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# Fem-nomenology

By Deborah A.Z. Strehle

“Without Bodies #3” by Jessica Bandy

Moral and practical issues concerning the body, particularly ones relevant to women, have had little place in philosophical discussion. By analyzing the body’s role in existence, phenomenology—particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical contributions—gives feminists the tools to explore these historically neglected issues. Two compelling examples provide frameworks for understanding femininity and the body. By incorporating the lived body at the foundational level, feminists can encourage philosophical discourse to move beyond the limits of mind-body dualism.

“*The world is not what I think, but what I live through.*”

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>

**T**he body is a historically neglected entity, often to the particular detriment of women. In the tradition of his phenomenologist predecessors, Merleau-Ponty elucidates a philosophical approach that attempts to eliminate the mind-body distinction, resulting in a more convincing and holistic picture of the self. The purpose of this paper is to show how feminism stands to benefit from phenomenology. First I will discuss how the body is traditionally overlooked in the Western tradition. Then I will cover general ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach expands our understanding of persons in ways that are relevant to feminists. Next I will introduce Iris Marion Young’s essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” as an example of phenomenology’s ability to shed light on important and often ignored issues, despite Dianne Chisholm’s criticisms.<sup>2</sup> I conclude that a feminist philosophy will be

increasingly inclusive if it adopts and explores phenomenology in the way both Young and Chisholm successfully do.

## The Neglected Body

Philosophical conversations presupposing a mind-body dualism can be traced back to Plato’s era. The traditional dualist picture of the self parallels the separation between the spiritual and material worlds. This has been the dominant ontology throughout the modern philosophical period. This duality often privileges the mind over the body and locates the self as primarily in the mind. As a result, the body is seen as in opposition to and subordinate to the mind.<sup>3</sup> The body is often associated with limitations—illness, mystery, and unending desire.<sup>4</sup> Conceived as both a problem and as an entity separate from the mind, philosophy has neglected to focus on the body as a legitimate locus for understanding the self.

The body also has a gendered history: “women, besides *having* bodies, are also *as-*

*sociated* with the body, which has always been considered woman’s “sphere” in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Consequentially, moral and practical issues concerning the body, particularly ones relevant to women, have had little philosophical place for discussion.<sup>6</sup> Issues such as abortion, pornography, domestic violence, eating disorders, and physical disabilities are all subordinate to concerns of the mind—truth, knowledge, morality, etc. In addition, when women are associated with the weak and limiting body, how can philosophy take women’s theorizing seriously? There is evidence that mind-body dualism is somewhat responsible for the historical absence of women in the field.

The implications of this oversight are extensive. Although philosophy has recognized the body’s role in existence, mind-body dualism has reduced its importance and thus estranged it from the tradition. Embodiment is an essential aspect of human existence and

overlooking its relevance to philosophy results in a distinctly detached method of theorizing in philosophy that has provided a limited picture of the world. This detachment continues to emphasize an exclusive and harmful intellectualism. The philosophical majority position not only excludes alternative viewpoints, it leaves a lasting mark on the body—repressed bodies express their exclusion and silence in a number of hurtful ways.

### Phenomenal Benefits

The study of phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contributions, has the potential to overcome the metaphysical oversight of the body's relevance and thus, include women and their bodies in the philosophical tradition. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty provides a theoretical framework that emphasizes embodied characteristics as vital to personhood and agency. I will briefly discuss aspects of his theory that are relevant to feminist philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology begins with lived experience. He is concerned with how individuals perceive the world. For him, embodiment is a fundamental aspect of experience. The self is a lived body experienced in immanence and transcendence—as a unique self and as able to extend beyond itself in relation to the world. Consciousness and embodiment are inseparable; consciousness informs the body as much as the body informs conscious thought: “rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, mind-body dualism is minimized in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

The concept of the self as embedded in the world is vital to Merleau-Ponty's theory. Our basic presence is a self-awareness of consciousness and physicality that informs our body image. Merleau-Ponty describes the lived body as an agent that is able to orient itself towards other things in multiple possible ways. The self is “subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past,

our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects.”<sup>9</sup> Our actions depend on our relationships to things in our environment, which we perceive through our potential intention to interact with objects. Objects are inseparable from the intentional meaning we give them. In this way the self is transcendent—it extends

## What constitutes the feminine has not been the domain of philosophy, and if it has, it has usually excluded women from the writing of their own history and analysis.

beyond as a unique boundary, as a border and as a link to the world. Here Merleau-Ponty's illustrates his theory:

There is my arm seen as sustaining familiar acts, my body as giving rise to determinate action having a field or scope known to me in advance, there are my surroundings as a collection of possible points upon which this bodily action may operate,—and there is, furthermore, my arm as a mechanism of muscles and bones, as a contrivance for bending and stretching, as an articulated object, the world as pure spectacle into which I am not absorbed, but which I contemplate and point out.<sup>10</sup>

As shown, the self is more than the sum of its parts; its consciousness and physicality are accounted for as part of the whole. The environment is the known relational space and a domain of potentiality through which the body acts. The self is integrated into its environment in both conscious and physical ways. The arm acts on behalf of the whole self as an arm in motion reflecting the “acquired worlds” of motile memory.<sup>11</sup> It is a physical extension of the body's “attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task.”<sup>12</sup> There is a balance between (what traditional philosophers see as) the mind and the body. The lived body

requires self-awareness, but also an ability to relate to the world, to transcend the self by imagining oneself in a variety of possible interactions with the world. The body both experiences immanence and transcendence.

This picture of us is a much better reflection of humans as agents in the world than what mind-body dualism describes because it accounts for a dialogue between the physi-

cal and the mental. Some theories of mind-body dualism cannot explain the relationship between mind, body, self and world. This is a problem for understanding the self as a person and as an actor. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology illustrates a theory of the self that is holistic rather than piecemeal. His focus on the lived body restores the body to its rightful position in philosophy. His contribution to phenomenology is beneficial for feminist philosophers because it helps feminists analyze a culture that emphasizes difference based aspects of our bodies. This is particularly refreshing for those who find no place for women's issues in traditional theories. I will discuss this in more detail in the next section.

### Feminist Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological emphasis on analyzing the body's role in existence gives feminists the tools to explore historically neglected issues of the body. Iris M. Young's essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” builds on Merleau-Ponty's and Simone de Beauvoir's accounts of phenomenology in order to address the feminine. Young's account is an example of how phenomenology can lead to philosophical discussion of women's issues. By describing the feminine phenomenologically, Young helps

break down a barrier for women in philosophy, and provides philosophical information about gendered and sexed bodily experience.

As Young notes, the “feminine” is a historically and culturally constructed term. Historically in literature, philosophy, medicine, and everyday life, people referred to femininity as a categorical catch-all for all unexplainable aspects of women's lives. As a result, the few accounts of what it is like to be a woman have been viewed through the singular lens of femininity—unique characteristics, stories, medical conditions all fell under this label. What constitutes the feminine has not been the domain of philosophy, and if it has, it has usually excluded women from the writing of their own history and analysis. Considering the association of the body with weakness and women with the body, it is not surprising that “feminine,” a term normally designated for women, represents a somewhat lacking experience.

The feminine, for Young, is not something biologically determined. Young views femininity as an inhibited style of existence, opposed to the freedom and openness of the masculine style. Young's essay explores basic modalities of feminine embodiment with the goal of demystifying the femininity expressed by women in a “contemporary advanced industrial, urban, and commercial society.”<sup>13</sup> In her examples, Young concentrates on particular actions that involve the whole body as it seeks to complete particular tasks, such as throwing a ball, because these actions provide the best instances for a phenomenological account. Femininity is a style of behavior expressed by most Western women but not all. Citing de Beauvoir, Young argues, “Every human existence is defined by its *situation*; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation.”<sup>14</sup> However, in the same paragraph Young also recognizes women as unified by something “specific to a particular social formation during a particular historical epoch.”<sup>15</sup> By acknowledging both difference and unity among women, Young builds a strong foundation for her phenomenological analysis.



“Without Bodies #6” by Jessica Bandy

Young diagnoses feminine inhibition as a “tension between immanence and transcendence.”<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty discusses immanence and transcendence through his description of the self as a “pure presence” that is connected to one's environment, which one sees as an extension of possible avenues for the self.<sup>17</sup> He describes a sense of wholeness, knowledge

of one's body, and a sense of free interaction with the world that Young argues the feminine actor lacks. Women have a hesitating sense of flow and interaction with the world because they are constantly self-aware of themselves as objects. They cancel the possibility of completing a task before they even start it. There is a realm of possibility, but it is disconnected



“Without Bodies #4” by Jessica Bandy

from the self, it is someone else’s possibility.<sup>18</sup> With an inhibited sense of intentionality and ambiguous transcendence, feminine motion contradicts itself and thus, actions are completed hesitatingly. The body is stuck in immanence, and only partially extended in transcendence; neither is fully expressed and a balance is not achieved.

Young further argues that, as a result of occupying an unbalanced space between immanence and transcendence, the self is seen as both a subject and object, both looked at and acted upon.<sup>19</sup> Action is perceived as happening to them, and not as an engaging activity. The feminine body has a disrupted sense of unity because the body is seen in parts, and motion is

seen as carried out in these parts discretely, rather than as a part of a whole. They live as objects instead of lived bodies, feeling segregated from their environment and disconnected from the potential avenues of action surrounding them. Historically used as a tool for masculine goals, the feminine body lacks a sense of control over itself. They see themselves in the mind-body dualist tradition—as having minds and having bodies, but not as a whole self with uninhibited agency. Instead their agency is thwarted.

Young’s discussion of space also exemplifies the notion of the inhibited feminine body. Feminine women tend to act in an enclosed space, with a feeling of the self’s space and the space of the action as separate, and are stuck in a particular space. Young cites numerous examples to support this: the use of only some of the body to complete a physical task, recoiling in fear of getting hurt (the feminine as fragile), receiving an action rather than engaging with it, acting within a small protected space, hyper-self-awareness, the worry of appearing awkward or too strong, perception of the self as weak, low expectations and thus lack of effort, lack of self-trust, lack of practice performing tasks.<sup>20</sup> The tension between immanence and transcendence, along with conceptions of space particular to women, provide compelling philosophical descriptions of the empirical characteristics of many women.

### A Critique

Young’s account of the feminine, though useful, does not stand unchallenged. In her essay, “Climbing Like a Girl,” Dianne Chisholm argues that Young’s characterization of the feminine does not accommodate change and difference in the expression of femininity over the years since Young first wrote her essay in 1980.<sup>21</sup> Chisholm argues that Young presents the feminine through “a restrictive history that fails to account for the phenomenology of their ‘ascendance’ in new realms of freedom and existence.”<sup>22</sup> Chisholm argues that the femininity Young describes does not typify “all women at all times” and that Young’s “feminine” is presented unfairly as something in

strict contrast to masculinity, dictated by it.<sup>23</sup> Chisholm is not looking to prove society has overcome its gender biases, rather she attempts to show women’s bodily interactions have ascended to a degree since Young’s essay, and that performing an action “like a girl” does not have to be synonymous with inhibition.

Chisholm focuses on the case of Lynn Hill, a professional climber. According to Chisholm, Hill transcends gender constraints by climbing in her own distinct way specific to her smaller, “feminine” build. Chisholm uses Hill as a counter example to Young’s description of the feminine, and as an example of what women “can do beyond embodying gender.”<sup>24</sup> “Hill exemplifies, above all, how she or any woman can climb like a girl most capably and adventurously without endorsing and performing femininity (or masculinity) even as she lives in a hyper-masculinized world.”<sup>25</sup> Chisholm’s point is that Hill’s lived body extends beyond traditional femininity, while still exemplifying characteristics of a girl. Chisholm does not clearly describe the difference between “like a girl” and “feminine”; however, it seems Chisholm means climbing like a girl is a style not able to be categorized as feminine or masculine, yet one that still acknowledges gender difference. Hill climbs like a girl, using the characteristics of her sexed body, in contrast to her masculine fellow climbers. Where men are forceful, she treads more carefully. Instead of following the male lead, she and other women climb in an opposing manner more individually suited to their bodies. Her embodiment is not limited. Hill experiences free, balanced transcendence and immanence.

As a very successful free climber, Hill stands as an example of the possibility that women can achieve unrestrained motility by overcoming the feminine. The strength of Chisholm’s essay is that the term feminine may not only come to express uninhibited unity and motility, and thus extend beyond the negative historical meaning that Young describes, but that the term feminine could eventually be abandoned. Chisholm argues that women can learn to climb like a girl, or do anything like a girl, without exemplifying femininity. It is the term fem-

inine itself, not the women who exemplify it, that is inherently limited. To describe only two possibilities, masculine and feminine, is to ignore others and those in between. It seems the typical meaning of feminine has not changed drastically since Young’s essay was published. Young’s description still resonates women, particularly college-age ones, as she notes in her follow-up essay, “Throwing Like a Girl: Twenty Years Later.”<sup>26</sup> Not only do women still feel and act in the inhibited manner Young describes, popular culture via media echo and reinforce her phenomenological account of femininity.<sup>27</sup> Like the problem of mind-body dualism, gender dualism is equally destructive. The feminine cannot disentangle itself from history. But it is possible to transcend it in a way similar to Chisholm’s example.

Where Young describes the current situation, Chisholm imagines the future based on a current example. She argues that not only can we re-appropriate the feminine for positive meaning, but also that women can transcend

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a limiting view of gender and still be women. Women have the ability to reshape their style, to individualize their movement and resituate themselves as freely engaged beings in the world. Femininity might always be associated with a constrained picture of motility; therefore, women must overcome the category. There is room for moving beyond feminine.

On some phenomenological level it is possible to abstract to a level where people are people, rather than gendered and sexed beings. Young has built on Merleau-Ponty’s less explicitly gendered theory to demonstrate concrete examples of women’s historical subjugation through analysis of their bodies in relation to action. Young focuses on the gendered body in her phenomenological account because this

is a way we are currently situated in society. Recognizing the limitations of gender is vital in a tradition where gender has been a cause of prejudice. Her discussion proves the benefit of phenomenology in uncovering and explaining issues of women’s concern.

Phenomenology is in the process of reshaping feminists’ philosophical foundations. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has encouraged both Chisholm’s and Young’s discussions of an observable style of behavior in women on the philosophical level. Both feminist approaches to phenomenology have been useful in strengthening feminist goals in different ways. Though conflicting at some points, both accounts give a philosophical place and voice to women’s bodies. Feminist philosophy has already benefited from their adoption and adaptation of phenomenology. By incorporating the lived body at the foundational level, feminists will perhaps be able to further general philosophical discourse that has been limited by mind-body dualism. Theories of moral

justification, for instance, are problematic in part because of their ignorance of the body. Working in a phenomenological context, feminists can work to achieve a more accountable ethical system and provide a more accurate reflection of people as actors in the world.

As shown here, matters of the body have a lasting impact on theories of experience. Developing a philosophical approach to account for the body’s role is vital. Disembodied theorizing can only provide an incomplete picture of us as actors in the world. Phenomenology helps achieve important feminist goals by accommodating a multiplicity of experiences. Merleau-Ponty’s account moves beyond mind-body dualism and forges an avenue for discussion where none existed before.