



IN DEFENSE OF FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY: LIVED BODY, FACTICITY AND THE PROBLEM OF ESSENTIALISM

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the main themes and concepts cultivated in the intersection between phenomenology and feminism, as well as to introduce some of the authors whose research has impacted the field. To that effect, I first analyze the seminal works which helped consolidate the discipline that would come to be known as “feminist phenomenology”, focusing next on relevant notions to the topic at hand, such as the concepts of lived body and facticity. In doing so, I intend to show that, even though phenomenology itself may have been charged with engendering essentialist arguments, the possibility of further non-essentialist unfolding within a phenomenological framework can contribute a great deal to the solution to a number of laborious, yet central deadlocks currently plaguing feminism as a theory as much as a political movement.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenology; Feminism; Essentialism; Lived Body; Facticity.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma visão geral dos principais temas e conceitos cultivados na intersecção entre a fenomenologia e o feminismo, bem como apresentar alguns dos autores cujas pesquisas têm impactado a área. Para tanto, analiso primeiramente as obras seminais que ajudaram a consolidar a disciplina que viria a ser conhecida como “fenomenologia feminista”, focalizando a seguir noções relevantes para o tema em questão, como os conceitos de corpo vivido e facticidade. Ao fazê-lo, pretendo mostrar que, embora a própria fenomenologia possa ter sido encarregada de engendrar argumentos essencialistas, a possibilidade de mais desdobramentos não-essencialistas dentro de uma estrutura fenomenológica pode contribuir muito para a solução de uma série de laboriosos impasses, embora centrais, que atualmente atormentam o feminismo tanto como teoria quanto como movimento político.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fenomenologia; Feminismo; Essencialismo; Corpo vivido; Facticidade.

Opening remarks

The connection between phenomenology and feminism is the object of a relatively recent and, if we take into account its sheer potential, a hitherto barely explored field of

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philosophical study. Indeed, many of the now “classic” authors associated with phenomenology –including Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, and Edith Stein– have approached woman-related issues. Even so, and despite the fact that Beauvoir's *opus magnum* has been in printing for over 60 years now (not to mention the more recent contributions to feminist theory penned by many other authors whose thought was also shaped by the phenomenological tradition) a certain level of resistance persists, nonetheless, when it comes to properly establishing the conversation that includes both feminism and phenomenology within the bounds of academic philosophy. If nothing else, the reception of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) betrays the discomfort which accompanies the ongoing influx of feminist criticism right into the heart of institutional philosophy; for it is common knowledge at this point, as Margaret Simons (1983) and Sara Heinämaa (2003) aptly observe, that Beauvoir's work was read more often than not as an essay rather than as a full-blown philosophical work (let alone as an explicitly phenomenological work), regardless of the author's pervasive adoption of concepts evidently originated in the tradition founded by Edmund Husserl.

Beauvoir's case illustrates a state of affairs that is fortunately undergoing transformation these days: a number of philosophers, the likes of Iris Marion Young, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Linda Alcoff, Sara Heinämaa, Silvia Stoller, Linda Fisher, Dorothea Olkowski, among others, either have already developed or are presently developing –some of them since the mid-1970s, others from the 1990s onwards– works that aim to show what is promising in a dialogue between feminism and phenomenology, thus making more evident what each part would have to benefit from engaging in it. Here I intend to present a general overview of what I consider to be the prominent themes and concepts to be found at the intersection between those two fields of inquiry; in addition to that, I will indicate which considerations originated in that intersection appeal to me the most.

With this exposition I expect to indicate, albeit in an introductory fashion, how much it means across the board for a traditional field of philosophical inquiry such as phenomenology to open itself to critical debates involving other areas of knowledge. It is my belief that collaborations such as these provide the very opportunity for us to ascertain, in the most straightforward way possible, academic philosophy's ability to speak to ourselves in our own time and place – that is, its potential to go beyond the undoubtedly valuable achievements upon which the researchers in the history of philosophy have their due claim. I also intend to list my reasons for maintaining that the rapport between phenomenology and feminism comes to light as a privileged stance in a landscape of feminist philosophy studies typically steered by the

influence of both poststructuralism and analytical philosophy.

Definitions, noteworthy forerunners and consolidation of the dialogue

It is certainly no simple matter to keep track of all the threads comprising the relation between phenomenology and feminism. The trouble is due, firstly, to the fact that both “phenomenology” and “feminism” can each be as complex a theme as its respective definitions can be elusive. Such difficulties are mostly the result of the labels themselves having been used and incorporated to disparate discourses and in a variety of ways. Since the time Edmund Husserl first conceived of it and devised it into a proper philosophical method, phenomenology went through several changes, which were, in turn, effected through appropriations by a large number of authors such as Martin Heidegger, Edith Stein, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, among others. Similarly, feminism, whether taken as a political movement or as a theoretical endeavor, encompasses multiple interpretive venues. To be sure, in its sheer plurality, it even makes room for internal dissent, as more than a few of those venues are grounded in assumptions that simply exclude one another.

Limiting ourselves to a considerably general definition, one can nevertheless agree on characterizing phenomenology as a philosophical current concerned with laying out the structures and experiences of consciousness through a descriptive method that focuses on phenomena such as they are apprehended in the context of subjective experience.² Feminism, in its turn, can be understood as a vast movement –both theory- and activism-wise– which seeks to secure women's rights so as to overcome gender inequality. On the theoretical front feminism asks, for instance, what is the origin of said inequality and what grounds are there for intending to preserve it; it so follows that, in posing questions like these, it contributes a wide range of topics in political theory. Hence, as soon as phenomenology and feminism establish a connection, multiple issues related to the female experience –so often kept invisible by the mainstream philosophical discourse– become available for further inspection; by the same token, the range of topics to be tackled by feminism benefits from its own acceptance of larger philosophical issues concerning the experience of women as subjects.

Alia Al-Saji contributes a decidedly interesting view of how the relationship between phenomenology and feminism concretely comes to fruition.³ The author distinguishes between

²I emphasize, however, that my own use of the phenomenological theory and method is basically in alignment with the different approaches that have its source in the tradition founded by Husserl.

³ In an interview to Emma Ryman, May 2013. Available in:

two chief ways through which both fields can be connected: on the one hand we have the feminist analysis of phenomenological works; from that type of undertaking, a number of conclusions can be drawn; the conclusions take either the form of criticism, and as such they are addressed to the limitations those phenomenological works present in what regards women's situation and the particular conditions of female experience; or else they take the form of a renewed interest in studying the works of “classic” women philosophers associated with phenomenology. On the other hand we have the application of the phenomenological method (or of part of its conceptual apparatus) to traditional issues and topics in the context of feminist studies. In allowing feminist theory to be developed from a properly phenomenological perspective, this latter approach facilitates various contributions to feminist philosophy in the broad sense of the term. In fact, these two approaches are more likely seen to be carried out simultaneously, so that the philosophers who happen to develop their own research endeavors in the feminist phenomenological front will venture criticizing the faults in the classics' neglect to gender issues; at the same time the very same philosophers will employ the typical phenomenological method and concepts in order to advance their own projects within the feminist theoretical framework. A few cases to be examined in what follows will help illustrate this double approach.

As is well known, early authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt and Edith Stein had already developed their works with an eye to the overlapping between phenomenology and themes related to the condition of women; nevertheless, this overlapping would not be more extensively studied until the 1990s onward, and it wouldn't be cemented as a research topic *per se* until recently. Part of these later studies involve, precisely, revisiting those early women philosopher's writings from a fresh, explicitly “feminist” perspective. Still, despite this late occupation of the intersection between the two fields, there are some prior significant cases worth mentioning. Outstanding among them is the work by Iris Marion Young (2005).⁴

Young's approach is noteworthy, first of all, for its appropriation of both the phenomenological and existentialist traditions, by which means the author set out to build politically oriented analyses of the how women come to experience their own bodies. The philosopher goes on to describe what she refers to as the *inhibited intentionality* of the female

<http://www.rotman.uwo.ca/feminist-phenomenology-race-and-perception-an-interview-with-alia-al-saji/>

⁴ There are numerous relevant works to be mentioned here, like the essays by Luce Irigaray (1984), Judith Butler (1989) and Sandra Bartky (1975); but Young's work excels in its originality, its use of phenomenology to analyze the experience of women and their relation to their own bodies.

corporeal lived experience. Due to a number of preconceptions regarding how a woman is expected to behave –as well as *use* and *frame* her own body, so to speak– such intentionality inculcates in us a disposition that has us locked out of our own physical abilities and potentialities. It directly affects, for instance, our way about the practice of sports. Young's conclusion, which I subscribe in its entirety, is that the imposition upon us of this inhibited intentionality is the result of our tendency to experience our own bodies as *things*, being as such constantly judged, analyzed, objectified and put under threat –hence this ascertained difficulty in our experiencing all our own possibilities.

Concerning the regained attention to a specifically phenomenological reading of classic authors, the new wave of studies focusing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir seems to me to be of particular interest. To a certain extent, Judith Butler (1986; 1989) was the one author to trail-blaze this kind of research, her critical reaction to that existentialist philosopher's thought notwithstanding. Other fundamental undertakings in that direction are, for example, the writings of Margaret Simons (1983) and Sara Heinämaa (2003), which show that *The Second Sex* can be read as a work of phenomenology and, in that capacity, be understood as a conceptual tributary of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty –a affiliation long-neglected by interpreters, especially given their propensity to regard Beauvoir's book as a rather philosophically undemanding sort of essay.

Those initial analytical fronts serve as a springboard for the development of various other studies comprising phenomenology and feminism at once. Some significant initiatives, such as the *Feminist Phenomenology Group*, founded in 2000 by professor Silvia Stoller of the University of Viena, helped cement the research in the area. Many important publications made their debut in this context.⁵ What is distinctive in the studies that are brought out in this scene is that, in a definitive way, they manage to actually introduce “feminist phenomenology” as an academic field of research, by coining the expression itself and establishing it as a particular area of feminist philosophy. As I have already mentioned, the works recently emerging in the field are as much about critically revisiting phenomenology's classics from a feminist perspective as they are about applying phenomenology's distinctive methodology and analyses to feminist studies.

⁵ For example FISHER & EMBREE (2000); STOLLER (2005); STOLLER, & VETTER (1997); SCHÜES; OLKOWSKI; FIELDING (2011).

On what feminism has to offer phenomenology (and vice-versa)

When one starts pondering how can feminism and phenomenology possibly benefit each other, a parallel question comes along, namely: why has feminist philosophy been so heavily influenced by movements such as poststructuralism and, at least initially, so little influenced by the phenomenological studies? After examining this issue, Linda Fisher (2000) concludes that some of the features that are particular to phenomenology –or at least to its ordinary interpretation– have played a role in its estrangement from feminism; so much so that it even prompted many authors to eventually posit a fundamental incompatibility between the two. To be fair, early contact with phenomenology's seminal writings may indeed make it seem like a quite abstract, essentialist philosophy, arguably unfit for the kind of analytical work especially focused on gender issues.

Fisher's remarks make a lot of sense if we take into account certain aspects of phenomenology as a discipline. Firstly, if we pay attention to the way Husserl (1976, 34) introduces the phenomenological method (viz. as a means to investigate and describe phenomena by grounding the whole inquiry on the pure transcendental ego, and that much in order to get access to the realm of essences), it becomes sufficiently clear what kind of difficulties feminism will find right there. The subject in Husserl's philosophy is a transcendental one; it is, therefore, a “self” that will do without gender anyway you look at it. Unsurprisingly enough, as far as this Husserlian characterization is concerned, phenomenology has been deemed a discipline that remained tied to the paradigm of modernity due to its placing a high value on the very notion of subjectivity while at the same time keeping subjectivity itself insulated from each and every difference that may be ascribed to the sexes. Now, it so happens that many of the charges brought up by feminist philosophy against the philosophical tradition boil down to precisely those two points: tradition's essentialist view of subjectivity and its alleged “neutrality”, which in fact did a great job of precluding any inquiry into issues related to gender differences and gender inequality.⁶

This state of affairs appears to constitute a hindrance even when we take a look outside the confines of Husserl's phenomenology. Other developments within the phenomenological thought, including those by authors that criticized Husserl's essentialism, would seem to be no less guilty of the charges of overlooking the distinctively *male* assumptions behind their own conceptions. Interesting examples of that are the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*, as well as

⁶ See, for example, WITT (2010), and NYE (2004).

Merleau-Ponty's notion of *body*. Through the analysis of *Dasein* as *being-in-the-world*, Heidegger (2001) sought to overcome Husserl's concept of subjectivity. His means of accomplishing that required that he described what he viewed as the structures of human being's concrete experience; Heidegger's account of those structures would construe them as being integral parts of an intersubjective reality (2001, §26); however, the German philosopher fails to provide any insight into *Dasein* in its sexual being; he falls short, that is, of describing its being as one that has its identity determined by its gender and is so perceived. Similarly, while deserving credit for working out a phenomenological account which deals explicitly with the body in its sexual dimension, Merleau-Ponty (2001, 180-202) seems to further no particular thought on the specificness of gender in that connection as well.⁷

These are some of the points of disagreement which prompted the accrued feminist criticism directed at the phenomenological tradition; they constitute some of the chief contributions to phenomenology made from the feminists' standpoint. In that sense, it is due to the very disagreement between both areas that feminism is able to deliver its first results here: in criticizing that which is deemed a limitation in the traditional phenomenological approach, feminist theory shows how to expand the scope of phenomenological investigations. This can be especially interesting if we focus on the fact that we can look at this feminist contribution not only as criticism that has its origin in a very specific political viewpoint, but as a set of objections that affect certain basic philosophical constituents: if, at the outset, the methodological foundation of the phenomenological tradition expresses the need for describing experiences so as to overcome the philosophical tradition's theoretical preconceptions, it is only fair to add to its descriptions those elements that refer to gender-related experiences –which have been, for ideological reasons, ignored and neglected by philosophy as a whole. In other words, tackling gender and sexuality issues wouldn't seem to be a superfluous addition to phenomenology's scope; instead, doing so it would be a sign of its own coherence.

Regarding whatever potential contributions phenomenology has to offer feminism, I would like to mention a few that seem to me to bear great significance; they involve carrying out a task only partly finished to this day, namely, the revaluing of questions grounded in the *concrete* and *factic* (to employ openly phenomenological terms) female experience; an account of that kind should include the female *corporeal lived experience*, comprehended as one of the determining conditions of the female identity. That is, I believe it to be of the utmost importance

⁷ According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994) e Jeffner Allen (1982) critical stance on this subject, to give only one example.

for us to lay new claim to some questions that were left aside (mostly due to the influence of poststructuralist thought, or by what came to be often called postmodern philosophy) both by feminist philosophy and by feminist theory in general.

Under the surface of this debate lies, at least in part, the criticism addressed to an essentialist view of female subjectivity and, more broadly still, the problem of how to identify who can be representative of the political category “woman”, all while keeping these people (insofar as they are representative) from being committed, in their subjectivity, to a metaphysical straightjacket of sorts. In order to comprehend this topic, if only in outline, we have to briefly review the key arguments in a feminist critique of essentialism. In doing so, I intend to show that, even though phenomenology itself may have been charged with engendering essentialist arguments, the possibility of further non-essentialist unfolding within a phenomenological framework can contribute a great deal to the solution to a number of laborious, yet central deadlocks currently plaguing feminism as a theory as much as a political movement.

An example of feminist phenomenological analysis: overcoming deadlocks by way of *factic experience* and the *body*

In short, the issue I refer to as being one of the most difficult conundrums in contemporary feminism is that of how one can overcome the essentialist view on what it is like to be a woman and who women are, simultaneously taking care, while doing so, not to completely impair the possibility of feminism as a political movement, since political organizations, in order to advance their claims, construe the basis for their own activism in terms of a politics of identity. The aforementioned deadlock can be distinctively made out as soon as one peers into the following concrete case.

Most feminists tend to adhere to Beauvoir's existentialist maxim that denies the idea of a given female essence; however, at the same time, the action many among them are taking to improve women's conditions is based on identity-oriented strategies. Every time we gather on the streets with our placards up, demanding that violence against women be put an end to, or whenever we ask for a new birth control bill to be passed that will give us the choice whether or not to stop pregnancy, we are doing so under the assumption that indeed, *there are* women. *We are* women. Now, a closer look into the consequences of those claims will make clear that the theorists influenced by phenomenological thought have played a crucial role in shaping the approach to such matters.

To review it briefly, let us begin by taking the “essentialist” view of the feminine as a component part, present across all iterations of Western and Christian metaphysics; it will be found in some instances of feminist theory as well and, according to some interpretations, generally in the feminist movement itself up until the 1960s; the movement at the time adhered to a rather fixed, generic category of “woman”, failing to satisfactorily work its way through the female experiential diversity. The “anti-essentialist” reaction, as we may call it, is introduced as a critical response to the stance that would eventually make a strict ruling on what a woman is –and, consequently, also on what she *must be*: a stance that would, by the same token, eventually take the otherness within the subjects identified as women and make it invisible.

It should be noted, therefore, that this brand of essentialism is itself a wide-ranging affair: it encompasses a variety of explicitly masculinist metaphysical propositions, while arguably being fostered at the very core of the feminist movement. As evidence of the former, numerous propositions by male philosophers from all eras can be adduced: from the Pythagorean claim that the woman, like darkness and chaos, came to be by an evil principle (as opposed to the good principle by which man was created⁸) to Rousseau's argument (1979) for educating women so that they could better serve under men, to Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's statements (1966; 1970) on the lying, deceiving nature of the female of the human species.

As to the essentialism rooted within feminism, the issue can prove to be even more complex, since its source is not patriarchal like the one permeating the history of philosophy, but an *affirmative* response by women willing to put an end to gender inequality: with a view to overcoming the masculinist conception of the feminine, there are even feminists openly making the case for the existence of positive characteristics *inherent to women only* –essential qualities which should, as they claim, be valued rather than deprecated. Such is the case of certain authors associated with eco-feminism; they maintain that there is an essence that is particular to women, which, along with a connectedness to nature, we should learn to cultivate anew. Some of these authors will go as far as advocating a “female superiority”, always attached to whatever is taken to be the distinctively female features –empathy and an inclination to care for others, for instance.⁹ Criticism addressed to the eco-feminists, on the other hand, makes the point whether and to what extent ascribing women certain essential characteristics –positive as they may seem to be– would not instead amount to replicating stereotypes the same way

⁸ As cited by Beauvoir in her epigraph to *The Second Sex* (2014).

⁹ See, for example, GRIFFIN (1978) e DALY, (1978).

patriarchal discourse has always done, thus binding women a bit further down to preconceived patterns of action and behavior.¹⁰

Furthermore, even the feminists that will not subscribe to an essentialist theory are liable to end up building, if unknowingly, an essentialism-laden basis for their own activism. That was the charge laid by a number of theorists and activists against the feminist movement as it stood by the middle of the 1960s; such is, moreover, the criticism addressed to much of the contemporary activism up to this day. Although it might not be openly admitted, oftentimes the women who take on a leading part in advancing the feminist cause happen to be focused on a specific agenda and a very particular view of “woman”. The rather abstract discourse that only refers to “women” without further qualifying the term would appear to eventually standardize and essentialize a multiplicity of highly diverse experiences, on the one hand and, on the other, universalize the idea of woman based on a very particular experience of “femalehood” – typically that of the white, middle-class, straight woman.

Even though that which is usually called feminist anti-essentialism branches out in multiple directions, I believe it makes sense to distinguish between two fronts or moments across the various turning points within feminism. Firstly, resulting from a confluence of activism and debates in political theory, there is a response made possible by black, latino, lesbian and otherwise marginalized women from a variety of backgrounds. Especially from the late 1960s onwards, they drew attention to the question: *to what extent a feminist movement built merely upon the problematic, rather vague idea of “woman” can actually meet our experiences down to their specifics?* In that connection, feminist authors such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa can be mentioned, among others.

What I designate as the anti-essentialist critique's second moment is related as well to the previously listed objections; but it can be mostly traced back to the theoretical work of authors who have been influenced by both poststructuralism and phenomenology itself: Joan Scott, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler are all associated with that particular branch. What these authors show is that not even the conceptions of *body* and *sex* can be ultimately deemed neutral ones; for that reason, not only gender, but the very idea of body must be comprehended as a socio-historical construction.

According to Butler (1990, 12): “‘the body’ is itself a construction (...). Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender”. That is, it is not the case that we can determine an essence or a foundation to being a woman, not even biologically,

¹⁰ A critical analysis of this type of eco-feminism can be found in BIEHL (1991) and JAGGAR (1983).

because our conception of the body is –as are, from a phenomenological perspective, our conceptions of everything else– already laden with our assumptions concerning how our bodies are built, how they should be like, and what they are for.

This view, as fit as it may be for the job of exposing troublesome essentialist premises, has entailed the predicaments I indicated above. Given that flaw, other philosophers and feminist theorists, some of them influenced by phenomenology as well, draw attention to the effects of radicalizing the arguments presented; according to these authors, the whole discussion is all but trapped into a strictly linguistic framework by means of this radicalization. Now, while also clearly manifested discursively, violence against women is a quite concrete matter, branded (in the utmost corporeal sense) onto the ones who suffer it. In addition to that, it may be necessary to preserve some fixed grid of reference to the notion of “woman” as a political category precisely in order to secure any degree of effectiveness to the feminist movement.

The most interesting objections come into circulation chiefly from the 1990s on, with some authors advocating a “strategic essentialism” designed to keep up with feminist activism; among those, Linda Alcoff, Tania Modleski, Ellen Rooney, Denise Riley and Sheila Jeffreys are the most notable proponents. Alcoff, for example, puts it bluntly: what can we demand on behalf of women “if ‘women’ do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do? (...) How can we demand legal abortions, adequate child care, or wages based on comparable worth without invoking a concept of ‘woman’?” (1988, 420). With that in mind, strategic essentialism would be unavoidable in the context of feminist politics: even if we acknowledge the sheer diversity in the experiences of the people referred to as women, even if we understand the point that there is no such thing as an essence grounding the idea of “woman”, still that category would be required by the shared experiences of the oppressed and their being acknowledged as such, as well as by their being able to reclaim their rights.

It is in reference to this set of issues that I wish to suggest, following Alcoff and other philosophers associated with the phenomenological perspective, that a feminist phenomenological analysis can keep contributing to the debate to a greater extent than the fair share I have here managed to summarize. First of all, I believe a return to the *material* elements of the female experience is imperative. One reason for doing so is that many of the concepts that were culled from the phenomenological tradition, such as *facticity*, *lifeworld* and *body* are well suited to a philosophical analysis of the female condition; such an analysis should be capable of overcoming the apparent obstacles posed before the task of reconciling the retained political category “woman” with the plurality of subjects referred to as women; at the same

time, it should avoid the pitfall of essentialist conceptions that posit some sort of female “nature”.

An initial step toward a better understanding of this proposal is realizing that, although our concept of the body implies socially constructed constituents (and, moreover, always takes part in a web of historically grounded meanings, which, in turn, are already affected by a number of previously established stances on gender and sexuality), certain features pertaining to the experience of most people referred to as women will remain unaccounted for if they are approached solely in terms of that socially informed view; in contrast, such features can be more vividly made out if one reflects upon the female lived experience. If, for instance, it is true that most women menstruate and can get pregnant, then this is to be considered a fundamental part of their experiencing their own bodies. Likewise (now bringing the analysis to a distinctively political ground) if it is the case that in various cultures women are taught to be either disgusted or afraid of their own period blood, as well as to think of themselves as incomplete for not bearing children, the fact that we are, in that case, facing a major issue should be clear enough. It is something to be taken into account when we are dealing with the phenomenon of a woman's experiencing her own *lived body*.¹¹

Similarly, the concept of *facticity*¹² sheds light on the fact that the multiple female experiences –though each experience can be expected to vary immensely from one woman to the next– share certain features which are themselves something describable. For instance, when women, by sharing their own stories with one another, are able to learn to what extent the fear of being sexually assaulted gets to be part of their everyday lived experiences, or how being discriminated and denied a say in nearly every matter are forms of abuse lurking both in the workplace and at home, those facts belong to their concrete, factic experience; that is, they are not points to be merely explained through linguistic analysis, much less are they issues that can be put to rest by someone's claiming that women are unstable or essentially this way or that. As Laura Downs' article perfectly expresses, beginning by its title: “*If ‘Woman’ Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?*”.(1993).

Of course, simply posing this kind of question cannot be tantamount to claiming that there is a female essence, neither does it mean that all people referred to as women are the same; it only means that, since we share certain characteristics, and since those characteristics are construed and represented in similar ways in a given culture –or else in different cultures that

¹¹This is not the place for a detailed treatment of such specialized phenomenological issues. For more on the topic, I refer the reader to the work of James Dodd (2012).

¹² For more on the concept of facticity, see RAFFOUL & NELSON (2008).

happen to share similar values— we can, because of that, describe the common features found in our own lived experiences and take notice of their intersubjective aspects. This is, after all, the process that will ultimately shape our political action. Acknowledging the existence of pervasive structures of oppression that engulf a larger number of individuals despite their differences is the first step in the tasks of organizing ourselves and changing that context.

Accordingly, what the phenomenological alternative shows is that focusing our analyses either on differences or similarities is a descriptive choice which, in any case, remains open to us. Still, ignoring the concrete aspects manifested in the lived experience of most women (as instantiated by certain characteristics which are customarily symbolized and experienced by them) is no reasonable solution. This latter claim can be adequately assessed in its full significance if we only recall, as I have pointed earlier, the fact that feminist theory, to this day, is given a distinctive poststructuralist emphasis, which frequently causes it to view the relevant phenomena under an excessively linguistic and discursive light —thereby making it prone to forget that, beyond the landmarks of language and discourse, women's experience is also a corporeal one: we feel *in our bones* what it is like to be a woman.

Concluding remarks

In this short presentation of the potential connections between phenomenology and feminism I hope to have shown, if only in outline, that both phenomenological analysis and feminist theory are, to a considerable extent, already engaged in continued mutual contribution, despite the strong resistance that can still be felt on both sides. In any case, collaboration with a different area will surely depend on an attitude of critical openness and a disposition to implement change in our traditional ways of handling discourse and analysis. On the phenomenological side of things, it is due time to accept the limitations in the works of traditional authors such as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who have failed to recognize how gender roles can be crucial when it comes to understanding subjectivity. As to feminist theory, I have suggested that the excessive postmodern and poststructuralist emphases of late must be reconsidered insofar as it has led us thus far into theoretical and political deadlocks which could have been otherwise overridden —by means, that is, of a certain kind of analytic enterprise, capable of taking into account the *factic* and *concrete* aspects belonging to the female experience, especially with regard to the *body*.

The gist of the lines of inquiry that have their source in the intersection between

phenomenology and feminism is that, through them, one might be able to find a fresher form of looking into the relevant issues that are already ordinarily examined by feminist philosophy in general. The quite reasonable disposition to view philosophical tradition as primarily male and patriarchal can be thus reevaluated and re-purposed in the light of renewed interpretations and perspectives. Furthermore, the rapport between feminism and phenomenology not only helps us in the task of remaking the case for reading and ascertaining value to key authors such as Edith Stein, Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt; it also inspires us to delve into as of yet unexplored directions, which, in turn, should help us consolidate women's place in philosophy.

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