller and Vetter's edited anthology *Phänomenologie und Geschlechterdifferenz* (Stoller & Vetter, 1997), Fisher and Embree's volume *Feminist Phenomenology* (Fisher & Embree, 2000), Fisher, Stoller and Vasterling's bilingual collection *Feminist Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* (Stoller, Vasterling, & Fisher, 2005), Heinämaa and Rodemeyer's special edition "Feminist Phenomenologies" of the *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2010 (Heinämaa & Rodemeyer, 2010); Iris Young's collection of essays *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a Girl" and other Essays* (Young, 2005) has become a classic in the field; numerous other collections and individual pieces have come out since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most notably many fine papers in the journal *Hypatia*.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist phenomenology has become an active sub-field within the phenomenological school of thought within the last two decades.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the narrow view, and the possible difficulties involved in aligning classical phenomenology and feminism, see Linda Fisher's 'Phenomenology and Feminism. Perspectives on the Relation' (*Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Fisher and Embree, Kluwer, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For more extensive bibliographical references to feminist phenomenology, see e. g. Fisher and Embree (2000) and Heinämaa and Rodemeyer (2010).

Historically, its origins are usually dated back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, (Beauvoir, 1949/1989), considered a founding text in the tradition due to its admixture of narrative accounts of women's lived experience with a global outlook on women's subordination in society. This text has been only recently reclaimed as a properly philosophical opus with a distinctly phenomenological conceptual vocabulary – a fact obscured to the English-speaking audience by an incomplete and misleading translation;<sup>3</sup> there now exists a substantial body of secondary literature devoted to the philosophical and phenomenological dimensions of Beauvoir's work, and she has belatedly become recognized as an original thinker in her own right.

The beginnings of feminist phenomenology can be dated further back to Edith Stein's phenomenological writings from the 1930s. They raise the question of human types and gendered identities – a properly philosophical/phenomenological interrogation, which combines an interest in the universal categories of experience with the political cause of women's access to appropriate education, as well as spirituality (in English, see especially *Essays on woman* (Stein, 1996); for an introduction, see Calcagno (Calcagno, 2007). Hannah Arendt's reflections on the human action's dependency on natality and the event of birth in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958/1998) are directly relevant to the feminist phenomenological project. Luce Irigaray's engagement with the phenomenological tradition (through Merleau-Ponty and Levinas), and the inclusion of pre-discursive experience in her own thinking, point to a live relation between phenomenology and the "French feminist" tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (see especially *An Ethics of Sexual difference*, (Irigaray, 1993)). In sum, elements of feminist phenomenology can be encountered in the writings of contemporary women philosophers in the continental European tradition for a long time – even if the authors did not adhere to the labels "feminist" or "phenomenologist."

### *Interdisciplinary Dialogue in Feminist Phenomenology*

A deliberate thematic openness to experience as gendered feminine

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<sup>3</sup> The first translation into English by Parshley omitted large sections of the original material, and turned technical philosophical concepts into loose everyday ones; a new translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier has been available since November 2010 (Beauvoir, 2011).

and/or masculine has not always been coupled with interdisciplinarity; feminist phenomenology is sometimes bound by an academic emphasis on exegesis of the canonical phenomenological texts, and converses with other traditions of inquiry within philosophy only. Feminist phenomenology is interdisciplinary as long as it intersects the methods and approaches of reflective and empirical disciplines, and ties theoretical study with practical relevance (such as in therapeutic practice, or in concerns about the ethical and political backdrop, and implications of phenomenological claims). We believe that feminist aspirations are well served by interdisciplinarity, and that a thematic and a methodological openness go hand in hand. A straightforward appeal to one's own experience may not be sufficiently mindful of its own background assumptions and its location on the social map; as such it can be corrected, without simply being overthrown, by a broader, structural analysis of the total situation in which this experience unfolds, which is the approach that feminist philosophy contributes. Similarly, a scholar can all the better accommodate the richness and complexity of lived human experience when she enriches phenomenological reflection with a case study or other data gathered by researchers, or even with the insights expressed by artists and writers. This does not imply, however, a blind trust in the unquestioned validity of hard data, nor does it suggest that the scientist has the final say on the truth. An interdisciplinary feminist phenomenologist brings conceptual resources to bear on the empirical material understood as a phenomenon endowed with meaning, and in need of interpretation. Needless to say, interdisciplinary efforts of this kind are best pursued by a community of scholars drawing on diverse disciplinary and social backgrounds. Only then is the myth of a sexless, individualistic ego effectively overcome.

### *The Phenomenological Method*

Phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty said, "can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking. (...) It has been long on the way, and its adherents have discovered it in every quarter" (1962, p. viii). This phenomenological style of thinking suffuses the papers in this collection: our authors come from many disciplinary quarters (philosophy, psychology, nursing, education) and also from different countries (Canada, the US, Great Britain, Austria, Norway and Sweden). But all are committed to a phenomenological sensibility and have discovered phenomenology as

a useful and fertile style of thinking in their field of research.

The strength of phenomenology lies in its interdisciplinary appeal. It is on the one hand a conceptual system within the history of philosophy, and since Husserl its intention has been to create new concepts in order to think the dimension of human experience and meaning (*Sinn*) more clearly and fully. But Husserl also conceived phenomenology as a *method* which would provide a deeper access to the fullness of phenomena as they present themselves to human consciousness (Husserl, 1952). As a method phenomenology slows down the stream of consciousness in order to create a descriptive attitude which focuses attention on the fullness (*Fülle*) of things and events. This process reveals the depth and complexity of phenomena which are usually covered over in our habitual, unreflected attitude of perceiving and judging what we experience. Phenomenology follows our naïve relationship to the world and lifts it up into philosophical thinking. Phenomenologists train themselves to dwell with phenomena and work on unraveling the fundamental structures of being which constitute the world as it appears in the researchers' particular time and place – a necessarily incomplete process because there is always more that can be researched and thought. The transcendence of things, which reveals itself in the phenomenological reduction, means that being is always already somewhere else and that the researcher discovers a profound web of significations, which leads to further questions rather than final answers. Phenomenology as practiced in philosophy and the human and social sciences has been long on the way, and it also has a long way to go: it is a method of continuous inquiry. Its strength lies in the ability of phenomenological researchers to be surprised by what the world has to offer and to work on understanding what determines our own construction of reality.

As a *method*, phenomenology has a number of functions:

1. Qualitative, phenomenological research in the human sciences works closely with first person descriptions about specific human experiences and attempts to illuminate the complexity of the research participants' worlds. It aims for depth and understanding of the human condition, rather than statistical validity. It is often useful for professionals in psychotherapy, nursing, and education who work with people with similar experiences as the research participants, and it allows them to develop better service practices for these populations.

2. In relation to qualitative research, a phenomenological inquiry practice pushes researchers to question the fundamental conceptual assumptions that undergird their research theories and practices and opens the field to new ways of understanding what is being researched. Here are two examples: Merleau-Ponty's (1962) introduction of the concept of the lived body was a very fertile challenge to the scientific theories of the body as a machine-like, anatomical entity, and it has revolutionized the thinking in contemporary cognitive neuroscience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1992); his phenomenological critique of the Kantian notion of "internal representations", which is a fundamental and unquestioned concept in most psychological theories, has the potential to open up research in cognition and intelligence in new and exciting ways (Dreyfus, 2002).
3. Engagement with psychology, education, nursing, sociology, anthropology, biology, physics etc. enlivens philosophical phenomenology. Simone de Beauvoir (2011) demonstrated that a *critical* engagement with the sciences of the day can be extremely fruitful for the philosopher. It reveals how philosophical concepts operate in the public discourse of the sciences, and that a *change* in philosophical concepts – feminist concepts, for example – leads to different research practices, which in turn can lead to different social practices since the sciences have a profound impact on the everyday lives of people. In return, the data of the sciences give philosophy something to think through and to challenge and test its philosophical systems.

### *A Critical Phenomenology*

Husserl's *époche*, as it has evolved in the phenomenological movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demands that we work on understanding the constraints of our own socio-historical discourses in which we were trained and which surround us in our institutions and public life. For Husserl (1970) it meant understanding the pervasive mathematization of knowledge and the resultant denigration--by the natural sciences--of the more fundamental epistemological structures of human experience as subjective and unreliable, and to rehabilitate consciousness and perception

as proper fields of inquiry for philosophy. For phenomenologists today the *époché* or bracketing implies that we have to be suspicious of our own cultural prejudices and accept that we will never be able to perform a complete reduction and see phenomena in their transcendental purity. Phenomenology has been on the way for a century and it has adapted and responded to the pressing philosophical questions of its time and widened its scope into continental philosophy: we have moved through the existential turn with Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; through the hermeneutic turn with Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur; through the post-structuralist turn with Foucault and Derrida; through the ethics/event turn with Levinas and Deleuze; through the feminist turn with Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler. A *critical phenomenology* understands the contingencies of human experience and consciousness and works on understanding the pervasive influences of ideology, politics, language, and power structures as they construct and constrain the lived experiences of people. Phenomenology is a limited and flawed enterprise, but more than any other philosophy and method it teaches us to pay close attention, to describe well, to understand phenomena within their larger context, and to reflect on our own limitations as researchers, thinkers, and fellow human beings.

Feminist phenomenology is, by definition, a *critical* phenomenology. Feminist thinkers find themselves thinking within a long tradition of concepts created by males who have taken the male world-experience as the norm and as the foundation for their epistemological practices. Finding one's place neither fully within nor completely outside this tradition is a difficult task, and the feminist researcher has to be critical of her own intellectual history as well as of the institutions which produce knowledge. But feminist phenomenologists are also faithful in their attempts to describe and conceptualize gendered existence and to allow for a clearing where women's voices can be heard. Feminist phenomenology finds itself having to balance the hermeneutic discipline of suspicion (of existing discourse structures) with a hermeneutic discipline of affirmation and empowerment (of the complexity of individual, situated, gendered life experiences) in order to find a place for ethical, non-patriarchal political action on behalf of women, men, and children.

*Feminist Research Practice*

Many contributions in this volume showcase qualitative research practices and articulate feminist and critical approaches to conceptualizing, conducting, and interpreting the process of research itself. In the following are some of the key insights about feminist phenomenological research methods from their papers.

1. Feminist research practice begins with understanding that human experience is embodied, inter-subjective, and contingent, and woven into personal and cultural webs of signification. The experiences of research participants have to be treated with interest, respect and compassion, but they also have to be interpreted from a critical perspective: is the disenfranchisement of a woman laboring in a hospital ward just a given of the process of pregnancy, or is her experience of giving birth produced by the underlying scientific ideology of the medical establishment and its institutional practices? Feminist phenomenologists do a “double book-keeping”: note what the participant says, but also uncover what she does not or cannot say but what structures her discourse.
2. Feminist researchers are critical of the power structures inherent in academic disciplines and try to develop alternate forms of generating data and interacting with research participants. The scientific production of knowledge and the academic research procedures themselves are suspect because they have been used to cement the patriarchal status quo and were used as a tool for the erasure of women from scientific theories (Gilligan, 1982).
3. Feminist researchers engage in the practice of *reflexivity*, which consists of procedures that help us become aware of our own preconceptions and prejudices and clarify the researchers own participation in the creation of research data.
4. Many feminist approaches are relation centered and challenge the view of the bounded, masterful, isolated self. As Linda Finlay puts it: we are related to our participants, even “entangled”, and our phenomenological *époche* demands that we become aware of it.

The entanglement is not something that needs to be erased; we only have to recognize it. Our inter-subjectivity, our *Ineinander*, our co-existentiality can function as a tool for hearing the voice of the other more genuinely.

5. Feminist research often sees itself as a tool for the empowerment of women, and its processes and results should enhance the lives of research participants directly. Treating participants with dignity, respect, and as *experts* in their own right, and “giving the results back” to the participants in an appropriate form are small political actions in the laboratory -- Eva Simms’ colleague Constance Fisher aptly called this the “Prometheus principle” of emancipatory qualitative research.
6. Feminist researchers often try to develop a different voice for articulating and presenting their data. Giguere and Janzen both use poetic techniques to capture the fullness of the moods which suffused their research situations. Subtle, textured descriptions, plenty of room for the participants’ own voice, and awareness of the unsaid within what is said are the hallmarks of feminist language practice in qualitative research.

### *Overview of the Essays*

The contributions to this volume fall roughly into two groups, depending on whether their gravitational pull falls more strongly in the field of classical phenomenology or empirical studies. Essays from the first group draw on resources from classical phenomenology (and post-structuralism) in order to shed light on gendered experience and sexual hierarchy – notably, the indeterminacy of gender (Silvia Stoller), the temporality of aging (Kristin Rodier), female embodiment and fatness (Talia Welsh), and institutionalized oppression (Neal de Roo). They make an excellent case for the continued relevance of phenomenological writings and concepts to feminist concerns – regardless of the former’s originally intended explanatory scope. Essays found in the second group present a body of empirical studies best-approached and deciphered by means of phenomenological concepts and methods. Topics include faked orgasms (Hildur Kalman), childbearing (Stacy Giguere), traumatic abortion (Linda



Finlay and Barbara Payman), and child custody loss (Katherine J. Janzen and Sherri Melrose). The essay dealing with the lived experience of morning sickness (Astrida Neimanis) is arguably pulled in the directions of case study and phenomenological reflection with equal force. The contribution by Geraldine Finn breaks through the interdisciplinary boundaries altogether by offering a long love poem inspired by continental thought.

In “The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Post-structural Feminism,” Silvia Stoller draws on relevant works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as Judith Butler to establish the philosophical importance of indeterminacy, and apply it specifically to gender identity. She argues that contrary to the received view, classical phenomenological and post-structuralist contributions have a lot in common and can be fruitfully combined. In “Time and Habit: Touching the Boundary Mark in Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse*,” Kristin Rodier spells out the unique phenomenology of habit and temporality found in the later work of Simone de Beauvoir. She focuses especially on Beauvoir’s notion of a boundary-marked or foreclosed future, and applies it to narrative figurations of dying. Talia Welsh’s essay “Unfit Women: Freedom and Constraint in the Pursuit of Health” offers a feminist phenomenological reflection on a “good health imperative” undergirding some contemporary medical practices, and the concurrent correlation of fatness with poor health. Capitalizing on insights from Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, as well as contemporary feminist phenomenologists, she makes a case that women’s freedom is curtailed in a reduction of female embodiment to the medical norm of testable health, at the expense of lived experience. In “What Phenomenology can teach us about Oppression,” Neal De Roo draws on the notion of passive synthesis from Husserl’s phenomenology’s to shed light on institutional oppression – specifically, the seemingly paradoxical experience of feeling responsible for unintended acts and meanings. He also imagines how passive synthesis can be deployed in an effort to combat the same mechanisms of oppression.

In “Faking Orgasms and the Idea of Successful Sexuality,” Hildur Kalman reflects on a trend of women (and some men) faking sexual desire and orgasms at a time of apparent sexual liberation in the Nordic countries. She draws on perspectives of feminist theory and phenomenology to shed light on the gendered relations and cultural signification of orgasm in present day society. Stacy Giguere’s “The Poetics of Childbearing: Revelations of an Other World in Other Words” contrasts women’s own narratives of pregnancy and birth-giving with prevalent childbearing metaphors in

medicine and psychology. The former challenge the notion of a solipsistic fetus as found in ultrasound snapshots, and reveal a sensual ambiguity of experience that may be best articulated in poetic discourse. Linda Finlay and Barbara Payman's essay "I'm already torn": A reflexive-relational phenomenology of a traumatic abortion experience" applies a relational, existential-phenomenological approach to explore the lived world of a woman Mia (fictional name) who experienced a traumatic abortion. They illustrate how a relational stance adopted within their methodology helped deepen the exploration of Mia's experience. In the essay "When the Worst Imaginable Becomes Reality: The Experience of Child Custody Loss in Mothers Recovering from Addictions," Katherine J. Janzen and Sherri Melrose apply the conceptual perspective of the phenomenologist Max van Manen to tease out dominant themes within the lived experience of four addicted mothers who lost custody of their children. These themes can guide professionals seeking to support addicted mothers as they reclaim their lives after losing custody of their children.

In "Morning Sickness and Gut Sociality: Towards a Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology," Astrida Neimanis ponders the potential significance of the gut in developing a material-semiotic mode of responsivity between bodies, and provides a phenomenological sketch of morning sickness as one instance of gut sociality. She reflects on future directions of posthumanist feminist phenomenology, considering both the risks and the promise of a biological turn.

This collection of essays is appropriately concluded by a poetic exploration of "What kind of saying is a song?" (Geraldine Finn). Finn risks a formal adventure in order to do justice to the specificity of the particular linguistic event called a "song." She draws on the tradition inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Irigaray, Nancy, and Derrida to navigate the in-between zone of music and philosophy, poetry and prose.

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