
Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience

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Introduction

I take it as a given that phenomenology needs feminism. There has been some excellent work by feminist theorists, some of whom I will discuss briefly in this paper, showing that the body of phenomenological work in the canon has been indelibly imprinted with a masculine orientation in its development of the constitutive categories of experience. This suggests that if the phenomenological tradition is to continue in any useful way, and avoid becoming a mere artifact in the museum of philosophical history, it needs to acknowledge and explore the ways in which it has been affected by masculine and, I would also argue, racialized and Eurocentric assumptions.

But this paper makes an argument in the other direction. Whether or not feminist philosophy needs phenomenology is a more difficult question. For me, the principal issue here is how to incorporate what might be called "ideology critique" within a phenomenological approach, that is, how to make possible a critique of the ideological content of corporeal experience within an overall theory that bases knowledge on that experience.

In light of its focus on ideology critique, feminist theory has largely turned away from phenomenology. However, I believe that current feminist theory could benefit from some of the phenomenological treatments of experience. Post-structuralist feminism has largely negated the *cognitive* importance of experience on the grounds that experience and subjectivity are produced through the interplay of discourses. But on the basis of some good arguments, the pendulum has swung too far toward the elimination of experience's formative role in knowledge, and here is where I believe that a properly reconstructed phenomenology can provide a

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helpful corrective. In order to make this argument, I must begin by situating the feminist project within philosophy.

The Critique of Reason

By the end of the eighteenth century, philosophy had discovered, with the help of Kant, that reason, knowledge, and in fact philosophy itself was limited by the intellectual and perceptual attributes of man, that our reasoning capacity provides as much a reflection on us as a window onto the world. Man organizes and shapes his world, conferring on it meaning and intelligibility, and thus man is a constitutive condition for all knowledge. Philosophers continue to struggle with the implications of this idea, perhaps the most important of which is that, as Martin Heidegger said, the world which is the object of our inquiry is a world whose reference points all point to us, a lived world, and not a world in itself, or a world indifferent to human projects and concerns.

In the nineteenth century, with the help of Hegel, philosophy began to understand that knowledge and reason are also embedded within and marked by history, and thus temporally located or indexed, and unable ever to surpass completely the horizon of its historical era. Neither philosophical puzzles nor their solutions have a timeless reach, and in fact many theoretical resolutions develop only through the historical evolution of social change. Marx identified a further fundamental qualifying condition for philosophy in material power, which he defined as forms of laboring practices, and relations of production. After Marx, reason and knowledge were understood to be mediated by class, situated in particular economies, and permeated by an ideology that obstructed the self-criticizing project Kant initiated. After Marx, philosophy could no longer be entrusted to discern and correct its own errors; it required external critique.

In the (late) twentieth century, I believe it will in the future be said, philosophy began to discover that its categories of reason and knowledge are marked by sexual difference, and that these concepts of reason, knowledge, and even truth, as well as those of man, history, and power, are reflections of gendered practices passing as universal concepts. What feminist theory has inserted into the self-critical project within the Euro-American philosophy of our era is the sexually specific body as a mediating element of knowledge, a constitutive component of reason, and a condition of the right to know. "Reason" is constitutively "male."

But what does it mean to say that reason is male? It means that reason has been defined in opposition to feminine embodiment, such that it requires the exclusion, transcendence and even the domination of the feminine, of women, and of women's traditional domain. Moreover, as Genevieve Lloyd points out, "femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclu-

sion."¹ The woman who reasons, as Kant said, might as well have a beard. It is our irrational, intuitive, and emotional characteristics that both define us as female and make us capable of affirming men's "essential" superiority.

The major factor in this masculinist formulation of reason has been mind-body dualism. From the time of Plato, reason was thought to enable the soul to reach a "pure, and eternal, and immortal, and unchangeable" realm where truth dwells among the "divine...and the wise."² "The senses, in contrast, drag the soul back to the realm of the changeable, where [as Plato says] it 'wanders about blindly, and becomes confused and dizzy, like a drunken man, from dealing with the things that are ever changing.'"³ To achieve knowledge, Plato concluded, "the god-like rational soul should rule over the slave-like mortal body." Such a view, in various manifestations, made its way throughout the history of Western philosophy, through Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Bacon, Descartes, Rousseau, Hume, and even Kant.⁴ And needless to say, it was men alone who could hope to transcend the realm of the body, with its everyday commitments, its pedestrian passions, and its emotions clouding the route to the Real. Women, preoccupied with the cares of the particular, more regularly reminded of our fleshly limitations, could never ascend to the plane of the universal. As Rousseau put it, "The male is only a male now and again, [but] the female is always a female...everything reminds her of her sex."⁵ Therefore, he advises, "Consult the women's opinions [only] in bodily matters, in all that concerns the senses. Consult the men in matters of morality and all that concerns the understanding."⁶

The maleness of reason was thus, paradoxically, both supported and concealed by this evaluative hierarchy of mind and body. When the feeling body was split from the knowing mind, considered only of service to the mind as a brute recorder of perceptual images, bodily differences could not be seen to play any constitutive role in the formulation of reason. The body was conceived as either an unsophisticated machine that took in data without interpreting it, or it was considered an obstacle to knowledge in generating emotions, feelings, needs, desires, all of which interfered with the attainment of truth. The real epistemological action was always thought to occur in the mind, which, if it could

¹See e.g. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), x; see also Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* (London: Athlone, 1989), especially "Long hair, short on ideas."

²Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 6.

³Ibid.

⁴Linda Bell has compiled their views and others in an excellent collection entitled *Visions of Women* (Clifton, New Jersey: The Humana Press, 1983).

⁵Ibid., 199.

⁶Ibid., 197.

overcome the distractions of the body and discipline it to the yoke of reason, alone had the potential to achieve knowledge.

Though reason was portrayed as universal and neutral precisely because it was bodiless, and therefore this concept of reason might seem to be applicable to all, this schema worked to justify the exclusion of women from the domains of the academy, of science, and from generally being accorded epistemic authority and even credibility, because women were well known to be much more subject to bodily distractions, hormonal cycles, emotional disturbances, and the like. It is precisely for this reason that Genevieve Lloyd argued in 1984 that a feminist project determined to gain for women the realm of the "mind" will never work to overturn male supremacy. We cannot simply remove women from the sphere of the "body" and place ourselves in the sphere of the "mind" and "reason" when these latter concepts have been constructed on the basis of our exclusion. Such a strategy would only participate in the violent erasure of women, continuing the valorization of the masculine as the only gender that can achieve full humanity. Thus Lloyd warned that the "confident affirmation that Reason 'knows no sex' may likewise be taking for reality something which, if valid at all, is so only as an ideal...if there is a Reason genuinely common to all, it is something to be achieved in the future, not celebrated in the present."⁷

Therefore feminist philosophy, if it is to aid in the empowerment of women, must develop a better account of the relationship between reason, theory, and bodily, subjective experience. To quote Rosi Braidotti, we need to "elaborate a truth which is not removed from the body, reclaiming [our] body for [ourselves]...[We need] to develop and transmit a critique which respects and bears the trace of the intensive, libidinal force that sustains it."⁸ If women are to have epistemic credibility and authority, we need to reconfigure the role of bodily experience in the development of knowledge.

The Feminist Critique of Experience

It is within the context of this project that phenomenology can play a key role in feminist theory, for reasons that I will develop in a moment. But it is striking that, at least within Anglo-American feminist theory, phenomenology is today only rarely invoked or utilized. The rising influence of post-structuralism has worked to discredit phenomenology on the grounds that it takes subjectivity and subjective experience as cause and foundation when in reality they are merely epiphenomenon and effect. Phenomenology is presented as developing metaphysi-

cal accounts of experience outside of culture and history. Though in reality phenomenology and post-structuralism are not wholly opposed, too often they operate as if they are mutually exclusive, and this has helped to spawn a growing divide between feminist work in the social sciences influenced by phenomenology and feminist work in the humanities influenced by post-structuralism. In this paper, I cannot explore all of the issues involved in this debate, but exploring the issue of experience will reveal some of the principal differences between post-structuralism and phenomenology.

One of the critical motifs that dominated feminist scholarship throughout the 1970's was the idea of making women's experience visible and of validating women's experience against the multitude of "scientific" theories that purported to interpret our experience for us and that worked ultimately to delegitimize many of our own responses and feelings, even calling into question our own reports of events and incidents. From its inception, feminist scholarship and research in such fields as psychology, sociology, and anthropology was dedicated toward basing a new area of study on women's own understanding and interpretation of our experience. Consciousness-raising groups had created a model of individual empowerment through collective sharing, validation, and reflection on personal experience. And women's studies departments emerged from the idea that the identity and experience of researchers had epistemological effects, and thus that the study of women should come to be done primarily *by* women.

But experience itself, or the subjective understanding of one's own personal experiences including affective experiences, is the object and site of gender ideology. When women report feeling contentment and happiness only in the domestic sphere, when women feel revulsion toward our own bodies, or when women experience sexual violations as deserved, it is clear that these experiences are the product of structural forces that shape the meanings of events, and in this way construct subjectivities as sets of habitual practices that create dispositions toward certain affects and interpretations of experience. Subjective experiences, or women's own accounts of our lives and its meaning, cannot be accepted uncritically without relinquishing our ability to challenge gender ideology. But this has raised questions about the project of feminist social science to report on and validate women's experiences. How can women's own interpretation of our experience be validated without reifying gender ideology? How can social criticism operate in a discursive climate of inherent ambiguity? How can we justify the epistemological relevance of a researcher's gender identity if identity is only an ideological construction?

The feminist turn toward post-structuralism was motivated by the felt need for a deeper methodological critique of the roots of sexism and patriarchal assumptions in all existing domains of knowledge than an experiential-based feminism

⁷Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 107.

⁸Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8.

could provide. By the 1980's, it was obvious that rationalistic arguments for women's empowerment and inclusion were not working, either in the streets or in the universities. Feminists realized that the battle would not be won by remaining on the plane of reason, at least not as reason was traditionally conceived. This motivated us to look to discourse theory, structuralism, and post-structuralism for alternative accounts of how reason is structured. Feminists also explored accounts of the so-called "others" of reason, from psychoanalysis to rhetoric and literary forms of analysis. These theories offered a means to problematize gender formations as a contingent rather than necessary system of practices and they revealed the ubiquity of gender systems operating within every other domain of social practice. They offered a way to analyze misogyny, not as caused by innate male evil, but as part of the very formation of subjectivity, thus explaining how even well-intentioned men, as well as women, had difficulty combatting and even at times perceiving the effects of sexism.

However, this "turn" has left unresolved the issue of experience and its role in cognition. Feminist theory has swung from the extreme of taking personal experience as the foundation for knowledge to discrediting experience as the product of phallogocentrism. This latter position is clearly articulated in a recent anthology edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott entitled *Feminists Theorize the Political*, which is being widely read, cited, and used in courses, and is therefore a central place from which to observe the current features of post-structuralist feminist theory.⁹

In Joan Scott's essay in that volume, which she entitled "'Experience'" in quotes, she critiques a view that would "appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation [or] a foundation upon which analysis is based."¹⁰ This is the sort of view I characterized as dominant in 1970's feminism. Her critique of this pre-Hegelian account of experience focuses on its political limitations; she argues that it can only produce liberatory theories whose project is centered around "making experience visible," i.e., making visible that experience of heretofore invisible identities, but such a project precludes an analysis of the way in which ideological systems construct identities, experiences, and indeed, differences. Thus, Scott says, the project of making experience visible renders invisible the historicity of experience and reproduces the very terms and conditions upon which that experience is in fact founded; and therefore it cannot contribute to a *transformation* of experience.

Scott's alternative account of experience is articulated as follows: "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."¹¹ "Experience is," in short, "a linguistic event... The question then becomes how to analyze language..."¹²

Scott thus turns the naive account of experience on its head; on her account, experience is an epiphenomenon, originating entirely outside of the individual in linguistic structures, and its explanatory value is therefore eclipsed by the theorization of language. We are asked thus to choose between an epistemology of experience, in which experience serves as the unproblematized authoritative foundation for knowledge, and an epistemology of theory, in which theory interrogates and seeks to explain experience. Clearly this is a false dilemma, and one which replays tired modernist debates between empiricism and idealism. One need only have recourse to Hegel's concept of *Erfahren* to develop an alternative account which understands experience as epistemically indispensable but never epistemically self-sufficient. But Scott's essay and the view it presents is widely influential, and partly responsible for the eclipse of phenomenology within feminist theory. And it follows from a Derridean-inspired analysis which focuses exclusively on texts and discourses as sites of cultural representation and knowledge. The exclusivity of this focus is thought to be justified, as I shall discuss in a moment, by the view that all experience and knowledge operates within a discursive terrain.

But let me return first to Scott's formulation of the task of theory. Convincingly, Scott notes the importance of recognizing the knower's stake in the production of knowledge, and she argues that we need to explore the relations between discourse, reality, and cognition. But the problem is that these questions cannot be effectively pursued given her account of experience as simply the end-point of explanation, and never an authoritative source for knowledge. What could it mean to say that we must examine "the situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce" other than to say that we must examine their identity and experience?¹³ But given Scott's account it is unclear how experience could stand as an explanatory variable in accounting for knowledge, since experience is only that which is constructed for the individual by macro systems of meanings.

⁹Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992.)

¹⁰Scott, "'Experience,'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 24.

¹¹Ibid., 26.

¹²Ibid., 34.

¹³Ibid., 28.

Scott's account constructs a binary between a view in which experience grounds theory and a view in which theory explains experience. On the latter view, experience is only presented as the product of structural forces while theory somehow operates as a process of pure thought, disembodied, unlocated, and delinked to experience. And given its status as mere epiphenomenon, Scott denies that rendering experience visible can disrupt dominant knowledges and resist ideological interpellations, as 1970's feminists assumed.

Clearly, however, the project of "making experience visible" *has* sometimes had the effect of disrupting dominant discursive formations. Consider the current flurry of controversy over the term "date rape" and the ongoing inability of U.S. state laws to recognize rape within marriage. Why are these terms, based on the simple experiential reports of rape victims, so resistant to being processed or incorporated? Obviously because the very existence of such an "experience" as rape within the context of a heterosexual date or marriage must necessarily call into question the primary ways in which such institutions are understood, as well as such concepts and practices as man, woman, and heterosexuality itself. The principal tactic of the survivors' movement in North America has been to break the silence, to render visible the reality of sexual violence and its effects. It is true that survivors' descriptive reports of their experience have also been recuperated within the media to solidify patriarchal institutions, but this tactic of breaking the silence has unquestionably had a profound political impact and has tremendous subversive potential. Such subjective descriptions have often had subversive political effects, when they challenge existing epistemic hierarchies concerning what kinds of embodied speakers have credibility and authority, and when they raise questions about the benign status of institutionalized heterosexuality.

This context is particularly useful to explore the role of experience in relationship to discursive formations. What is the relationship between the discourse and the experience of sexual violence? It is clear that we have more than adequate reason to believe that rapes occurred on dates and in marriages before the 1970's when these issues first became widely discussed. On the other hand, it is also clear that the changes in discourse have effected changes in at least some of the experience of such traumas. But a position that links experience to discourse too securely might hold that, prior to the discourse of date rape, the experience itself could not occur, or at least not the sort of experience with such traumatizing after-effects as we now associate with rape (and such a view is today being promoted in "post-feminist" articles in the U.S., e.g., by Katie Roiphe). Thus date rape is said to be a fiction invented by feminists which is now having material effects in needlessly traumatizing young impressionable women. Such a view could gain credence from the claim, such as Scott makes, that experience and language are co-extensive.

In my view, this claim is a metaphysical error. Experience sometimes exceeds language; it is at times inarticulate. Feminism has not invented sexism out of whole cloth; it has provided new language by which to describe and understand old experiences. Certainly discourse permeates and affects experience, but to say as Scott does that "experience is a linguistic event," or that discourse is the condition of intelligibility for all experience, is to erase all of those kinds of experiential knowledges unsusceptible to linguistic articulation. If meaningful experience must pass the test of discursive formulation, we will preclude the inarticulate from the realm of knowledge, a tendency which has nicely served the interests of Western masculinity by allowing it to ignore forms of oppression that could not be expressed under reigning regimes of discourse. A better view would be one which understood experience and discourse as imperfectly aligned, with locations of disjuncture.

Phenomenology and Experience

Here is where phenomenology can play a critical role in feminist theory today. Feminist theory needs a better account of the relationship between theory and experience, one in which theory is understood as embodied in some fundamental sense rather than cut off from the body or existing in some free-floating, immaterial discursive realm. As psychoanalysis suggests, we need to also think about specific bodies, with their own specific individual histories and inscriptions, rather than some abstract concept of the body that always remains at the macro level or exists only in textual representation. If we begin to tie theory to specific bodies, however, we must also rethink what it is theory can claim to know, that is, its metaphysical scope, or the ontological status of its claims to truth. The phenomenological tradition, extending from Hegel's project to theorize knowledge as it appears to consciousness, and developed further through the work of Husserl and especially Merleau-Ponty, has itself struggled to formulate an account of knowledge and the cognitive aspect of experience without separating mind from embodiment or reifying the object world as over and against subjective, corporeal experience.

Husserl's project was to base philosophical knowledge on indubitable grounds by going back to the things themselves. But he understood this as an original intuition or immediate vision which manifests itself in bodily presence.¹⁴ Thus Husserl claimed "That every originally given intuition is a legitimate source of knowledge, that everything which presents itself to us originally in 'intuition,' so

¹⁴See *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Joseph Kockelmans (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967).

to speak in its bodily presence, has to be taken simply as what it presents itself to be, but only within the limits in which it presents itself."¹⁵ Despite this epistemic legitimation of intuition, however, for Husserl consciousness is not a passive receptor as it was for Descartes; consciousness is positional, intentional, inherently and incessantly open to the world and yet constitutive of the meaning of that world and of our experience within it. Perceptual experience is indubitable not as a means to know an object world separate from human existence, but as a means to know the lived world, and to deduce the necessary structures of consciousness.

Thus, despite its focus on immediacy of perception, Husserlian phenomenology does not accept without challenge the naturalness of what consciousness encounters; one of the purposes of the transcendental phenomenological reduction is to suspend the natural existence of what I perceive, to distance myself from the familiarity of the world, and to transform the world from the realm of the actual to the realm of the phenomenal, i.e., that whose validity is not yet determined. Thus, even given Husserl's heavy investment in the Cartesian project of epistemological foundationalism, experience is not a clear datum, as it was for the logical positivists, but a complex of elements in need of clarification and reflection. Thus, for Husserl, "experience" is a complex object, exceeding sensory perception so as to include cognitive and interpretive faculties as well.

Husserl's epistemology remains, however, too wedded to the goal of establishing certainty, as if through a reduction one might establish a bedrock of indubitable truth. And his concept of the transcendental ego remained in important respects disembodied, with its valorization of critical detachment as the route to a reasoned assessment of immediate experience. Merleau-Ponty's development of Husserlian phenomenology succeeds much better at leaving behind the legacy of mind-body dualism. Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's works are not in opposition, but there is a shift of emphasis away from the Cartesian project and toward acknowledging the fact that knowledge is always unfinished and incomplete, precisely because of the open-ended nature of experience and of meaning. I will develop these themes a bit and then show how they might contribute toward a better account of experience for feminist theory.

For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is the description of lived human existence, which is located at the between point of world and consciousness. In this space what exists is a developing synthesis which is forever unfinished precisely because it is instantiated in our concrete, fleshy embodiment, rather than an abstraction or transcendental perspective.¹⁶ Because the cogito is founded on

¹⁵Ibid., 29–30.

¹⁶See Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 57.

the percipio, it is both undetachable from bodily experience and incapable of achieving absoluteness or permanence. This means that our being is always being in the world, rather than a being apart from or over the world, and, because of this, we can understand both our ability to know the world and that our knowledge of it is forever incomplete, caught as it is inside, carried out within the temporal flux, and incapable of achieving a final or complete reduction.¹⁷ "The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible."¹⁸ Thus, whereas post-structuralism bases its claims about the inevitability of incomplete understandings on the nature of language, phenomenology bases its account primarily on a reflective description of lived human experience. Lived experience is open-ended, plural, fragmented, and shifting not because of the limitations of language, but because of the nature of embodied, temporal existence. This analysis thus makes it possible for Merleau-Ponty to talk about animal experience, an unthinkable project from within a theory based only on language.

In making such claims about the nature of lived experience, does phenomenology posit meaning outside culture and history? For Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of an experience is produced within an embodied synthesis of consciousness in the world. Meaning exists in the interworld of history, and thus refers to a world which is always already there before I come upon it and yet a world in which I live, whose meaning is always a meaning for me (and thus whose meaning must always incorporate not just interpretations, but also values). The world is not an object at a distance from me nor is it that which I construct or form; "it is the background from which all acts stand out...the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions."¹⁹ As Iris Young explains, for Merleau-Ponty:

Consciousness has a foundation in perception, the lived body's feeling and moving among things, with an active purposive orientation. Unlike a Cartesian materialist body, the lived body has culture and meaning inscribed in its habits, in its specific forms of perception and comportment. Description of this embodied existence is important because, while laden with culture and significance, the meaning embodied in habit, feeling, and perceptual orientation is usually nondiscursive.²⁰

¹⁷See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1962), xiv.

¹⁸Ibid., xvi–xvii.

¹⁹Ibid., xi.

²⁰Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

On this view, meaning is not outside culture and history, but meaning is produced through the embodied actions of consciousness in the world. This transforms the way in which we understand culture and history, such that they are no longer reified abstractions that stand over and against us or that can be reduced completely to the terrain of discourse. Within the phenomenological tradition, discourse does not exhaust experience. Experiences are not perfectly co-extensive or coincident with the realm of discourse or language. There is a pre-predicative experience which can be referred to but never fully articulated. As Young says, "Meaning subsists not only in signs and symbols, but also in the movement and consequences of action; experience carries the connotation of context and action."²¹ On the other hand, experience is understood as fundamentally historicized, rather than comprised of Kantian-based stable constituents. Experience can therefore never be understood outside of its full material context. It is a mistake to reduce this context to the sphere of language, and thus to miss the ways in which meanings, and thus the historical motion of cultures, can be imparted and transformed through non-discursive modes of practice.

Given this, phenomenology offers a very different account of subjectivity than either structuralism or post-structuralism. Merleau-Ponty says that in a phenomenologically-based descriptive psychology, "I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies...I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological, or sociological investigation."²² At the same time, contra Descartes and Kant, phenomenology also shows that my subjectivity is never detached from the world, never standing free and clear, capable of providing its own foundation, or merely "housed" in a mechanical body. Subjectivity cannot be theorized apart from its lived, embodied experience.

There are significant limitations and problems for feminists in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. As Iris Young, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz have all shown, Merleau-Ponty's existential subject, particularly in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, is masculine, his account of sexuality is patriarchal heterosexuality, and he naturalizes current gender relations.²³ However, neither Young, Butler, nor

²¹Ibid., 13.

²²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, iii.

²³See Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*; Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 37-59.

Grosz attribute these problems to phenomenology's metaphysics, nor see phenomenological description as positing a foundational experience outside of culture and history. Rather, on their view Merleau-Ponty's shortcomings result mainly from the fact that his analysis of embodiment did not specify sexual difference, and thus male embodiment was allowed to stand in for the whole. Still, much of Merleau-Ponty's categories of embodiment can be put to the service of specific analyses of the ways in which gendered subjectivity emerges from sexual practices.

Thus, despite its limitations, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers an ontology which is more open to the assimilation of corporeality within epistemology than the Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions. This marks an important break from the philosophical articulations of patriarchy which devalued the female element alongside matter, the body, and the emotions. Phenomenology thus can offer to feminist theory the beginnings of an expanded conception of reason and knowledge, one which is not predicated upon the exclusion of the feminine, the concrete, or the particular, and one which will not require women to become man-like before they can participate in the sphere of philosophical thought. In my view, such a transformation in our conception of knowledge must attribute a cognitive value to experience; not just that through experience knowledge is communicated, but that experience produces knowledge. As Grosz says, feminist theory has relied on "lived experience and experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion in the evaluation, not only of theoretical paradigms and propositions but also of day-by-day and mass politics." While it is true that

experience cannot be understood as the unproblematic criterion for the assessment of knowledges...without some acknowledgement of the major, indeed, formative, role of experience in the establishment and functioning of theoretical systems, socio-political and aesthetic constructs and moral and political values, feminism has no grounds for disputing patriarchal norms. Merleau-Ponty as one of the few more or less contemporary theorists committed to the primacy of experience is thus in a unique position to help provide a depth and sophistication to feminist understandings, and uses, of experience in the tasks of political action.²⁴

A Phenomenology of Rape

Attempts to explain experience solely from external, macro-structural perspectives fail to take seriously or adequately account for lived, personal,

²⁴Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," 3-4.

individual experience. Merleau-Ponty is right when he says that I do not, nor can I, experience myself as the mere meeting point of causal agencies, or as a mere construct of structures. My lived experience includes such things as choices, intentions, and a range of inarticulate affects that exceeds discourse. Such experiences as rape cannot be reduced to linguistic effects, nor is the meaning of the experience as ambiguous as any statement in a language. To theorize rape adequately we must have recourse to the description of embodied experience, and not merely the various possible and actual discursive representations of that experience. This does not imply that a rape experience is unsusceptible to discursive constructions. I can experience a rape as deserved or undeserved, as shameful for myself or as shameful for the perpetrator, as an inevitable feature of woman's lot or as an eradicable evil. But when I supplement the analysis of the discourses of rape with the phenomenologies of rape experiences from the perspectives of survivors of rape, I will be much less likely to suppose that rape itself might be the product of an interpretation, either a misdiagnosis of an event or an experience whose traumatizing effect might be the product of a particular politics.

Without phenomenological descriptions, discursive analyses of sexual practices are more likely to be distorted. A telling example of this can be found in Michel Foucault's account of sexual experience in volume one of the *History of Sexuality*. Foucault is often grouped among the post-structuralists, but his variance from their excessive focus on textuality is well-known. His work has contributed a great deal to the material conceptualization of power, history, and subjectivity. And yet, in regard to sexuality, Foucault's account accords to discourse the unique ability to attach meanings and values to our feelings and sensations.²⁵ This can have disastrous effects on how we understand sexual violence, as I shall show by way of conclusion.

Foucault introduces a case from 1867 France which serves to mark that moment in the history of sexuality when sex is brought under the jurisdiction of expert discourses in the human sciences. The case involved a "simple-minded" farm hand who was turned in to the authorities after having

obtained a few caresses from a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the village urchins round about him; for, at the edge of the wood, or in the ditch by the road leading to Saint-Nicolas, they would play the familiar game called 'curdled milk.'...[and] this village half-

²⁵Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random, 1985), 3-4.

wit...would give a few pennies to the little girls for favors the older ones refused him...²⁶

But this time, Foucault relates, the familiar, ordinary incident in the life of the village, the "everyday occurrence [of] inconsequential bucolic pleasures" became the subject of judicial and medical intervention. The farm hand was subjected to detailed, invasive questioning about his "thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations, and opinions."²⁷ The "experts" inspected his anatomy to the point of studying his "facial bone structure" and measuring his "brainpan" for signs of "degenerescence."²⁸ In the end, he was shut away at a hospital.

Foucault's objective in discussing this case is to suggest that it marked a discursive turning point in the construction of sexual experiences between adults and children, a change from a situation in which such relations were "inconsequential bucolic pleasures" to the object of "collective intolerance" and "judicial action." Evidently for Foucault, before the intervention of an expert discourse on sexuality, the meaning of the sexual act in 1867 between the farm hand and the girl was, simply, pleasure. His narrative of the event suggests a picture in which pleasure stands on one side, in a kind of pure form, innocent and harmless, and on the other side stands discourse, power, and domination. He makes this argument through illuminating what he takes to be a disparate juxtaposition between the insignificance of this event and the portentous response it received from the authorities, what he refers to as the overlay of an "everyday bit of theatre with their solemn discourse."²⁹ In this way, the overlay of expert discourses on sexual events produces what Gayle Rubin has called an excess of significance.³⁰

On the basis of this analysis we are led to posit pleasure as antithetical to power. Foucault does not think that pleasure is always disconnected from discourse and power, and in much of this volume he is at pains to reveal the ways in which pleasures can get used and taken up by institutional discourses. His view is, rather, that when properly disinvested of dominant discursive associations, pleasure is innocent and harmless, and even the privileged site of resistance. Thus he ends the volume with the claim that the "rallying point for the counterattack

²⁶Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random, 1980), 31-32.

²⁷Ibid., 31.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 32.

³⁰See her "Thinking Sex: Notes Toward a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984), 279.

against the deployment of sexuality [as a form of power/knowledge]...ought...to be...bodies and pleasures."³¹

But is it the case that pleasures, in and of themselves, when disinvested of discursive categorization and valuation, are resistant to power? Let us look again at the case from 1867. It hardly need be said that Foucault lacked sufficient evidence to warrant his claims about the girls' participation in or feelings about the event. If such relations were reciprocally initiated and pleasurable for both parties, why did there need to be an exchange of a "few pennies" to insure the girls' participation? Given this, on what does Foucault base his claim that any pleasure at all existed on the side of the children? His quickness to assume such knowledge manifests unfortunately typical male and adult patterns of epistemic arrogance.

Consider a phenomenological description of such an encounter from the child's subjective point of view. I have reconstructed such a description using current writings by adult survivors of sexual abuse, as well as my own experiences. In these accounts, trauma is often masked as confusion, for as a child one has no names to identify the ordeals endured or the sensations one feels. In encounters similar to the one Foucault described, the child exhibits a need to be held or hugged, to have affection or attention, or perhaps to obtain some basic good like money for food or shelter. The adult complies but on the condition of genital stimulation. This misresponse produces in the child pain and fear mixed with compulsion and intimidation, a duress created by uncertainty and the disparity between soothing words and painful, uncomfortable invasions, by the command to be silent and the assurance that all that is happening is ordinary and based on affection. One is told by a trusted adult to take the thing in one's mouth, to allow groping explorations, to perform distressing enactments that feel humiliating and foreign. While the child gags and whimpers (or even screams and cries), the adult sighs and moans, holding tightly so that the child cannot get away. Pleasure here is dimly perceived by the child as somehow dependent on one's own anguish, the product of intimately experienced terrors. Afterward, the child fears trusting anyone again, feeling that everyone who expresses concern ultimately only wants sex. The child also feels a shame marked on the body itself, as a thing to be used, a kind of living spittoon.

Such phenomenologies of sexual violence would suggest, I believe, a very different political ontology of pleasure than the one Foucault offers. During a rape, locked in the pantomime of an embrace, consumed by feelings of fear, pain, and anguish, one sees or feels the signs of pleasure in the other. Perhaps one feels an erect penis, or hears a moan, or sees the glassy eyes and flushed face of post-orgasmic ecstasy. Even while one's hands are bound, one's mouth is covered, even

³¹Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 157.

while all of one's muscles feel tight, sore, and bruised from straining to get free, one can perceive the frenzied pace of desire in the hurried, impulsive movements of the other. Even while one wonders silently how it will be possible to survive this torment, how much more violence is in store, and how death itself might be a comforting end, one can detect the sexual enjoyment experienced by the other, in his rapid thrusting, his incessant groping, his sexual energy. Pleasure here is corporeally perceived as the product of one's own pain and torment.

It is one of the most central features of patriarchy that pleasure can be received through the humiliation and physical harming of another. This is exemplified not only in rape, but in the cruel and hostile humor which produces entertainment through ridicule and derision, and the aggressive competitions which produce pleasurable sensations of satisfaction and contentment through acts of conquest and mastery over others. The association between pleasure and violation in such practices is more than mere juxtaposition; it is closer to a relationship of ontological dependence.

Now I have juxtaposed a phenomenological description culled from contemporary accounts with a narrative from a very different cultural period, and this may well seem an invalid move. But my purpose is to call into question Foucault's claim that discourses can alter the experience of events like sexual relations between adults and children to such a degree that they can become "inconsequential pleasures." This claim is belied by the phenomenology of sex itself, which involves uniquely sensitive, vulnerable, and psychically important areas of the body, a fact that persists across cultural differences. If rationality and knowledge are embodied, then it becomes clear how and why sexual experiences are cognitive: why, that is, they have the capacity to impart critically important meanings specifically concerning one's body, one's self, and the limits and possibilities of one's relationships with others. This does not establish that sexual acts have uniform meanings, but that they have in any case significant subject-constituting meanings.

My suggestion is that we need to supplement discursive accounts of the construction of sexual experience with phenomenological accounts of the embodied effects on subjectivity of certain kinds of practices. The meanings and significance of sexual events inhere partly in the embodied experiences themselves, whether or not they can be rendered intelligible within any discursive formation.

Much more needs to be said about the complicated issues surrounding the relations between discourse, meaning, and sexual experience.³² But the point I

³²I have treated this example from Foucault in much more detail in "Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia," in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel*

wish to make in conclusion is that such phenomenological descriptions should be a critical part of any attempt to explain experience, and not merely as endpoints or data that require theoretical illumination, but as capable of shedding light on theory itself. This will be vital if we are to reconfigure the role of bodily experience in the development of knowledge.³³

Foucault, ed. Susan Hekman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 99–135.

³³I would like to thank Linda Fisher for her extremely helpful comments on this paper.