A Phenomenology of Gender[1]

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The question that I ask and attempt to answer in this paper is this: How can phenomenology as a philosophical method of investigation account for gender? Although many feminists have expressed reservations about the possibility that the master's tools could ever dismantle the master's house, phenomenology as a philosophical method seems to have provided exceptionally useful tools for feminist inquiry. From Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* to recent studies on feminine corporeality, it has formed a significant part of the growing corpus of feminist philosophy. Yet it is in no way obvious how it could account for the question of gender. To what extent is it possible to study gender within the paradigm of a philosophy of a subject or of consciousness?

The answer will obviously depend on how we understand phenomenology. In addressing this issue I will explicate four different understandings of phenomenology and assess their respective potential in terms of understanding gender. Although my characterisation of these four phenomenological positions is necessarily schematic and therefore in many respects problematic and contestable, their function here is mainly to illustrate my arguments concerning gender. I will explicate a classical reading, a corporeal reading, and an intersubjective reading, but my sympathies are with my fourth interpretation, which I call a post-phenomenological reading.

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THE CLASSICAL READING

In its traditional formulations phenomenology cannot address the question of gender or sexual difference at all. This possibility has to be denied on the grounds that, in the proper transcendental attitude all the self-interpretations and bodily characteristics of the transcendental ego are bracketed, and in this sense it is incorporeal and above the concrete life-world. The true transcendental is universal pure subjectivity understood as consciousness, with its reality status and the reality status of its objects both placed in brackets.

Although not taking issue directly with the question of sexual difference, J. N. Mohanty, for example, argues that corporeality is not excluded from the life of transcendental subjectivity, but finds its proper place within its total structure. He notes that, although Husserl is often regarded as the paradigmatic case of a philosopher in whose thought a close connection between objective thinking, the objectification of the body, and the thesis of a universal constituting consciousness is pre-eminently exemplified, he does not see transcendental subjectivity as a purely logical principle.[2] Husserlian transcendental consciousness is not merely reflective and intellectual, but it rather comprehends within itself, as a basic stratum, pre-reflective perceptual consciousness including the lived body as a system of intentionalities.[3] The constituting principle is a disembodied consciousness, but the constituting life of subjectivity, even in its transcendentally purified form, contains a stratum of corporeality in which the lived body itself is constituted. Thus bodily intentionality, which participates in the constitution of the world and is well recognized by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, finds its place within the total field of transcendental subjectivity.[4] Mohanty points out that, while Husserl acknowledged that anonymous bodily subjectivity was, in an important sense, prior to or more fundamental than mental consciousness, from the perspective of phenomenological analysis, these levels together with their structural relationships can nevertheless only be comprehended within the total life of transcendental consciousness.[5]

From the perspective of feminist phenomenology, this means that even if we emphasise the constitutive importance of corporeality or bodily subjectivity, this will not bring the question of gender or sexual difference to the proper pheno-

2 Mohanty, J. N.: *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy*, Dordrecht 1985, p. 132.

3 Ibid., p. 163.

4 Ibid., p. 132 f.

5 Ibid., p. 164.

menological level of analysis, understood in this reading as an investigation of transcendental consciousness. Recognition of the importance of bodily subjectivity only implies that there must be a dimension of corporeality within the structure of the transcendental subjectivity that is constitutive of the mundane phenomenon of sexed bodies. Phenomenology as transcendental analysis must rise above or look behind these mundane phenomena by studying their condition of possibility in the transcendental subjectivity. And transcendental subjectivity cannot be understood as sexed, otherwise we would have to argue that there are, in fact, two different types of transcendental subjectivities.

Feminist phenomenology would thus be an oxymoron: the question of gender or sexual difference cannot arise in the phenomenological analysis of transcendental subjectivity. If it did for some reason, then we would have to simply dismiss it by pointing out that the procedure of transcendental reduction has not been properly understood or accomplished.[6]

THE CORPOREAL READING

The consequences of transcendental reduction in terms of gender make it understandable why most feminist appropriations of phenomenology have opted for the Merleau-Pontian version, which builds on the premise that complete reduction to transcendental consciousness is impossible. This is generally interpreted to mean that the phenomenological investigation must focus on the lived body as opposed

6 The phenomenological investigation of sexual difference can also be denied on the basis of Heidegger's thought. Drucilla Cornell writes that the Heideggerian position might run, broadly, as follows: Questions of sexual difference cannot follow directly from an analytic of finitude, because the marking of Dasein as differentiated by sex is a secondary phenomenon. An analytic of finitude that would proceed along the lines of *Being and Time* must not include secondary characteristics in its analysis because these would involve the philosopher in engaging with ontic and not ontological questions – questions of anthropology in Heidegger's sense, rather than questions of philosophy. (Cornell, Drucilla: Opening Remarks, in: Emanuela Bianchi (Ed.), *Is Feminist Philosophy Philosophy?,* Evanston 1999, pp. 3-9, here p. 4). Jacques Derrida is perhaps the best-known critic of Heidegger's view. He has questioned whether sexual difference can be reduced to a secondary characteristic of Dasein. (See Derrida, Jacques: Geschlecht. Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference, in: *Research in Phenomenology* 13 (1983), pp. 65-83).

to transcendental consciousness.[7] Merleau-Ponty's work has been appropriated in a variety of groundbreaking feminist studies on female embodiment, such as Iris Marion Young's phenomenological analyses of feminine movement, pregnancy and breasted experience.[8] According to this approach, the phenomenological study of gender is understood as a study of the basic modalities or structures of female embodiment that are typical of feminine existence. There is thus a distinct mode of corporeal being in the world that is female or feminine, and the aim is to describe the eidetic structures of the living body, rather than constituting consciousness that characterize this feminine way of being.

Despite the sophistication of this approach in terms of the philosophical articulation and analysis of the neglected experiences of women, such as pregnancy, it also has some serious problems. If any first-person description by a woman is understood as a phenomenological account and then generalized by turning it into a description of eidetic female embodiment, we end up with a female body

7 The way Merleau-Ponty's denial of the possibility of a complete reduction is interpreted varies. Sara Heinämaa, for example, argues against interpretations that claim that Merleau-Ponty abandons Husserl's reductions. According to her, Merleau-Ponty's critical comments are directed against intellectualist interpretations of Husserl's methodic ideas. The phenomenological reduction should be understood as involving passions and passivity. (Heinämaa, Sara: From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction, in: Ted Toadvine/Lester Embree (Ed.), *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, Dordrecht 2002, pp. 129-148).

8 See Young, Iris Marion: *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory,* Indianapolis 1990. On other influential feminist accounts appropriating Merleau-Ponty's thought, see e.g. Weiss, Gail: *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, New York 1999; Heinämaa, Sara: *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, Lanham 2003. Many feminist theorists have also expressed strong reservations about Merleau-Ponty's avoidance of the question of sexual difference and of his apparent generalizations regarding subjectivity and embodiment, which tend to take men's experiences for human ones. On feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty accusing him of manifesting a masculinist bias, see e.g. Allen, Jeffner: Through the Wild Region: An Essay in Phenomenological Feminism, in: *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry* 18 (1982-83), pp. 241-256; Butler, Judith: Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description. A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception, in: Jeffner Allen/Iris Marion Young (Ed.), *The Thinking Muse. Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, Bloomington 1989, pp. 85-100; Grosz, Elizabeth: *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indianapolis 1994; Irigaray, Luce: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London/New York 2004.

that is essentialized. Feminist theory has fought hard against essentialism, particularly biological essentialism, which holds that femaleness and femininity are determined by the biological structures of the body. The corporeal readings of feminist phenomenology thus threaten to push us back into defending a form of corporeal essentialism that potentially precludes political changes in the situation of women.[9]

Apart from the fact that this method of analyzing individual experiences and then deriving from them eidetic claims about female embodiment is questionable, ultimately the most serious problem with the approach is, in my view, the fact that the focus on the body is simply too limited a framework to support a philosophical understanding of gender.

Sara Heinämaa appropriates Simone de Beauvoir's thought in her seminal book *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*[10] in order to argue that phenomenologically sexual difference should be understood as a difference between two embodied styles of being. Her claim is that the philosophical context in which Beauvoir operates is phenomenological, and that she therefore does not conceive of men and women as two kinds of historical entities or as two kinds of biological organisms, but as two different ways of relating to the world. Women and men are two different variations of the human embodiment, of the human way of relating to the world, and every singular human existent is a variation of one of them or else combines elements from both. "So, the principle difference is the experiential difference between two types of living bodies, women's bodies and men's bodies."[11] Every individual woman thus both realizes the feminine way or style of relating to the world and modifies it. Accordingly, we can legitimately speak about 'feminine eroticism' and 'feminine literature' without assuming a fixed idea, 'femininity' describable by exact concepts.

Heinämaa's influential account has effectively problematized the attempts to reduce the meaning of gender or sexual difference to either side of the stalwart

9 Linda Fisher defends feminist phenomenology against the charges of essentialism by arguing that a general account need not be equivalent to the absolutist sense of generic, but should be understood rather as the thread of invariance; not a model that fits all, but structural invariance *within* variance, that gives shape and coherence to it. Feminist phenomenology should not be understood as a form of reifying and homogenizing essentialism that suppresses any variations, but the attempt to articulate the tension of general and specific. (Fisher Linda: Phenomenology and Feminism. Perspectives on their Relation, in: Linda Fisher/Lester Embree (Ed.), *Feminist Phenomenology*, Dordrecht 2000, pp. 17-38, here p. 29).

10 Heinämaa, Sara: *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*.

11 Ibid., p. 84.

binary of biology versus culture. However, it is my contention that the extent to which gender or sexual difference is a philosophical question it is not an issue that can be settled by just studying bodies, even if they are understood phenomenologically as opposed to biologically. It would thus be simplistic to conclude that, on the basis of the phenomenological analysis of embodiment, the philosophical meaning of gender could be reduced to the difference between two types of living bodies.

The idea that living bodies are constituted in perception and experience as necessarily falling into two basic categories or types can be contested on purely empirical grounds. Psychological studies on children's gender beliefs show that it is unlikely that a child is able to derive in some direct empirical fashion a tidy binary structuring of gender difference from everyday life in which gender distinctions are often confusing, contradictory, and irregular. The development of a 'gender schema', the framework for classifying people into appropriate genders, is a complex cultural learning process intertwined with the acquisition of language, but also with many normative issues operative in society.[12] Bodies themselves are also culturally molded in more and less violent ways to conform to the normative expectations of gender. The most extreme example would be the case of intersexed babies whose genitals are surgically made to resemble what are considered 'normal' male or female genitalia. The reason for this intervention is, in the majority of cases, purely cosmetic. The bodies of intersexed people are thus literally made to correspond to our dualist ontology or gender schema, rather than this schema simply reflecting our perception of living bodies.

Even if we did accept that human bodies do, in general, come in two basic models, and that there is therefore some kind of corporeal counterpart for the linguistic gender binary, philosophically the meaning of gender still cannot be reduced to this corporeal given. The way in which we classify bodies into types, give them value and meaning depends on historically and culturally specific practices. We can only identify something as something by using linguistically mediated conceptual determinations, and our experiences therefore always have linguistic, sociocultural, and historical conditions of possibility. A philosophical study of gender therefore cannot be limited to a description of the difference between two types of living bodies, but must also encompass

12 Johnson, Ann: Understanding Children's Gender Beliefs, in: Fisher/Embree (Ed.), *Feminist Phenomenology*, Dordrecht 2000, pp. 133-151, here p. 140-141.

a study of the ontological schemas in which those bodies and experiences gain value and meaning.[13]

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE READING

The intersubjective readings of phenomenology seem to open up a broader perspective on the question of gender that can account for the importance of shared normative structures such as language and historicity. Dan Zahavi,[14] among others, has effectively argued for an intersubjective transformation of Husserl's philosophy taking place in his late writings. Husserl's late thought is characterized by a decisive rethinking of the relation between the transcendental and the mundane that ultimately forced him to consider the transcendental significance of issues such as generativity, tradition, historicity, and normality.

The decisive question for the relevance of this approach in terms of gender is obviously in how we understand intersubjectivity. Zahavi distinguishes three different kinds of it operative in Husserl's work. The most common of these refers to a concrete relation between subjects. When I experience an experiencing other, the validity categories of my experience are subjected to a decisive change. By means of others, the objects of my constitutive experiences are provided with a validity that lends them independence with respect to me. Thus the categories of transcendence, objectivity and reality are intersubjectively constituted, meaning that they can only be constituted by a subject that has experienced other subjects.[15]

According to Zahavi, second and more fundamental interpretation is to understand it as an apriori structure of subjectivity. Intersubjectivity does thus not refer only to the other people's actual presence: the being of the subject as experiencing and constituting implies a reference to other subjects already prior to its concrete experience of them. There is an apodictic universal structure of intersubjectivity predelineated in every ego.[16] This fundamental intersubjectivity of

13 More on poststructuralist criticism of feminist phenomenology see e.g. Butler: Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description; Scott, Joan W.: Experience, in: Judith Butler/Joan W. Scott (Ed.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, London 1992, pp. 22-40.

14 Zahavi, Dan: *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity: A Response to the Linguistic-Pragmatic Critique*, Athens 2001.

15 Ibid., p. 38.

16 Ibid., p. 63.

the transcendental subject forms the condition of possibility for egological sense constitution.

These two senses of intersubjectivity do not have any obvious consequences in terms of gender, however. For the constitution of objective reality it should be irrelevant whether the constitutive community of others consists of men or women. Intersubjectivity in the sense of an apodictic structure of transcendental subjectivity cannot be understood as sexually varied either.

Zahavi distinguishes a third type, however, in addition to *apriori* intersubjectivity and the concrete experience of others, which is effective at the level of handed-down normality. As an incarnate subject, I am always already situated in an intersubjective, historical nexus of sense. I am a member of a historical community, learning from others what counts as 'normal' and thereby, as a communalized subject, participating in an intersubjective tradition. I also always understand the world and myself by virtue of a handed-down linguistic conventionality. This third type of intersubjectivity thus refers to the constitutive importance of the cultural sphere, or the *homeworld* of which the transcendental subject is a member.[17]

When gender is studied phenomenologically in the light of this third type of intersubjectivity, it becomes possible to understand how experiences and living bodies are given specific gendered meanings through intersubjectively constituted systems of normality that are always tied to conventionality. Being socialized to a culture and becoming a member of it means learning from others what counts as normal in the case of gender, too. I learn very early what the norms for maleness and femaleness are in my culture. I also learn what the sanctions for failing to live up to these norms are. Although the system of normality, the gender schema, often breaks down, as very clearly happens in cases of intersexed infants or transgendered individuals, as long as these discrepancies can be classified as abnormalities, the concordance of the homeworld and its system of normality can be maintained.

This approach leaves open the possibility that the system of normality could also change, however. If the meaning of gender is understood as dependent on culturally handed-down forms of normality and not on eidetic structures of embodiment, it should be possible to effect changes in it. As Zahavi points out, our system of normality must undergo continual correction because the concordance of the homeworld is ruptured by conflicts and discordances. Absolute concordance–i.e. the world itself–must thus be understood as an ideal that can only be

17 Ibid., p. 65, 163.

approached through the infinite movement of relative achievements that are carried out intersubjectively.[18]

Let us return to the example of intersexed individuals. As this phenomenon is now attracting more attention and these individuals themselves are able to articulate their experiences in new terms, it is possible that our system of normality concerning gender has to change or is already changing. Alternatively, we could simply consider, from our perspective, the stupidity of what philosophers have written about women in the history of philosophy, and the relativity of any concordance concerning gender should seem incontestable.

Although the intersubjective reading thus seems to solve many of the problems connected with the first two approaches, my critical question now concerns how, in practice, we can study phenomenologically the constitutive role of the third type of intersubjectivity. It is my contention that the cornerstones of the phenomenological method–the first-person perspective as radical self-investigation and the subsequent move of the transcendental reduction–in fact wipe this constitutive dimension out of the picture.

Zahavi makes it clear that transcendental intersubjectivity is not an objective structure that could be studied from a third-person perspective. It is not an ontological or an empirical postulate. It can only be disclosed through a description of the subject's structures of experience because it can only unfold itself in the relation between singular subjects. The point of departure for a phenomenological treatment of intersubjectivity, irrespective of which type we are dealing with, must be an investigation of a subject that is related to the world and to others. The turn to intersubjectivity thus in no way serves to refute a philosophy of the subject.[19]

The first two types of intersubjectivity were revealed by analyzing the structures of perception as well as other intentional experiences. The discovery of transcendental intersubjectivity was thus not based on simple empirical observations, on the fact that I can constantly see other people around me, nor was it a dogmatic metaphysical presupposition. Husserl argued that the analysis of perceptual intentionality led to the disclosure of the apodictic intersubjective structures of the transcendental ego.[20] In the case of the third type of intersubjectivity,

18 Ibid., p. 101, 102.

19 Ibid., p. 165.

20 Zahavi shows how the intersubjective constitution of meaning is revealed in Husserl's thought through an analysis of the constitutive processes of the subject. To every experience of an object, there essentially belongs a reference to further possible experiences, since the absent aspects of the object are co-intended through, and beyond, the intuitively given appearance. Since these possible experiences are incompatible in

the type that interests me here, the situation seems different, however. The constitutive conditions in this case are not *a priori* intersubjective structures, but historically and culturally changing norms. They are, in fact, exactly what distorts and clouds an investigation into *a priori* universal structures and must therefore be bracketed in the reduction. Despite the late emphasis on the constitutive importance of the third type of intersubjectivity, the phenomenological method relies on prior ontological commitment to the universal validity of the transcendental structures of the ego. The method starts from the analysis of the first-person experience and moves from there to a transcendental inquiry into the constitution of sense by identifying *a priori* structures of transcendental subjectivity. This move can only be justified on the basis of an ontological commitment to the universal similarity of the subjects.[21] The differences between them can only be understood on the basis of this more fundamental similarity, and must be studied through empirical sciences such as anthropology, sociology, or psychology.

Hence, although Husserl had to recognize the constitutive importance of the third type of intersubjectivity, it must always be understood as dependent on a more primordial type – intersubjectivity as a universal a priori structure–and it is this primordial type that the phenomenological method can accommodate. It cannot show, through the same method, both that the individual subjects of transcendental intersubjectivity are always furnished with identical *a priori* structures *and* that the concordance of their experiences is a relative accomplishment that has historical and cultural conditions of possibility. It thus seems that, although phenomenology must acknowledge the constitutive importance of language and cultural normality, it cannot address the transcendental, constitutive significance of these mundane phenomena without giving up the reduction to transcendental consciousness.

If we give up the phenomenological reduction we encounter the problem of circularity, however. How can transcendental intersubjectivity–now understood as comprising language and historicity–be constituted in experience if it is what

principle with my currently actual experience, it is a matter of the experience of possible others. I can only constitute an object because my horizontal relatedness to the world contains structural references to the perceptions of possible others. My experiences of the world therefore contain an intersubjective dimension *a priori*. (Ibid., p. 125).

21 Husserl also states this explicitly in *Cartesian Meditations*, for example: the individual subjects of transcendental intersubjectivity are furnished with mutually corresponding and harmonious systems. (See e.g. Husserl, Edmund: *Cartesian Meditations*, Dordrecht 1995, p. 125).

ultimately makes individual constitution possible?[22] In terms of my limited question of gender, the problem appears as follows: to start the analysis from a woman's experience when trying to understand what a woman is means already assuming that which we seek to explain. Husserl's solution to the paradox is the reduction to transcendental consciousness that keeps the empirical and the transcendental strictly separate.[23] This means, however, that we seem to have come full circle and have ground to a halt. Either the question of gender cannot be investigated under the phenomenological method at all, or our investigation is doomed to a circularity that already presupposes that which it seeks to explain. The question that we must thus face is, how does the phenomenological method need to be modified for it to be able study the third type of intersubjectivity, the constitutive importance of culture, language and historicity?

THE POST-PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING

With the term 'post-phenomenology' I refer to a modification of the phenomenological method, which, I argue, is better able to deal with the constitutive importance of the social and cultural world. According to my post-phenomenological reading, it is impossible to understand how gender is constituted through norma-

22 David Carr, for example, argues that transcendental intersubjectivity itself has, in the final analysis, to be submitted to phenomenological reduction to reveal how it is constituted. (Carr, David: Response to Drummond and Zahavi, in: *Human Studies* 25 (2002), pp. 117-123, here p. 121).

23 Merleau-Ponty seems to a certain extent to accept the circularity of his position and the superimposition of the empirical and the transcendental aspects of experience. He formulates the problem himself when he writes, for example: "Now if the transcendental is intersubjectivity, how can the borders of the transcendental and the empirical help becoming indistinct? For along with the other person, all the other person sees in me – all my facticity – is reintegrated into subjectivity, or at least posited as an indispensable element of its definition. Thus the transcendental descends into history." (Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Signes*, Evanston 1964, p. 107). Foucault's criticism of Merleau-Ponty focuses precisely on this circularity. He argues that the analysis of lived experience (*expérience vécu*) superimposes the transcendental and the empirical by giving the empirical contents transcendental value. What is given in experience and what renders experience possible correspond to each other in endless oscillation. (See Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London/New York 1989, p. 321 f., 336).

tive ontological schemas if we believe that we can, by some supreme methodological step such as the *epoche*, to leave all our ontological commitments behind. It is my contention that we should therefore accept the hermeneutical circle – at least in connection with our analysis of gender – and try to see to it that our method continuously turns back upon itself, questioning and modifying itself in an effort to articulate what it secretly thinks. This means understanding *epoche* not as total, universal, and complete, but as an endless, circular, and always partial task.

It is not enough just to give up the phenomenological reduction to transcendental consciousness and the totalizing understanding of the *epoche*, however. We also have to give up the first-person perspective as the exclusive and indispensable starting point of our analysis. In striving to understand the constitution of gendered experience it might be more helpful to start by reading anthropological and sociological investigations, medical reports on intersexed children, or psychological studies of children's gender beliefs than by analyzing one's own normatively limited experiences. Husserl himself, while extending his analyses of intersubjectivity, eventually had to broaden the purely self-reflective study of consciousness. He had to enter fields that have traditionally been reserved for psychopathology, sociology, anthropology, and ethnology.[24] Heidegger and his poststructuralist followers, including Foucault, have particularly emphasized the study of history.

Although it might seem that we have now thrown the baby out with the bath and rejected phenomenology altogether, this would be too hasty a conclusion. The philosophical investigation of gender is still understood as an investigation of the constitution of gendered *experience*, not as a conceptual analysis of language or a biological investigation of the body. It cannot be reduced to medical or sociological study, even if it cannot afford to ignore the methods and results of these and other empirical sciences. These empirical descriptions can only reveal something about the normative ontological schemas that are constitutive of our experiences when they are submitted to critical philosophical analysis. What is more, this analysis must ultimately take the form of radical self-reflection. It is ultimately *I* who must read these investigations, and it is only in relation to my experience that they can reveal something previously hidden about its constitution, its limits, and its supposedly natural and universal character.

I will return to the example of the psychological study of children's gender beliefs. The post-phenomenological question, unlike the psychological one, would not be about how children learn to classify people in the right gender cat-

24 See e.g. Zahavi: *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity*; Steinbock, Anthony J.: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Evanston 1995.

egories, but it would rather focus on what their beliefs reveal about us and the normativity of our adult homeworld. Ann Johnson, for example, notes that most psychological theories regarding children's gender beliefs already operate within a progressivist and biologist framework. When a young child thus says that if a girl puts on a boy's clothes she would be a boy, he or she is 'mistakenly' using cultural clues such as hair length or clothing to determine gender rather than rooting a person's gender classification in 'true' biological criteria. Johnson argues that, from a phenomenological perspective, however, children's gender beliefs can provide salient reminders of how we find ourselves within a never-ending chain of meaning, and at the same time put into question what we have learnt to accept as unquestioned reality. She refers to the opening pages of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, noting that attending to childhood gives us access to "the exotic charm of another system of thought," which in turn reveals "the limitations of our own (system), the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."[25]

The study of a different system of normality thus functions as a form of reduction in the sense that it makes us aware of the hidden aspects of our own thought–it lifts the naivete of the ordinary experience–and allows us to reveal and question its constitutive conditions, at least to some extent. It is not a shift from natural attitude to the level of transcendental consciousness, but it is nevertheless a shift to the level of transcendental discourse. The idea of phenomenological reduction would thus not be simply discarded, but it would be understood in similar terms as how Merleau-Ponty characterised it: it is the interminable effort to break our familiar acceptance of the world and to see as strange and paradoxical what we normally take for granted.[26] Compared with the corporeal reading I discussed above, however, the function of the 'abnormal' and the alien-world would not be to reveal the 'normal' and the homeworld as universally primary, however. The aim is not to find eidetic structures of female experience that characterise all women whether they come from Nigeria or Norway: it is rather to expose the structures that are constitutive of the sense of 'normal' in *our* homeworld. As Anthony Steinbock argues, a phenomenological analysis of the social world cannot begin with individual consciousness to reach a universal We, because intersubjectivity cannot be reduced to a universal, collective singularity without the patronizing assumption that we are the entire structure.[27] Such an analysis can only study the constitutive structures of our homeworld from

25 Johnson: Understanding Children's Gender Beliefs, p. 146; Foucault: *The Order of Things*, p. xv.

26 See e.g. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith (Trans.), New York/London 1994, p. xiii-xiv.

27 Steinbock: *Home and Beyond*, p. 269.

within it, given the awareness that they are themselves constituted in relation to alienworlds.

Hence, the post-phenomenological method would give up a complete phenomenological reduction to transcendental subjectivity, but it would, nevertheless, attempt to accomplish a partial bracketing in order to reveal something about the ontological schemas underlying our ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting. It would begin with considerations that are in some sense 'foreign' and therefore distanced from the subject, such as anthropological, historiographical, and medical studies, for example. This knowledge would then be appropriated in an attempt to make visible the presumptions and implicit ontological commitments in one's homeworld. Unlike the classical readings of phenomenology, it would hold that these constitutive, ontological schemas are always tied to cultural normativity – to language, history, and culture. While they are thus necessarily and irrevocably intertwined with our forms of reflection, they are, nevertheless, ultimately contingent and therefore changeable. What is 'normal' and therefore assumed as natural and necessary can, in the post-phenomenological inquiry, turn out to be that only within the parameters of our homeworld.

Despite this fundamental compatibility with certain forms of cultural constructivism, I am not advocating an empirical study of the objective and causal processes of cultural construction. This would entail adopting a view from nowhere and erasing the very background beliefs and ontological commitments that are constitutive of our objective accounts. My interpretation of phenomenology does not mean that the singular and always perspectival character of experience is eradicated. The philosophical reflection on gender, just like on anything else, can ultimately only be a personal task. I must analyse my own experiences and theories as being formed in a community with its attendant practices, beliefs, and language. Most importantly, however, I must be capable of problematizing them. I must be able to take critical distance from the commonly accepted meanings of various forms of experience, but also and most fundamentally, my own. This is not possible without a first-person perspective: the subject must engage in the attentive and radical study of her own constitution.

In conclusion and to revert back to gender, the answer to the question I started with is that phenomenology can account for gender by helping us to understand how gendered experiences are constituted and how their constitution is tied not only to embodiment, but also to the normative cultural practices and structures of meaning. This can be accomplished by a subject who, through radical philosophical reflection, manages to take critical distance from certain forms of experience. What my post-phenomenological reading suggests, however, is that in order to achieve this critical distance it might be more useful for me to

read psychological reports or ethnographical studies than to analyze my own experiences of women or embodiment.

Post-phenomenology would thus start with knowledge and experiences that are foreign to us, but this does not mean that the question of gender is relegated to the domain of empirical study. The method of reduction is necessary to effectuate the reflective step that opens up the realm of transcendental investigation. We must break away from the natural attitude understood as an attitude where our ontological pre-understanding of the world is not visible to us at all, to an attitude that is capable of problematizing it. At the same time, we have to accept that ontology can never be totally suspended, because it is irrevocably tied up with our language, methods of reflection and ways of seeing the world. This means accepting the always partial and preliminary character of any philosophical investigation concerning ourselves. An analysis of experience that aims to be radical and transcendental can only ever be fragmentary and incomplete.

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