

# Feminism and Gender

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## FEMINISM AND GENDER

*Marieke Borren*

### 1. Introduction

What distinctive perspectives, topics, or approaches does phenomenology bring to gender theory? Phenomenologists have sought to understand the ontology and politics of gender and sexual difference by drawing either methods or conceptualizations, or both, from the phenomenological tradition, at least ever since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *La Deuxième Sexe* in 1949.<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young's 1980 essay "Throwing Like a Girl" stands out as a second milestone of feminist phenomenology, even if the latter phrase only became prevalent around the turn of the present century, when a new wave of feminist interest in phenomenology (and of phenomenological interest in feminism, for that matter) took off. Ironically, the debate sparked by poststructuralist feminist criticisms of alleged essentialist conceptualizations of (gendered) experience in phenomenology has been a major catalyst to the further institutionalization of feminist phenomenology as a field of inquiry (Stoller 2017, 335–36).<sup>2</sup> Today, phenomenology is one of the major philosophical perspectives in gender theory, next to poststructuralism, with frequent rapprochements between the two, preceded by the unearthing and undoing of mutual caricatures.<sup>3</sup>

These rapprochements notwithstanding, feminist phenomenology features a specific historical trajectory and methodological debates. Like any phenomenologist, feminist phenomenologists aim to provide rich descriptions of lived experience or first-person perspectives of subjectivity, selfhood, or *Dasein*: in this case, focusing on their gendered dimension. Unsurprisingly, most phenomenological accounts of gender attend to embodied experience in particular. However, compared to classical transcendental phenomenology, feminist phenomenologists tend to take a more explicitly evaluative stance. They take into account that and how social and political structures and cultural norms impact differentially on variously situated women, men, intersex, and non-binary people. Put differently, feminist phenomenology is attentive to the "constitutive importance of culture, language and historicity" for subject formation (Oksala 2006, 237). Section 1 of this chapter is devoted to methodological debates. I will argue that to do justice to the phenomenon under consideration—gender—we need to adopt a broad and

interdisciplinary understanding of the phenomenological method while remaining faithful to its spirit.

Preliminary qualifications need to be made regarding choice of terminology: first of 'feminism' and second of 'gender.' Feminist theorists, including those working in phenomenology, increasingly acknowledge that gender cannot be isolated from other embodied differences between people as a result of challenges to conventional white, European, middle-class feminism, by, particularly, Black feminists, religious minorities (especially Muslim feminists), queer and trans activists and theorists, and other representatives of marginalized groups. Also, the implicit or explicit limitation of 'gender' to female subjectivity or women's experiences has largely been overcome, with growing attention to experiences of men ('masculinities') and of trans, intersex, and non-binary people. Consequently, for many phenomenologists working on gender, 'feminism' no longer covers the thrust of their arguments—hence, perhaps, the recent move to 'critical phenomenology.' Thanks to these challenges, feminist phenomenology is presently thriving, with analyses ranging from racism as habitual (Alcoff 2006, 187–88; Ngo 2016; Al-Saji 2014), disability as a form of "misfitting" (Garland-Thomson 2011), and queer orientation (Ahmed 2006). Henceforth, I will stick to 'feminist phenomenology' by way of shorthand for critical, power-sensitive phenomenological reflection on the intersections between gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, ability, etc. For reasons of space, I will focus on gender and 'racialized difference' ('race' for short).

A second preliminary qualification pertains to the very concept of 'gender' and takes us to the heart of the matter itself. 'Gender' is being contested in much of the existing (English-language) scholarship in both poststructuralism and phenomenology on the subject. It is widely felt that it cannot be understood apart from the sex/gender distinction that is typical of Anglo American feminism since the 1960s and of the underlying Cartesian dualisms of nature/culture and body/mind that are as tenacious as they are philosophically contested. Whenever I use 'gender' in this entry, it is because of its ubiquity in academic and popular speech while being mindful of the problems inherent in it.

To be sure, the sex/gender controversy itself provides a fruitful lens through which to study the typically phenomenological contribution to feminist theory: namely, its deconstruction of two intractable controversies that plague conceptions of gendered subjectivity to this day—the already-mentioned nature/culture (and body/mind) controversy on one hand and the subject/structure controversy on the other. To showcase the achievements of phenomenological reflections on gender (whether or not labeled as such), this entry will not focus on phenomenology just as a method but also as a rich repertoire of conceptual resources for understanding gendered existence spanning the various strands of this tradition, from the transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, and genetic to the post-phenomenological and critical. Section 2 discusses one of the concepts that has turned out to be extremely productive for feminist phenomenologists as an alternative to 'gender'—namely, the 'lived body'—and suggests that this productivity is the result of its provision of an interactive or relational perspective on the dichotomies underpinning these controversies.

The steps taken in Sections 1 and 2 together aim toward presenting phenomenology as an open, inclusive, and living tradition without losing its distinctness. The final section briefly returns to the phenomenological method and draws some conclusions from the double legacy—phenomenology and feminism—in feminist phenomenology and sketches some pathways for future feminist phenomenological projects.

## 2. Gender and the Method of Phenomenology

Classical phenomenology and gender theory make a somewhat difficult couple, with both partners pointing out incompatibilities. On the one hand, some consider gender unfit for transcendental inquiry since bodily characteristics do not belong to the constitutive structures of the transcendental ego (even if these structures are conceived as intersubjective) and are bracketed in the *epoché*. The historically shifting social, political, and cultural norms and structures that shape and inform gender and other embodied differences, so the argument goes, are merely *empirical* restraints.<sup>4</sup> In other words: gender is considered a subject matter for social science research, not for transcendental ontological inquiry. By extension, insofar as gender theory defines itself as an interdisciplinary project that draws on extra-phenomenological and even extra-philosophical sources and qualitative methods, it would not meet the requirements of phenomenological investigation.

On the other hand, gender theorists tend to be ambivalent about phenomenology because of its traditional neglect of sexual and other embodied differences. The presupposition of a neutral, unsexed subject in classical phenomenology is seen as symptomatic of false neutrality that, in fact, comes down to a masculinist bias. It is argued that this bias is not just accidental but inherent in the very methodological foundations of phenomenology. In a related but slightly different vein, some argue that the phenomenologist's understanding of human experience 'in general'—which, after all, is what phenomenology pursues—is severely limited if the lived embodied experiences of women are not considered (Oksala 2004, 16; Stawarska 2018, 14–15; Cohen Shabot and Landry 2018, 2–3). Examples include experiences such as menstruation, menopause, “being breasted” (Young 2005, 96), and, for many though not all women, pregnancy, giving birth (Oksala 2004), and breastfeeding (Cohen Shabot and Landry 2018). Perhaps even more fundamentally, as being born, the self is unthinkable without sexual difference (Oksala 2004, 19). Also, how embodied differences play out in amateur and professional sports, physical exercise, and medicine has received much attention (Young 2005; Chisholm 2008; Zeiler and Käll 2014).

In the course of the development of feminist phenomenology, both tensions have been put into perspective. Most feminist phenomenologists today regard the objection that gender is a subject matter for empirical rather than phenomenological investigation as the result of a very specific and unduly narrow construal of the phenomenological method. If one takes into account post-Husserlian phenomenology in its hermeneutic, existential, enactive, genetic, and/or post-phenomenological branches, the transcendental/empirical divide loses much of its force, and, hence, the alleged incompatibility of phenomenology and gender theory is relaxed. With some notable exceptions (Heinämaa 2003; Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010), few feminist phenomenologists are unconditionally committed to the transcendental phenomenological method and the full enactment of—rather than critical reflection on—the *epoché* (Stoller 2017, 338). Most adopt a non- or quasi- (i.e., historico-transcendental) approach. However, several concepts taken from the Husserliana are found useful, such as the *Leib-Körper* distinction, Husserl's conceptualizations of sensing and touch (Al-Saji 2010), and “orientation” (Ahmed 2006, 2007). Additionally, many feminist phenomenologists draw fundamental principles and concepts from the work of Heidegger (Beauvoir 2011<sup>5</sup>; Lugones 1987; Ortega 2016; Vasterling 2005) and other hermeneutic phenomenologists such as Gadamer and Ricoeur (Warnke 2017; Alcoff 2006, 84–129; Halsema 2013), from Sartre's phenomenology (Beauvoir 2011<sup>6</sup>; Young 1994), contemporary genetic phenomenology and Arendt's work (Schües [2016] 2017; Oksala

2004), and, especially, the phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir (Heinämaa 2003; Young 2005; Weiss 1999; and many others). With the obvious exception of Beauvoir, it is not implied these phenomenologists themselves investigate gender or race—in fact, they do not—only that their work is often (rightly or not) felt to lend itself better to productive appropriations in the service of gender theory by partially or entirely abandoning the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction more broadly and entirely focusing on humans' practical and embodied 'being in the world,' which throws into relief the subject's irrevocable social situatedness, as expressed in terms of 'situation,' 'historicity,' 'facticity,' or 'thrownness.' This opens up the possibility of accounting for social, political and cultural norms and structures as more than merely empirical restraints (Oksala 2006).

The skepticism about the masculinist bias of phenomenology has not so much disappeared as given way to a variety of productive feminist engagements with phenomenology (Stawarska 2018, 16–18; Al-Saji 2010). At one end of the scale, we find 'conservative' or additive approaches that seek to correct for masculinist bias by providing the complement of women's experiences (Fisher 2000, 32–38; Heinämaa 2003). On the other end are transformative interventions that aim for radical methodological revisions while still staying within the orbit of phenomenology. An example of the latter is found in the Arendtian principle of natality, which Oksala (2004) and Schües (2016/2017) present as the condition of possibility of intentionality: birth is not just an empirical event in the world, but it is only because they are born into the world that human beings can act and constitute sense.

There is a tendency in recent literature to stress the flexibility and openness of the phenomenological method. Feminist phenomenology would fit within a living tradition, which it takes further rather than attacking frontally (Fielding 2012, 525–26; Fielding 2017; Simms and Stawarska 2013, 11). Stressing methodological openness has allowed feminist phenomenology to engage more extensively in dialogue with other areas of contemporary continental philosophy, especially poststructuralism. Also, it has rendered feminist phenomenology a more inclusive and interdisciplinary project that does not categorically reject but even welcomes collaborations with empirical research (Simms and Stawarska 2013, 8–10). For feminist phenomenologists who are committed to historico-transcendental inquiry, interdisciplinarity serves the enactment of the—be it partial—*epoché*. Oksala, for example, argues that phenomenological description should let itself inform by a plurality of empirical first-person accounts of the lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This is indispensable in order for the phenomenologist to achieve a critical distance from her own culturally shaped pre-understandings, which is all the more pressing if the phenomenologist takes up a relatively privileged social position (Oksala 2006, 238–40). For others, a more open method liberates phenomenology from a Eurocentric "border policing" that reinforces unequal academic power relations (Stawarska 2018, 17–18).

A commitment to methodological openness does not preclude distinctness. Three features of phenomenology stand out. First, feminist phenomenologists share the general phenomenological predisposition of distancing oneself from pre-understandings, even if they assume the impossibility of a complete *epoché*. As Cohen Shabot and Landry put it, "[F]eminist tools offer phenomenology what other methodologies cannot; feminist insights not only make visible 'normal' experiences of embodied beings but also do so without parsing out that which makes 'normal' experiences possible" (2018, 2). Second, feminist phenomenologists typically assume that this predisposition presupposes that one takes a first-person perspective, 'perspective from within,' or 'point of view' as a starting point for inquiry, in contrast to most social scientific, constructivist, and materialist accounts

of gender and race, which mostly take a ‘perspective from without’ and do not inquire into the very background beliefs that enable such accounts (Fielding 2017; Oksala 2006, 239–41). Third, feminist phenomenologists align themselves with the relational or interactive ontology that follows from the phenomenological principle of intentionality and its hermeneutic and existential modifications: the fundamental intertwinement of self (or *Dasein*) and world.

In addition to methods, the phenomenological tradition also offers a toolkit of conceptual resources that have been creatively appropriated and reworked for understanding gender questions (Stoller 2017, 339).<sup>7</sup> The next section presents what has proven to be one of the most significant and fertile phenomenological interventions in gender theory: the lived body—the body regarded not as a “thing” but as a “situation,” in Beauvoir’s words (2011, 46) or as seen ‘from within.’

### 3. The Lived and Habitual Body

The aim of this section is to demonstrate the merit of taking serious embodiment in its experiential, material, and habitual reality for rethinking two intractable controversies in feminist philosophy: the sex/gender and subjectivity/structure debates. The former controversy refers to a conceptual dichotomy that constituted an extremely successful Anglo American feminist intervention in academic scholarship from the 1960s. The sex/gender dichotomy has gained a wide circulation well outside academia and even beyond feminism ever since. As it is conventionally understood, ‘sex’ refers to the biological body with its reproductive features and ‘gender’ to socio-cultural norms and meanings attached to them, to social relations and roles expected of women and men. Additionally, in its everyday use, ‘gender’ increasingly refers to individuals’ self-identification. The social constructivist category of gender initially allowed for a non-naturalistic view on feminine (and masculine) identity and on the relations between men and women. It fit well in the feminist agenda of liberating women from the shackles of a fate to which their bodies allegedly destined them. Its purpose was to demonstrate that women’s centuries-long oppression and exclusion is not an immutable natural fact grounded in anatomy but entirely conventional and, hence, open to social, legal, and political change. In other words, the stakes involved in the social constructivist separation of ‘gender’ from ‘sex’ were to abandon the biological determinism, reductionism, or naturalism typical of unequal patriarchal power relations: a naturalism that, incidentally, is all but dead today, given the hold of paradigms on the life sciences such as the neurosciences and evolutionary psychology over explaining sexual difference and gender.

However, from the 1980s, feminist poststructuralist philosophers started to challenge the sex/gender divide, mostly because it inadvertently again turned ‘sex’ into an immutable natural given. It was acknowledged that this distinction reproduces a Cartesian ontological dualism since the sex/gender divide maps onto dichotomous realms such as body/mind and nature/culture in which the first is considered given and immutable (a fact, grounded in anatomy) and the second contingent, historical, and therefore open to change. Moreover, this dualism is not neutral but hierarchically structured; with this dualism invariably comes a valuation of one at the expense of the other pole: culture over nature, mind over body, etc. Judith Butler famously argued in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that sex, no less than gender, is a discursive effect that is subsequently naturalized (i.e., presented as pre-discursive). One could say that sex has been gender all along and all the way down.

The poststructuralist deconstruction of the sex/gender dichotomy led to the criticism among feminist phenomenologists that it turned gender into a merely discursive or linguistic effect and accomplished an erasure of the body. The biological reductionism that the concept of gender (grounded in ontological dualism) so effectively denounced was replaced by cultural or linguistic reductionism and determinism in poststructuralist hands, it was argued.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the sex/gender controversy seems to leave us with a choice between three takes on the relation between body and mind and nature and culture that are, each in its own way, unattractive for ontological or political reasons or both: naturalism, culturalism, or Cartesian dualism. The former two are reductive. For naturalists, the body is a thing or machine, and one only needs to look at the body to get at the truth about sexual difference. In other words, there is nothing but sex, with the body directly issuing norms for women's and men's behavioral patterns, identities, and roles. For culturalists, on the other hand, there is nothing but gender, with the body regarded as merely text, becoming almost a phantom, strangely devoid of physical reality. As a result, the body is emptied of ontological dignity. The feminist sex/gender dichotomy does not solve the problem of naturalism; it only displaces it. It is problematic not only ontologically—the body is presented as a passive object awaiting signification, rendering the interaction between body and mind unintelligible—but also politically: it reproduces the hierarchical structure inherent in Cartesian dualism, only on a different level.

Due to their relational ontology, feminist phenomenologists are in a good position to deconstruct the body/mind and nature/culture dichotomies without reducing one to the other. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was the first major phenomenological effort to demonstrate that 'nature' (the biological body with its visible differences) and 'culture' (cultural meanings and evaluations attributed to those differences and the norms informing them) should not be conceived as two substances but as inextricably intertwined in women's and men's sexed existence.<sup>9</sup> Despite the sometimes-outdated examples and a noted lack of intersectional awareness—it was first published in 1949, and its descriptions of women's lived experiences reflect Beauvoir's own white and bourgeois environment—this work, until today, remains an exemplary exploration of sexual difference through an account of its 'lived experience' (the title of the second volume) and has proven to have a remarkable capacity for sparking renewed interest in every new generation of feminist phenomenologists. What's more, previously overshadowed by the existential phenomenology of her partner Sartre, in recent decades, Beauvoir had increasingly been recognized as an original phenomenologist, even if she was inspired by key phenomenological insights from the work of Merleau-Ponty (the lived body, corporeal schema), Heidegger (facticity, projection, thrownness), Sartre (situation, alterity), and Husserl (*Leib*) for her own project of developing a phenomenology of gender.

For some feminist theorists working outside phenomenology, this fitness of Beauvoir's work for overcoming the sex/gender divide may be somewhat surprising, as *The Second Sex* has often been interpreted as attaching philosophical credence to this very divide on account of the famous—but often poorly understood—statement “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (2011, 293). Many, especially Anglo American feminists, read this phrase as a straightforward assertion of the social construction of gender. This reading is erroneous, a result of what is now widely considered the first English mistranslation of *La Deuxième Sexe* by zoologist Howard M. Parshley in 1953, which completely missed the phenomenological background of this work.<sup>10</sup>

To understand how Beauvoir phenomenologically deconstructs the nature/culture divide that underpins sex/gender, explicating the meaning of this famous statement is, in fact, a good place to start. Beauvoir takes the lived body as her starting point, which means that she does not conceive of it as a “thing” but as lived as a “situation” (Beauvoir 2011, 46). Being situated means that every human being is born into and exists within particular historical and cultural conditions and relations. One’s particular situation allows for the way human freedom is disclosed (as possibilities) as well as constrained or, in other words, for what one ‘can do’ and cannot do. It is through the body, with its sexually differentiated features amongst others, that one lives one’s situation. “Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped” (45). Beauvoir rejects the idea of human nature, an essence shared by all human beings, in general, and of a female essence (the “myth of the eternal feminine” [3]) in particular, defined and determined by either biological or cultural features. Being a woman (or man, intersex, or non-binary person, for that matter) means being in a never-ending process of becoming one. For Beauvoir, sexual difference belongs to the facticities of human existence: they are given, not chosen but—and here lies the difference with naturalist accounts of sex—contingent. Sexual differences, the ‘facts’ of female and male embodiment, only disclose themselves through interpretation—that is, through the meanings that humans in a particular place and time attach to them—so they are, as a principle, open to interpretation. Biological discourse about women’s and men’s bodies is itself shaped by historical, cultural, and social conditions.

[Biological data] are one of the keys that enable us to understand woman. But we refuse the idea that they form a fixed destiny for her. They do not suffice to constitute the basis for a sexual hierarchy; they do not explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her forever to this subjugated role.

(Beauvoir 2011, 45)

Kruks calls this “the dialectic of the natural and the historical” to point out the reciprocal constitution of bodies and the world (1998, 73). Our bodies disclose the social world according to our situation, which is itself shaped by the world.

From being situated also follows, Beauvoir argues, that the opposite of naturalism—namely, cultural or discursive reductionism, or what she calls ‘nominalism’—is equally false. It is not the case that women are “merely those who are arbitrarily designated by the word ‘woman’” (Beauvoir 2011, 4). To say there are only human beings irrespective of sexual difference is “an inauthentic flight” for “anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests, and occupations” (Beauvoir 2011, 4). These differences (and here one could add other “visible identities” such as race, to use Alcoff’s [2006] phrase) are profoundly constitutive of life, yet simultaneously, they are contingent, not essential, and may change and even disappear altogether, Beauvoir adds.

Building on Beauvoir’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenologies of the lived body and situation, Iris Marion Young, in her 1980 essay “Throwing like a Girl,” argues that (stereo) typically feminine bodily movement often displays what she calls “inhibited intentionality” (Young 2005, 37). A careful phenomenological analysis of the way girls and boys, respectively, perform physically challenging (but doable) tasks—the example being throwing a ball—reveals that they “live and move their bodies in space” (40) differently, she argues.



For Merleau-Ponty, the body, to the extent that it is competent ('I can'), creates an immediate link between the spatiality of one's own body ('here') and one's surrounding or outlying space ('yonder') (Merleau-Ponty 2000, 162). The body projects an open space—that is, a space in which outer and inner are continuous—that enables movements and projects (i.e., what they 'can do'). Young, on the contrary, points out that this may not be a universal human experience but a generalization of a particular—male—way of moving one's body in space. For women (and, I add, other marginalized subjects, such as racialized people), the continuity between 'here' and 'yonder' is more likely to be severed, whence allegedly normal everyday open space gives way to an enclosed or confining one that inhibits their movements and projects ('I cannot') (Young 2005, 40).

Incidentally, Frantz Fanon had already (in his 1952 *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*) observed something quite similar with respect to Black bodily agency. No less critical of certain falsely universalizing tendencies in Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body than Young after him, he observes that, for the Black person, the 'natural' (but actually naturalized) dialectic between body and world breaks down under (post-)colonial conditions. Both Young and Fanon point to the social and historical world as the source of the 'dual subjectivity' of women and Black people, respectively: it reflects that they are seen as objects in sexist and racist society while they simultaneously "live their bodies as subjects" (Young 2005, 44).

In other words, one's sense of bodily agency, of what one 'can do,' is contingent on one's situation, entailing gender and race, among others. Girls' hesitancy in throwing balls, Young demonstrates, is not dictated by female anatomy. She makes it painstakingly clear that one needs to learn to move 'like a girl' in the social world—in line with Beauvoir's 'becoming woman.'

Young's essay is not without its critics. Some generally sympathetic readers nonetheless find her account of split female subjectivity overly dualistic (Weiss 1999). Others accuse her of a methodologically problematic essentialism; Oksala, for instance, argues that Young generalizes a particular first-person description of female embodiment (Oksala 2006, 232). Finally, it has often been declared outdated by a younger generation of feminist phenomenologists (Chisholm 2008). Still, as a modern classic that remains widely read, it continues to make sense to many readers.

A more recent development in feminist phenomenology is the adoption of Merleau-Ponty's approach of the lived body as "habit body" (Merleau-Ponty 2000, 144). Seeing sexism, racialization, and racism as embodied perceptual habits has turned out to be helpful for understanding their mechanisms and persistence (Alcoff 2006; Al-Saji 2014; Ngo 2016). As suggested in the title of her 2006 monograph *Visible Identities*, Linda Alcoff observes that and how race and gender manifest precisely through visible bodily differences. Ambiguous or undecidable gendered or racial appearance causes deep confusion, fear, and even hatred. Focusing on racialized identities, Alcoff's account of perceptual habits provides another argument that collective identities are not merely linguistic or discursive constructs (2006, 102). Yet to acknowledge the visible physical presence of the racialized body is not to reduce it to a biological reality either. Accounting for habituality may help explain the tenacity of processes of racialization (Alcoff 2006, 187–89).

Helen Ngo (2016) takes this analysis one step further, from the habituality of racialization to (anti-black and anti-Asian) racism, which she illustrates with an analysis of George Yancy's much-cited case study of the "Elevator Effect". Yancy describes how he, a Black man, walks into an elevator with a white woman as its sole other occupant. Seeing him, her body

becomes tense: she clutches her bag, starts to tremble nervously; her hand palms become sweaty, etc. For Ngo, the elevator effect demonstrates how racism may work “in the register of bodily gesture and response,” which moreover, becomes “habituated” (Ngo 2016, 851). Even if it is a bodily response, it is informed by a long history of racist practices. As ways of seeing that are both learned and embodied, perceptual habits are not so much partly cultural, partly natural—a middle ground between the two—as beyond the nature/culture dichotomy.

So far, the argument has been about the deconstruction of the sex/gender controversy and the underlying nature/culture dichotomy. The phenomenological notion of the lived and habitual body is also helpful in shedding light on the related but distinct debate on structure versus agency. While in current popular discourse on gender, ‘experience’ and ‘identity’ signify highly individualized personal self-identifications and gender something up for the individual to choose and take up and off at will, gender theorists generally assume it is shaped in relation to tough social and institutional structures, power relations, or systems with a long history. However, they disagree as to which one has primacy in shaping human action. Is agency an epiphenomenon, derivative of deeper conditioning and determining oppressive structures and the ideologies organizing them, such as patriarchy or racism, or are these structures and eventual changes to them, reversely, enacted by agents? What is at stake are the conditions of freedom and the possibility of change.

Feminist poststructuralists who adopt the type of ontological culturalism described here tend to view agency and related concepts such as experience and subjectivity as mere discursive effects: i.e., the passive outcome of determining social and linguistic power structures (Scott 1992). Feminist phenomenological conceptualizations of ‘becoming woman,’ orientation, and habit, on the other hand, deconstruct the structure/agency dichotomy. Beauvoir’s ‘becoming woman,’ for instance, entails a dialectical understanding of agency and social structure (Stawarska 2018, 22).<sup>11</sup> In other words, it is an ambiguous notion, involving “a sense both of being created by externalities and of creating oneself” (Kruks 1998, 73). It means that, as a woman, one is both construct and project, constituted physically and culturally *and* constituting oneself ‘like a woman’—or a girl.

Likewise, that one learns to ‘throw like a girl’ within the bounds of the social world implies that girls (and women) can unlearn self-inhibiting ways of bodily comportment if the social world changes. Indeed, much has changed in gender relations and in the way many girls and women move through the world in various parts of the world since Young’s essay was published in 1980, let alone Beauvoir’s book from 1949. For instance, the accessibility and professionalization of sports for women have increased tremendously. On a different note, the normalization of sexual harassment has been challenged, not in the least by the concerted collective actions of feminist movements.

Feminist phenomenologists of habit moreover demonstrate that structures do not so much determine as *orient* bodily responses and gestures in particular ways (Ahmed 2006, 2007). Ngo (2016) challenges conventional understandings of habit in terms of sedimentation or calcification, for bodily habits—for example, white racist habits—are *held*, she argues.

#### 4. Outlook: Feminist Phenomenology as a Critical Phenomenology

In the preceding sections, I hope to have demonstrated that feminist phenomenology fits within the phenomenological method but is also critical of it because it features a double

legacy: of phenomenology and of feminism. On the one hand, feminist phenomenologists are faithful, if not to the actual practice of the *epoché*, then to its spirit: the methodological predisposition to denaturalize the natural attitude (Husserl) and to uncover the everyday practical world that ‘normally’ operates in the background (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty). On the other hand, it is not just committed to a description of first-person lived experiences but also galvanized by feminism as a critical political and ethical project and related to feminist struggles. Without exception, feminist phenomenologists are attentive to the normatively significant implications of the historicity, situatedness, and habituality of differential embodiment and committed to change.

This double legacy is a persistent yet productive source of tension in feminist phenomenology; it prompts efforts at expansion of the topics deemed proper for phenomenological inquiry and at methodological transformation. There is a tendency in scholarship to put the tensions between phenomenology and critical thinking in general, including feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability studies, in perspective. It is argued that a critical moment is inherent in *any* phenomenological undertaking, even in classical phenomenology (Guenther 2021). As a manner or style of thinking, it has been suggested that the *epoché* is only a “heuristic device” designed “to cast new light on what usually appears natural, or normal”—“like much feminist critique” (Kruks 1998, 67). Indeed, it could reversely be argued that, as a critical political and ethical project, feminist phenomenology works precisely through phenomenological description (Fielding 2012, 518; Ortega 2016, 7; Stawarska 2018, 13–14; Simms and Stawarska 2013, 10–11; Oksala 2006, 239–41). Feminist phenomenologists uncover what has been obscured because it presents itself as normal or natural as it constitutes the horizon or background of lived experience without itself appearing, such as systemic structures of oppression. They more or less systematically reveal commonplace pre-understanding, including gender-based prejudices and racialized or racist bias. As a result, these constitutive structures and pre-understandings are made available as objects for critical scrutiny—hence, the possibility of change. Description itself may thus weaken the normative hold of these structures. For example, uncovering the habitual nature of sexist or racist perception robs the sexed and racialized body of its naturalness and opens up practices of perceiving otherwise.

Now that feminist phenomenology has become an established field of academic inquiry, it seems to blend more and more into critical phenomenology more broadly. As Simms and Stawarska write: “Feminist phenomenology is, by definition, a critical phenomenology” (2013, 11). More work needs to be done, though, on the precise historical and conceptual relation between feminist and critical phenomenology. To what extent can feminist phenomenology be said to be the mother discourse from which contemporary critical phenomenology originated? Has feminist phenomenology made itself obsolete as a separate field or even a relic of an unreflectively white, cis-gendered, middle-class feminist past? Whatever the answer, some of the most exiting directions for future phenomenological research on gender pertain, first, to the implications for gender theory of phenomenological reflection in trans studies on non-cis and non-binary bodies and, second, to the intersections between gender and other embodied differences that are not related to the conditions of the reproduction of the human species and therefore may seem less susceptible to biologist reductions. Is the lived body as fruitful a perspective on trans studies and intersectional feminist thought as it has been to gender theory so far?

## Notes

- 1 However, some trace the advent of phenomenological reflection on gender back to the early work of the German phenomenologist Edith Stein (1891–1942) on the nature of women and on male and female consciousness.
- 2 For historical overviews of the genesis and recent development of feminist phenomenology, see Simms and Stawarska, 2013; Stoller 2017; Kruks 1998; Stawarska 2018; Fisher 2000; Fielding 2012, 2017.
- 3 Judith Butler’s work takes a pivotal role in these debates on alleged essentialism on the one hand and cultural or linguistic reductionism on the other.
- 4 On this argument, see Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010, 4–5.
- 5 On Beauvoir’s relation to key Heideggerian concepts, see Gothlin 2003.
- 6 On the relationship between Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s phenomenological work, see Gothlin 1996.
- 7 A clear example of this type of appropriating phenomenology is reflected in Weiss, Murphy and Salamon 2020.
- 8 Later, I will argue that this is somewhat of a caricature that we perhaps only find in Joan Scott’s work (1992), not in Butler’s.
- 9 On Beauvoir’s deconstruction of the sex/gender dichotomy, see Fielding 2012, 519–20; Gothlin 1996, 2003; Stawarska 2018; Heinämaa 2012; Kruks 1998; Moi 1999; Young 2005, 16.
- 10 Also, this mistranslation unjustly led to the accusation that Beauvoir is hostile to women’s bodies. The much-awaited 2011 translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier is now regarded as the authoritative English-language edition.
- 11 Many feminist phenomenologists today hold that Beauvoir’s ‘becoming woman’ shares this feature with Butler’s gender performativity. By demonstrating the proximity, continuity, or at least compatibility of Butler’s poststructuralist and feminist phenomenology, they adapt a previously held caricature (Stawarska 2018). Weiss 2021 even goes so far as calling Butler a feminist phenomenologist without much ado.

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