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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Husserl and Merleau-Ponty:
A Feminist Critique of the Phenomenological Body**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Philosophy
In Partial Fulfilment to the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

Jasmin Mohyeldin Makhoul

Under the supervision of **Prof. Steffen Stelzer**

Spring 2021

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the phenomenological notion of embodiment, to explain the objectification and coercion that women and their bodies experience on a daily basis. I build the philosophical foundation of this thesis on Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, as well as, their work's receptions in feminist philosophy of the early 20th century, mainly Simone de Beauvoir, as well as, more contemporary thinkers like Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. Moreover, the thesis argues for a return to the traditional phenomenological notion of embodiment while incorporating elements of sexuality and sexual difference.

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Introduction

I. The Problem of Embodiment

As we observe the world around us, the first thing we notice is our **body**. Once we realize this is **our** body, we look away and see how others and the world interact and react to us, especially our body. And most of the time, it is our body and its features to set the tone for how we will be treated; i.e., the color of our skin, our gender, if our hair is covered or not, the shape of our body, and much more. In a way there exists a hierarchy of bodies whereby certain types of bodies are preferred over others, particularly male ones. Regardless of race, class, and socio-economic background the body of a man is almost always primal to the body of a woman.

Nonetheless, female bodies, despite their lower stance on the hierarchy of bodies seem to always be at the center of social and political issues such as; sexual harassment, reproductive rights, sexuality, motherhood, sex trafficking, unequal pay, and objectification only to mention a few. Why is the scrutinization of the bodies of women so important? And often done under the public eye, as if the female flesh is to be shared, used, abused, and shamed.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the phenomenological notion of **embodiment** to explain the otherness and oppression of the bodies of women. More importantly, how can a feminist reading and critique help develop said notion. I ground my method in the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and their work's receptions in feminist philosophy of the early 20th century, mainly Simone de Beauvoir, as well as, more contemporary thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz. **What does Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian embodiment have to offer to feminist phenomenology of the 21st Century?**

The thesis aims to contribute to current feminist literature through the reworking of Husserlian embodiment, as it has been neglected notwithstanding new interpretations¹² that open up possibilities for discussions. This is in striking contrast to the greater engagements Merleau-Ponty's texts have received from feminist scholars, beginning with Simone De Beauvoir. Nevertheless, in the feminist reading and critique of embodiment more fundamental issues remain. **Thus, the thesis proposes to strip embodiment of excessive levels of analysis and rework the notion to provide a more inclusive definition.**

The question of embodiment and the role the body has in people's lives is not one that is asked simply because one perceives it while looking at its reflection in the mirror, or because feet become cold as they touch the ground in the morning. The body is not a mere bundle of nerves and neurotransmissions, a vessel, an object. The body is at the center of human subjective experience. To understand, describe, and analyze said experience one must inquire on what "makes" people **embodied**, if they are at all. In order to do so, the standing point of the thesis is the phenomenological one. Before gender, race, class, and religion there is a subject in the world experiencing it first-hand.

What is Phenomenology then? It is the study of consciousness' structures and subjective experience³. This philosophy studies all of which is taken for granted by modernity and its scientific developments; the subject is allowed to perceive the world, and it does not pretend it is a mere appearance, or an illusion of the mind. The world is real and it is connected to the subject in a real way. These statements, may very well be refuted by philosophies, as

¹This point refers to the works of philosopher Dan Zahavi, Alia El-Saji, and Linda Fisher.

² Linda Fisher, "Feminist Phenomenology," in *Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Linda Fisher and Lester Embree (Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht, 2000), 1-15.

³ Nevertheless, there is no actual standard definition of phenomenology, since it evolved throughout the years based on the epistemological or ontological focus of the philosophers included in this literature review. However, Taylor Carman in the forward to the *Phenomenology of Perception* defines it as "...an attempt to describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first-person point of view, in contrast to the reflective, third person perspective that tends to dominate scientific knowledge and common sense". Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012) viii.

well as, sciences which stand on the opposite side of the spectrum or simply hold a different view of the world. Nevertheless, phenomenology is most suitable for this thesis because it allows to question embodiment through an epistemological lens; do subjects **know** by being embodied? But also, an ontological one; what does it mean **to be** embodied. Phenomenology, is still fighting for the importance of philosophy in the face of science which is especially salient at the moment due to the amazing developments in the latter, as well as, philosophy of science.

By reading Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, a pure description of experience becomes possible. The phenomenological method provides insights on the essence of being and the structure of conscious knowledge. Moreover, there is an urgency to understand embodiment and develop it further in the 21st century, because of issues like sexuality, scientific progress in the fields of artificial intelligence and body prosthesis, the increasing demand of being beautiful and its effects on the subject's existence, self and other body perception in multicultural, deeply intertwined, societies which still suffer from structural forms of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. Can defining embodiment point out to the lives that matter more than others, do all lives really matter?

Thus, the thesis argues for a return to the traditional phenomenological notion of embodiment while incorporating elements of sexuality and sexual difference. In order to make this argument, there are three main questions that must be addressed, each in a separate chapter. The first chapter *What is Embodiment? Between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty*, examines in detail the meaning and definitions of embodiment in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies. The chapter's main goal is to provide a phenomenological definition of embodiment, identify the epistemic and ontological dimensions, as well as, its drawbacks. The second chapter *What About the Female Body? A Feminist Critique* provides a critical feminist reading of embodiment in the works of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The chapter aims at

problematizing this notion in relation to gender. Lastly, the third and final chapter *Returning to the Phenomenological Body*, asks the basic question of what can be done better? How can one build on the philosophical drawbacks of Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian embodiment, integrating the feminist standpoint in order to provide an overreaching and more inclusive definition of embodiment?

Chapter One

Embodiment: Between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the meaning of embodiment and identify the role of the body in the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Both philosophers belong to the phenomenological tradition, yet; as Carman points out the disparity and differences in terminology and the meaning embodiment holds for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty should not be overlooked⁴. This difference is not a mere translation/language issue, but it derives from their Philosophies' fundamental principles.

The chapter explores the two definitions chronologically, covering the time frame from 1880 to 1980. The chapter is structured in said manner to demarcate the development of embodiment from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, highlighting the shift from the early focus on the epistemological dimension of lived embodiment, as being part of the structures of knowing, to the ontological interpretations of the concept. **The review demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty's view of embodiment opens up a particular dimension to the body that is not addressed by Husserl, and that makes his approach particularly relevant for feminist theories of embodiment addressed in Chapter Two.**

I. Body and Embodiment in Phenomenology: A Brief Overview

What is the body? In a way the body is the most natural, familiar, and self-evident thing perceived, and yet, it is also the object of intense examination. The body has been considered in dialectical relations as opposed to the mind, the soul, and/or consciousness such as; subject-object, same-other, and/or present-absent. The body has also been viewed as a oneness with

⁴ Taylor Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophical Topics* 27, no.2 (1999): 205-226.

one's consciousness, or as separate from it. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas⁵, the body is a powerful symbolic form which creates, but also adapts to rules and hierarchies. The body is at the center of culture and folklore by being trained, disciplined, forbidden, sexualized, and objectified through activities such as eating, dressing, and speaking for example. But the body can also have a strong political role if it becomes the location of social control, as argued by Foucault⁶. Throughout the history of philosophy, many different attitudes, approaches, and perspectives have been offered about the body.

The notion of embodiment is not original and limited to the field of phenomenology, but it has been examined in multiple fields and eras of philosophy. In each phase, embodiment held a different meaning. For example, with the recent developments in philosophy of cognitive science, embodiment can be understood as **body-functionalism**, whereby the body is basically a machine responsible for the computation of cognitive capacities. Embodiment is also understood as **body-enactivism**, whereby it becomes the source of meaning by making situations meaningful, the body can enact⁷.

Nevertheless, it was one of the fundamental achievements of phenomenology to question the traditional place of the body in the history of philosophy. Husserl⁸ highlighted the centrality of embodiment and identified the body as a center of lived experience that is capable of motion, which he later identified as **kinesthetic consciousness**. However, in his development of embodiment, Husserl still separated the subject from the pre-given world. In response to Husserl, Heidegger for instance, emphasized *Dasein* which rejects the subject-object division, since being in the world entails inseparability from it. The subject is not a

⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body* (Los Angeles: Univ of California Press, 1995), 165-167.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135-149.

⁷ Julian Kiverstein, "The Meaning of Embodiment," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4, no.1 (2012): 740-741.

⁸ See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: Second book studies in the phenomenology of constitution*, trans Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

spectator interacting with objects outside of him/herself, but is embedded in the world as part of his/her ontology⁹. Moreover, Heidegger's main task is to access being (*Sein*) through human experience as *Dasein*, which is further elaborated by Sartre¹⁰ who differentiates between being and knowing through three ontological dimensions.

As discussed by Moran¹¹, Sartre's three ontological dimensions of existence are as follows; first, the body lived first-hand, which is not an object. The second is the understanding of the materialization of the objective body as studied in the sciences. In this second ontology, Sartre also speaks of the instrumentalization of such a body, picked up from Heidegger¹², and on which the concept of Otherness is built, and later borrowed by Simone De Beauvoir. The third ontological dimension, as Dillon¹³ puts it, discusses *the-body-for-itself-for-others*. He argues for a social understanding of an intercorporeal, intersubjective *Dasein*, who does not experience his/her own body alone but also as experienced by others.

In more recent developments such as post-phenomenology's, the focus shifts from the human body to the non-human bodies that shape the world¹⁴. Ash and Simpson¹⁵ argue that this new stream attempts to examine the constitution of the subject through its experience of the world, which is similar to Merleau-Ponty's view of subjectivity but also attributes a role to inanimate objects in the creation of the socialized body. This distancing from the human body gave rise to an interest from the side of analytic philosophers such as J.N Mohanty¹⁶ and Gilbert

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (USA: State University of New York Press, 1996), 229.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hanzel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992)

¹¹ Dermot Moran, "Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness," In *Ontological Landscapes—Recent Thought on Conceptual Interfaces between Science and Philosophy*, ed. by Petrov Vesselin (Ontos Verlag, 2011), 263-293.

¹² The body as an instrument among instruments – *Zuhandensein*. As seen in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, (USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 214.

¹³ Martin C. Dillon, "Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty's Critique," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (1974): 144-158.

¹⁴ See Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context*, (USA: Northwest University of Press, 1995).

¹⁵ James Ash and Paul Simpson, "Geography and Post-Phenomenology," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no.1 (2016): 48-66.

¹⁶ See Dermot Moran and Rasmus Thybo Jensen, *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*. Vol. 71. (New York: Springer, 2013).

Ryle¹⁷ who re-explored phenomenology more generally under the umbrella of the philosophy of mind, but preferred the Husserlian version. However, on this view, embodiment is conceived as embodied cognition, where a stronger focus is on consciousness and the body becomes a mere vessel of the latter once again.¹⁸

Hence, the chapter discards this final view as irrelevant to its scope. In contrast, it supports a return to a Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian notion of embodiment, as their understanding unify¹⁹ two important elements of analysis for the task at hand, the body and the world. The turn, is motivated by three meanings embodiment holds, as Dreyfus²⁰ lists them, in Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is physical, comprising the subject and the flesh; embodiment is bodily skills and situational responses, which draws from Husserl's previously mentioned kinesthetic consciousness; and finally, embodiment is the cultural knowledge learned from the world in which we are embedded, reconnecting to Heidegger's discussion on *Dasein's* inseparability from the world, as well as, to Sartre's complex third ontological dimension which leads to an understanding of the socialized experience of the subject by other subjects. This last meaning provides the space to understand embodiment in terms of subjective embodiment, as well as, intersubjective embodiment without objectifying the body of the experiencer and ultimately leading to the feminist turn discussed in Chapter Two of the thesis.

II. Edmund Husserl

Husserlian phenomenology is rooted in the intentionality of consciousness, how the latter constitutes²¹ the body, and its role in perceptual experience. As Husserl discussed in *Logical*

¹⁷ Ibid, 71

¹⁸ For more reading on the matter see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleonor Rosch, *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*, (USA: MIT Press, 2016).

¹⁹ By unify I mean bring together, not discard/ prefer one or the other.

²⁰ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment," *The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 4, no.4 (1996): 1-16.

²¹ The term constitution is a technical term for Husserl, and refers to the correlation between experiencing and the that which is experienced. Further elaboration of the concept can be found in Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 6.

*Investigations*²² and *Ideas I*²³, **intentionality** generally refers to a subject's intentions to act, but also to any thought directed at objects outside of oneself. To provide a systematic understanding of intentionality, Husserl devises three structural elements; the intentional act (the subject's intention to do something such as; perceiving and remembering for example), the intentional object (object-directed thought – this refers to the content of the act the subject is doing), and intentional content (the way the subject thinks of the object). For example, I see (intentional act) a tree (intentional object) as big as a house (intentional content)²⁴. The first two elements of intentionality are the most important to the current discussion because intentionality can be understood as a correlation between the subject (I) and the object (the tree), but also as a difference which separates the subject from the object.

The creation of a difference between the subject and the object leads to two fundamental pairs of dichotomies in Husserlian phenomenology, first; the *immanent*, the inner sphere of conscious experience, and the *transcendent*, the outer sphere belonging to external objects outside of oneself. By starting from the subject's inner sphere, he turned to the first-person point of view reclaiming the role of the body as more than a vessel radically separated from consciousness. His reflections on the body and embodied personhood first begin with the critique, as well as, the rejection of the mainstream philosophy and science of his time; a rejection implemented in order to discover truth and to make a radical turn in philosophy²⁵.

Second, the difference between the real and the ideal. This is the most pivotal of all relations and differentiations, because it is at the base of how he categorizes the body. As W. R. Boyce Gibson simplifies it, for Husserl there are three main types of object; the real (the thing, the

²² Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001).

²³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First Book General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982).

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 1-4

real object sciences empirically observe), the irreal (this is a kind of perfect form of the object – here Husserl refers to transcendently purified experiences), and the *Wesen* or Essence (what Husserlian phenomenology is mainly concerned with, specifically “...*the essential nature of that irreal form of Being he calls Pure Consciousness*”)²⁶.

How does this relate to the body? If there are different types of objects, to which category does our body belong to? Is it a real object, an irreal one, or a *Wesen*?

A possible answer can be found in this key passage in the *Cartesian Meditations*:

“Among the bodies belonging to this “Nature” and included in my peculiar ownness, I then find my **animate organism** as **uniquely** singled out - namely as the only one of them that is not just a body but precisely an animate organism: the sole Object within my abstract world-stratum to which, in accordance with experience, I ascribe **fields of sensation** (belonging to it, however, in different manners a field of tactual sensations, a field of warmth and coldness, and so forth), the only Object “in” which I “rule and govern” immediately, governing particularly in each of its “organs””²⁷.

There are different thing-like bodies belonging to Nature, there exists a **biological body**, a physical and real object (*Körper*²⁸) which belongs to my inner subjective sphere. And then there is also the **animate organism** or **lived Body**²⁹, situated at the center of subjective experience; named *Leib*³⁰. The animate organism is the only Object³¹ within the abstract, the ideal, sphere of my experience which does experience in different ways. When Husserl says that this Object/Body is ruled and governed by oneself, he describes it as an immediate rule to avoid being misunderstood. He does not view the Body as a puppet attached to strings moved by consciousness. It actually is the center of our own experience of the world by the intimate

²⁶ W.R. Boyce Gibson, "The Problem of Real and Ideal in the Phenomenology of Husserl," *Mind* 34, no. 135 (1925): 311-333.

²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 97.

²⁸ The German form of the word was retrieved from Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 14-15, as Cairns did not include it in the text of this specific passage.

²⁹ Body is capitalized to differentiate it from the biological body, since for Husserl the body and Body are two different types of object.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 14-15.

³¹ Object in this context refers to the German form, Objekt and not Gegenstand which would have been written in English as object without the capitalization of the O. Gegenstand is used to refer to real objects outside of oneself, which does not apply to the body.

connection between consciousness and the Body. This is a necessary distinction that needs to be drawn before any inquiry on the body is pursued, since the interplay between *Körper* and *Leib*³² two fundamentally inseparable sides of the subject's body, pave the way for the discussion on embodiment. The body is experienced as an object in the world, while the Body experiences things that are worldly. However, even if the body is experienced as an object of intentionality, it is not an extended non-thinking physical substance, as Descartes claims³³.

The Husserlian account of the body and of being embodied is in striking contrast to the one provided by the then prevailing Cartesian dualist interpretation. Husserl particularly disliked the naturalist tradition³⁴ because it inherited the Cartesian dualist understanding of substances as *res extensa*³⁵ and *res cogitans*³⁶. This clear-cut division and difference in substances is not the only problem. Naturalism and the empirical sciences more generally, approached consciousness and the body as mathematizable things. After separating them, they attempted to connect the two substances psychophysically, in a way that it presupposed the human body to be an object like any other if not inhabited, connected, or controlled by consciousness.

For a phenomenologist like Husserl, who wants to access consciousness through lived first-hand experience, the main drawback of this approach was the absence of the embodied body, which is not constituted by bodily acts, but intentionally through the reflexive relation which is created as one perceives one of the organs (i.e. hand) with another (i.e. eye)^{37,38}.

³² Both *Körper* and *Leib* refer to the English word body, and in order to differentiate between them the thesis implements the same method that Rojcewicz and Schuwer implemented in translating *Ideas II*. This is the standard and most popular translation of the two words while reading Husserl's translated work.

³³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54.

³⁴ Husserl defines it as "...a phenomenon consequent upon the discovery of nature, which is to say of nature considered as a unity of spatio-temporal being subject to exact laws of nature" in Edmund Husserl and Quentin Lauer, "Philosophy as a strict science," *Cross Currents* 6, no. 4 (1956): 325-344. More generally, Naturalism is viewed and understood as an approach which examines philosophical problems through empirical sciences without the employment of a priori knowledge/ theorization.

³⁵ Body

³⁶ Mind

³⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 96-98.

³⁸ Another important term here is body intentionality, which Taylor Carman defines as "the immediate sense of embodied agency we are familiar with, and that we all take for granted". Taylor Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," 211.

Husserl further explains that this difference lays in the way body and consciousness interact. This interaction unfolds as the body mundanizes consciousness, it makes it worldly. It is only through its experiential relation to the *Leib* that consciousness becomes human. Only then, consciousness becomes part of Nature by occupying a place in both space and time³⁹. Consciousness is mundanized by being **embodied** within the natural world. By being embodied in a *Körper*, consciousness acquires the characteristics of being “here and now” through the intensive relation to the corporeal being which it embodies. On the other hand, the *Körper* becomes animated by consciousness turning into Husserl’s *Leib*. Hence, the importance of the conceptual distinction⁴⁰. It is in fact this conceptual distinction that separates Husserl from his contemporaries. By elucidating the distinction between the body and the Body of embodiment, he is challenging naturalists and empiricists, but he is not challenging the practice of medical professionals approaching the living body as something empirically observable for example⁴¹.

In very simple words, Husserl is highlighting the idea that there is more to the body than its physiology, and that consciousness cannot be empirically examined. He does so in three main literary steps; in *Ideas I*⁴² he develops his philosophical foundations focusing on consciousness and intentionality without mentioning the body (as seen by Naturalists). In *Ideas II*⁴³ he brings back the Body, but not the *Körper*, rather the body which experiences and is experienced, the embodied body, *Leib*. Finally, in *Ideas III*⁴⁴, the physiological and the phenomenological merge; in fact, Husserl proposes a new science, somatology, incorporating both the material and the experiential methods of investigations.

³⁹ Acquiring that spatio-temporal character naturalist attributed to the body as inanimate object.

⁴⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 14-15.

⁴¹ Alfred Schuetz, “Die Phaenomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften (Ideas III. by Edmund Husserl),” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 13, no.4 (1953): 506-514.

⁴² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*.

⁴³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*.

⁴⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: Third book phenomenology and the foundations of the sciences*, trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl (The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980).

The Body discussed in *Ideas II*, is examined in relation to the *Lebenswelt* or lifeworld. This is the cultural world, the world infused with social interactions and encounters; all of which with other embodied subjects. The latter is vital in his understanding of embodiment, because when we do encounter others, we see a whole embodied subject, we do not look at them and think “Here is Sarah! A pile of bones animated by consciousness, an immaterial thing working like a battery”. Instead, there is an immediacy in my reaction to her presence; a handshake, a hug, or any other culturally specific norm used to greet another person. And as I greet her, I do not think of the neurotransmissions occurring in my body.

This is mainly due to the way the subject is constituted, the way it is given the “here and now” status with embodied consciousness through the lived Body. But again, what is this Body? Where does it belong? This passage and the discussion around it, may help further clarify the body and embodiment:

*“The same Body which serves me as means for all my perception obstructs me in the perception of itself and is a remarkably imperfectly construed thing”*⁴⁵

Husserl is explicitly referring to the idea that embodiment is twofold. On one hand there is the Body, which allows us to perceive by being the subject of perception. On the other hand, there is the body which is the perceived object, even if he writes, is imperfectly perceived by oneself. And so, in a way his ideas return to a dualism, but different from the Cartesian one. It is a conceptual dualism dictated by his dogmatic metaphysical statements on consciousness and the world, he calls it an “abyss of meaning”⁴⁶, and unfortunately this conceptual dualism inhibits the body from being the source on intentional phenomena with regards to perceptual experience; this is because of the detachability the world from the realm of consciousness^{47,48}.

⁴⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 167.

⁴⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, §93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, §76-86

⁴⁸ The clearest example of this detachability is the epoché, also known as the transcendental reduction. A more detailed explanation can be found in *Ibid*, § 31-34 and §56 to 64.

Moreover, embodiment itself is both extended and physical, the dualism lays in the kind of objects (bodies) that Husserl identifies not in the difference between body/Body and consciousness. Again, the key to Husserlian embodiment is not in the difference in substance, but it is in its twofold-ness⁴⁹. And again, even if there is a material side to embodiment it does not mean that we can be moved, touched, looked at, or spoken to passively. Every person experiences all which is externally affecting them subjectively!

The famous example provided by Husserl to explain double sensation⁵⁰ is the one of the touching hands. With my left hand I touch my right hand, and here I have two experiential possibilities. I can focus on the material characteristics of my right hand; smoothness, warmth, shape, colour etc... Or, I can focus on the subjective sensing of my left hand⁵¹. Double sensation is not however, multiple sensations running back and forth through our nerves and connective tissues, but rather two separate experiences. I have both the object sensation and the subject sensation. I am simultaneously the object of intentionality, as well as, its subject⁵².

Nonetheless, even if the Body is capable of this double sensing, it still does not occupy a center place in his phenomenology. It is quite the opposite for Merleau-Ponty, who in fact, situates the body in the middle, the conceptual space where the world and consciousness occupy the same place. Finally, it should be noted that the mind-body problem was never the main question asked by Husserl. It was the “things in themselves” that interested him the most. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, who will not only ask about the mind-body dualism, but will reject and overcome it.

⁴⁹ I follow the same interpretation of twofold embodiment as discussed by Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and crying: a study of the limits of human behavior* (USA: Northwestern University Press, 1970) 34.

⁵⁰ To feel and to be felt, the Leib and the Körper

⁵¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 152.

⁵² At the beginning I proposed the example of looking at the tree. In this case I am both the I and the tree.

III. Maurice Merleau-Ponty

As a continuation, but also development of Husserl's work, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*⁵³, Merleau-Ponty's approach to *le corps propre*⁵⁴ is neither biological nor mechanical⁵⁵. Just like Husserl⁵⁶, Merleau-Ponty begins his inquiry by rejecting classical psychology and embracing the *Gestalt* one. The rejection of the former is dictated by the way it views the body, as Merleau-Ponty writes⁵⁷:

“When classical psychology described one's own body, it already attributed “characteristics” to it that are incompatible with the status of an object. It first claimed that my body is distinguished from the table or the lamp because my body is constantly perceived, whereas I can turn away from these other objects. Thus, my body is an object that is always with me”.

Merleau-Ponty views this distinction between the body as an object and other objects as a contradiction. How can the body be an object whereas the one vital characteristic of objects is the subject's ability to turn away from them, while the body is an object constantly perceived? Another way of formulating the question is; if the perception of objects is not constant, but the body is an object constantly perceived, why is the body considered an object? In fact, he continues and explains⁵⁸:

...But then, is it still an object? If an object is an invariable structure, this is not in spite of the change of perspectives, but rather in this change, or through it. The always new perspectives are not, for the object, a simple opportunity to manifest its permanence or a contingent manner of appearing to us. It is only an object in front of us because it is observable, which is to say, situated at our fingertips or at the end of our gaze, indivisibly overthrown and rediscovered by each of their movements. Otherwise, the object would be true in the manner of an idea and not present in the manner of a thing. In particular, the object is only an object if it can be moved away and ultimately disappear from my visual field. Its presence is such that it requires a possible absence.”

⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁴ This translates to the body proper, as Merleau-Ponty calls it. This is the body which I live as my own, the body that allows me to have a world.

⁵⁵ Which explains why there is no actual corresponding French translation for *Körper*

⁵⁶ As mentioned in the section above, Husserl also rejected the mainstream sciences and philosophies of his time.

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 92.

In a way, Merleau-Ponty is asking the same question as Husserl; what kind of object is my body, if it is an object at all? For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a different kind of object, it is an object in the empirical sense that is examined. However, the permanence of the body, its omnipresence, makes it different from the table, the chair, the bottle, perceived by the perceiver. Merleau-Ponty criticised the classical psychological understanding of the body because it treated it the way a lamp is, simultaneously attributing to it characteristics that do not belong to objects. In this case, the ability to “move it away” from oneself. One cannot take his/her body away from him/herself. And this, is an indirect, yet important similarity in attitude with Husserl. They both say there is something different about one's own body. For Husserl is the fact that it cannot be perfectly perceived; while for Merleau-Ponty is that my own body cannot be moved away from me. It seems as if the body is situated – metaphorically speaking – between the natural world and consciousness for Husserl; and within the world for Merleau-Ponty.

The understanding of the body being an object immersed in the world and that cannot be moved away from oneself, can be traced to Merleau-Ponty's embrace of *Gestalttheorie*. It is a way of breaking away from the empiricism which treated the body like an object. His excitement for this, then new, theory of psychology and perception is evident, as he writes:

“The figure on a ground, the simplest “Etwas”- the Gestalt contains the key to the problem of the mind⁵⁹”

The Gestalt is not just a school of psychology, but it is also the primal level of perceptual experience for him. Merleau-Ponty infuses the perceived world with so much meaning and value constantly giving and taking to and from our lives, and bodies. This choice is vital because by embracing the latter school of psychology, the divide between the

⁵⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 192.

mechanical physical object performing functions such as movement, and the body as embodied is no longer there; or at least not as clear as in Husserl. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the thing through which we sense and live experience, which can be connected to Husserlian double sensing. We are not in a body, the body is not a container, instead it constitutes the experience of the world and of being in it. There is a profound sense that one is his/her body⁶⁰. This is embodiment that element of existence that allows one to be a subject and not merely a body, an object, among others.

For Merleau-Ponty, in a way, embodiment is the actualization of one's existence. At this point, it is important to note that for Husserl, the body and embodiment are part of his system of intentionality; however, for Merleau-Ponty the question of embodiment is far more vital. For the former, the intentionality of consciousness is at the center, while for the latter it is bodily intentionality. In his philosophy, Merleau-Ponty blurs the line between thoughts and sensations and does not relegate them to two different spheres of experience like Husserl; but he links them through perception⁶¹. Thoughts and sensations can only take place against the background of perceptual activity understood in bodily relations. As Merleau-Ponty reads Ideas II, he points out something he believes is lacking from the two-folded Body of Husserl; he asks:

“Then what link is there between my body and me in addition to the regularities of occasional causality? There is a relation of my body to itself which makes it the vinculum of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a ‘physical thing.’ But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, es wird Leib, es empfindet. The physical thing becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an explanatory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes ‘a sort of reflection.’ In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 204

⁶¹ As Carman explains “Perception is not of something, if the “of” in that formula indicates a causal relation to something in the external world, for there might be no such thing – indeed, as far as phenomenology is concerned, Husserl insisted, there might be no external world at all. Perception is instead as if of something; it identifies or describes a merely putative object, whether the object exists or not” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix- x.

what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body – the body is a ‘perceiving thing’ a ‘subject-object’”⁶²

The goal of this passage is to show that this strict dichotomy, this twofold-ness, of subject and object, *Körper* and *Leib*, cannot fully flash out the importance of the body. He says:

“ If the distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body, it is also blurred in the thing, which is the pole of my body’s operations, the terminus its exploration ends up in, and which is thus woven into the same intentional fabric as my body”⁶³

For Merleau-Ponty this distinction is counterproductive and as seen in his interpretation of the hand example, confusing. The *Körper* “element” of embodiment is what is problematic for Merleau-Ponty. Accordingly, the existence of other objects really prevents my body from being an object, as well as, being “completely constituted”⁶⁴. However, both agree on the fact that our bodies cannot touch or see themselves like they touch or see other objects; thus, returning to the initial point of the section. But what is the body then for Merleau-Ponty?

In his own words the body is “our anchorage in a world”⁶⁵, it is “our general means of having a world”⁶⁶. What does this entail? It entails a greater centrality for the body since perception and existence are essentially bodily. As he writes “My body is my point of view upon the world”⁶⁷. It is my point of view upon the world because my body is not a mere object in the world, since the line between me and the world is not so demarcated, but also because it provides me with the background of perceptual necessity where all happens. According to Merleau-Ponty, our body is necessary to experience the world, it is not possible to perceive by

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (USA: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 166.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 167.

⁶⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 92-93.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 146 – 147.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 146-148.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

bracketing⁶⁸ out the natural attitude⁶⁹ of my body. And so, this points towards a very different standpoint from the Husserlian one. If it was consciousness for Husserl, it is the body and perception for Merleau-Ponty.

Another important point of comparison is language. French does not have an equivalent for *Körper* and *Leib*, it does not allow that kind of differentiation which however, is not the reason why Merleau-Ponty strays from that conceptual dualism. Instead, he refers to the body as *corps* and adds attributes to define it, such as *propre*⁷⁰. An additional key word for him is *chair*, what is referred to as flesh. This specific delineation of the body stresses on its materiality and connection to the world. By this, I do not mean the materiality of Husserl's *Körper*, but rather the double sensing and twofold-ness of the embodied Body⁷¹. It refers to the experience of materiality, the experience of bodily functions not simply in relation to the bones, muscles, and nerves. But rather, the *le corps fonctionnant* similar to what Husserl would refer to as functioning I. Both signify the body at work, the body which is the epicenter of doing, as well as, the body to which things happen⁷². By that I meant the things which happen to us passively, like falling, forgetting, or feeling sad all of the sudden for example.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is also our way of confronting reality; a reality that is always pre-given. Just like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a pre-world, pre-subject, pre-I, and the prefix refers not to precedent spatio-temporal position, but to an embodied past⁷³. If the body has different attributes, it experiences and is experienced in the world, what is embodiment then? If for Husserl it is the locus of experience and movement, for Merleau-Ponty

⁶⁸ See my previous footnote on the epoché.

⁶⁹ This is one of the modes of being of Husserl. This is the mode belonging to the natural world, the objective/real realm.

⁷⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxxi -xxxii.

⁷¹ In German it is also referred to as the *Leibkörper*.

⁷² Bernhard Waldenfels, "The central role of the body in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 39, no. 1 (2008): 76-87.

⁷³ Memories, affects, behaviors that in a way make us who we are.

is the perpetuity of existence, is that which allows me to know I am myself and my body, is the awareness of being in the world and of perceiving.⁷⁴

What then, can these two similar yet contrasting views on the body and embodiment have to offer to feminist theory? What dimensions of the Leib and le corps propre may be of interest to Feminism? If phenomenology is concerned with first-hand subjective experience and its description, and the body is the most central in our experience of the world, does its gender matter? Does it matter if the subject describing experience is a woman, a man, or identifies outside of the binary spectrum of gender? These questions are addressed in the following chapter.

⁷⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 169.

Chapter Two

What About the Female Body? A Feminist Critique

The issue of gender and sexuality can be the object of research, and research done through a feminist stand point has the potential of becoming an epistemological approach to the experience of being in the world. Rethinking and reworking a concept of embodiment that overcomes the traditional dichotomies of mind/body and subject/object is difficult but it must be done. Feminist theory has developed literature on various issues concerning embodiment such as constitution, intentionality, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, empathy, affect, and more. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to locate the feminist turn in phenomenology and provide a feminist reading of Husserl and Merleau-Pontian embodiment. What do these two philosophers have to offer to contemporary feminists? Is the feminist reading of classical phenomenology satisfactory?

I. Simone de Beauvoir and the Feminist Turn in Phenomenology

Regardless of the ways in which the body is defined, conceptualized, or situated within the world, the body of a man has always been primal in relation to the body of a woman. In order to understand and systematically develop this statement, it is important to begin by locating the feminist turn in phenomenology. The latter can be found in Simone de Beauvoir's reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*⁷⁵.

In *The Second Sex*⁷⁶, Beauvoir expounded on Sartre's notion of the Other to delineate a subject in a state of alienation, who refuses to experience her own subjectivity, and instead identifies with the look of the other. She draws a connection between this **otherness** and the

⁷⁵ Simone de Beauvoir wrote a review essay of Merleau-Ponty's book, *La phénoménologie de la perception* de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which first appears in *Les temps modernes* in 1945.

⁷⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1949).

one **enforced** on women through dichotomies that necessarily situate men and women in contrasting positions, whereby he is the subject and she is the object⁷⁷. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this conception of otherness originates from Sartre's third ontological dimension, whereby subjective embodiment becomes intersubjective. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's standpoint, like Merleau-Ponty's, is the body's view towards the world. As Cataldi⁷⁸ adds, the body is the base of being, and it is the body that allows for this becoming woman.

The embodied subject, *le corps propre*, *Leib*, is a subject in its own right. In her review of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty on the principle that our bodies should not be seen as objects. This may entail that bodies are perceived as means of communication to the world rather than instruments among other instruments⁷⁹. This philosophical affinity with Merleau-Ponty stems from her leaning on three main ideas presented in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; the living body, the sexed body, and experience's temporal nature. This is especially interesting, since Merleau-Ponty writes about sexuality not as a function, as one would assume after reading the section above, but as part of existence's expression⁸⁰.

In her review, what she begins with and truly appreciates, is the elimination of the dualist understanding of subject-object; specifically, she argues that it is impossible to define the object as detached from the subject, to cut it off. This is due to the nature of objects; being for the subject and the subject revealing itself by engaging with objects⁸¹. On that note, she emphasizes her agreement with him on the body not being an object, not even a

⁷⁷ Ibid, 16-17.

⁷⁸ Suzanne Laba Cataldi, "The body as a basis for being: Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *The existential phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2001), 85-106.

⁷⁹ Simone De Beauvoir, "La phénoménologie de la perception de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophie* 1, no.144 (2020): 7-10.

⁸⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 156-157

⁸¹ Simone De Beauvoir, "La phénoménologie de la perception de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," 7-10.

special/privileged kind of object. She highlights that our body is not positioned in the world like a pawn on a chess board, but the body lives in it, it is the expression and realization of our existence⁸². The sensuous experience our body has, is the way of communication with the world, as she writes *tissu intentionell*⁸³.

However, it is in *The Second Sex* where a feminist phenomenological explanation of objectification is expressed as imposed on women by restrictions such as; items of clothing or cultural practices. She argues that the body in flesh and bones should not be taken as definite; in *The Data of Biology*⁸⁴ Beauvoir emphasizes that biological bodily indicators should not determine neither the individual characteristics of the subject, nor the social life. In this sense, Beauvoir draws on Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the limiting biological understanding of the body, and so also rejecting Husserl's *Körper*.⁸⁵

The biological body is forced to be gendered. This is one of the fundamental views in Beauvoir's philosophy, as seen throughout history, women have been exploited specifically because of their biological features. For example, forced prostitution, as well as, the ability to give birth and breastfeed children. This is a major change of perspective in relation to female existence, as women are not just their bodies, and by extension the latter's abilities and features. It is from this view that the subject-object dichotomy emerges; with the man being the subject and the woman the object. The male subject symbolizes reason, while the woman is her own body, the object given to the male subject⁸⁶. This theorization represents the starting point of

⁸² Ibid, 7-10.

⁸³ Intentional network.

⁸⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 33-64.

⁸⁵ The distrust of biology continues into contemporary approaches to the body, for example, Michel Foucault emphasizes the centrality of the body as socio-political construct. This is taken a step further by Braidotti who notes that the centrality of the body becomes the main reason of oppression and praises the Foucauldian approach for not falling into the trap of biologism. This disregard for the "biology" of the body can already be found in Merleau-Ponty since the body's agency and materiality contribute to our experience. The difference here is that he does not elaborate on the impact that gender has on the experience of the world. See Rosi Braidotti, "The Subject of Feminism," *Hypatia* 6, no.2 (1991): 155-172 and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁸⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16

contemporary feminist phenomenologists who criticize the dichotomy, nevertheless building on it.

II. Beyond Beauvoir: Sexual Difference

While Beauvoir inaugurated the possibility of a feminist phenomenology, there were a number of issues that remained questionable in her work, namely the traditional dichotomy between the Absolute (male) and the Other (female)⁸⁷. This binary is addressed through more recent feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. The question of the body and embodiment cannot be ignored by feminists. In fact, as Grosz argues⁸⁸, if one is to discard or deny the importance of embodiment within the feminist scholarship, then it would be treated the same way as it was when only a masculine consciousness⁸⁹ was discussed and imposed on the body, whereby the body as mere vessel, was attributed to the woman.

Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*⁹⁰ reads through Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* and at first agrees with the return to pre-discursive experience where subject-object divisions are paused. In fact, she writes:

*“Up to this point, my reading and interpretation of the history of philosophy agree with Merleau-Ponty: we must go back to a moment of prediscursive experience, recommence everything, all the categories by which we understand things, the world, subject-object divisions, recommence everything and pause at the “mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity.”*⁹¹

The mystery she is referring to is the mystery of sexual difference, or as she calls it “the issue of time”⁹². Irigaray criticizes the way philosophy, science, and language have been

⁸⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁸⁹ By male consciousness, is understood the idea that only male consciousness is of relevance. In fact, the underlying statement is that, when philosopher discussed consciousness, was exclusively discussed from the male point of view.

⁹⁰ See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 151.

⁹² *Ibid*, 5.

claimed by men; starting from the description of the subject always written in the masculine form. Man is always at the center of politics, theory, and discourse⁹³. Man is the creator of space and time, carefully situating women and their bodies within certain spaces, roles, and identities. One of the very important roles and identity she focuses on is the feminine-maternal. This theme of motherhood and the fecund body of women is recurrent in her work and is the standpoint for her critique of Merleau-Pontian body. She especially focuses on the way he describes the relationship of the body to world and vice versa. Much of the critique is offered in the *Ethics of Sexual Difference* is on Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, but what exactly is she critiquing and reworking? The object of inquiry is the visible, Merleau-Ponty defines it as follows:

*“The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible (the things as well as my own body) some “psychic” material that would be— God knows how— brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body.”*⁹⁴

But it is how he describes the visible, as a light which remains in obscurity, that raises questions. The way he brings it to language and describes it as a close intimacy like the one between the sea and the strand⁹⁵. This, she reads it as an unconscious, almost implicit, description of intrauterine life. The visible, the mother, is in this intrauterine limbo, where all she sees is from her mother perspective. The latter resurrects the idea of the feminine other, again by attributing the visible to women. Her reading of the text is not just in the form of a commentary, but is also a philosophical and psychoanalytic engagement. What Irigaray is pointing at is that the intelligibility of bodies between mother and fetus erases sexual difference

⁹³ Ibid, 6-10.

⁹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 130-131.

because the mother from visible becomes invisible, and her role as child bearer surfaces and she, as a subject, is erased. This erasure is what leads to the erasure of sexual difference.

However, as Butler⁹⁶ comments, this very criticism, the erasure of sexual difference of the body, in reality is an affinity, since Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty resembles the way he outlines the flesh⁹⁷ and the body. Both engaging with one another. Through her engagement with the text, Irigaray, recaptures sexual difference by proposing her reading as evidence that in erasing sexual difference, Merleau-Ponty is actually locating it at the core of the body. As Butler explains:

*"Irigaray textually enacts a kind of entanglement that suggests that the "outside" to phallogocentrism is to be found "within" its own terms, that the feminine is insinuated into the terms of phallogocentrism, rendering equivocal the question, whose voice is it, masculine or feminine?"*⁹⁸

Nevertheless, Irigaray's understanding is not of a masculine-subject versus a feminine-object, but rather a constitutive one. Whereby, the subject (man) cannot be without the object (woman); the exclusion of the feminine from the discourse of body and embodiment in itself is constitutive. The condition of male being is negative, it is only through the negation of the feminine that the masculine comes to being; returning to Beauvoir's dichotomy. The same dichotomy she initially wanted to overcome. Butler⁹⁹ also emphasizes the inadequacy of Irigaray's question on how to treat the other, the feminine, well. Butler¹⁰⁰ states that the other for Merleau-Ponty is not really the other, as his intersubjectivity does not entail the alienated other of Husserl's object. Rather, it is a social other who communicates through his/her body. Like her contemporaries, Irigaray attempts to go beyond the dichotomies suggesting that sex and gender are irrelevant as they force us to consider bodily characteristics as features that

⁹⁶ Judith Butler, "Sexual difference as a question of ethics: Alterities of the flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty," *Chiasmi International* 10, no.1 (2008): 333-347.

⁹⁷ With the flesh being the visible and the body the invisible.

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

determine subjectivity. However, as Butler points out her reading of Merleau-Ponty resurrects the dichotomy in a way that makes the feminine indispensable to the masculine.

Why is this important for the feminist reading of embodiment? In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*¹⁰¹, Butler clearly points out that if we are only to take the female body as constitutive of the female subject, through a naturalistic approach, all we are left with is a limited embodied experience. An experience relegated only to the roles and functions the female biological body can perform, such as; giving birth and breastfeeding for example. This is why the difference between sex, the biological, and gender, the constructed, was introduced; to avoid the relegation of female experience only to certain social dimension.

This rejection of naturalism in regards to the embodied body is also present in both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, as elucidated in the previous chapter. Butler cites Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir when it comes to defining the body. Its facticity, its materiality, in a way is denied and the claim of the body being an historical idea is highlighted. By historical it is meant the process by which the body becomes infused with cultural meaning, and this cannot possibly be a simple biological complex organism. The body is a process by which cultural and historical opportunities become embodied.

Thus, the body becomes a set of possibilities not related by the perception of the other or predetermined by its essence¹⁰². This entails that the body is not just physical, or at least its materiality does not bear importance, as much as the meanings it holds. Those meanings, according to Beauvoir, have been imposed and imparted on women from men.

¹⁰¹Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (London: Routledge, 2003) 97-110.

¹⁰² Ibid, 97-110.

III. Beyond Beauvoir: Bodily Movement

This relegation to certain bodily roles and meanings has been developed by Iris Marion Young in *Throwing Like a Girl*, as an inability to have specific embodied experiences. She applied Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to examine the difference between masculine and feminine¹⁰³ bodies. She noticed that these appear early on in childhood whereby whole-body movements is present in boys and not in girls. This statement was a result of observation of children while running, playing baseball, and doing sports in general. While boys tended to move all of their body parts, girls only moved the body part involved in the activity, i.e., if a girl was to throw a ball, she would only move her arm¹⁰⁴. Young relates this inability of girls to perform certain actions to three modalities of feminine motility; inhibited intentionality¹⁰⁵, ambiguous transcendence¹⁰⁶, and discontinuous unity¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸.

These three modalities, she explains, are the result of the woman embodied experience as subject and object simultaneously. By object, Young means thing, not even Körper. These modalities stem from her reading of Merleau-Pontian intentionality as located in the body. Because intentionality is located in the body, feminine body motility is characterized by both an "I can" and an "I cannot". As a subject her body, should have skills and abilities by which it approaches the world around her guided by her intentions. However, what Young is arguing is that her embodied experience, because affected by both subjectivity and objectivity, is perhaps characterized by a "one can" instead of "I can". There is a consistent disbelief in her

¹⁰³ By feminine, Young refers to the mode of being relegated to women in a particular context or situation, it does not by any means related to the essence or bodily characteristics of females.

¹⁰⁴ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing like a girl: A phenomenology of feminine body comporment motility and spatiality," *Human studies* 3, no. 1 (1980): 137-156.

¹⁰⁵ "Typically, the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination which are available to it. Feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an "I can" and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed "I cannot." Ibid, 146.

¹⁰⁶ "...feminine bodily existence is a transcendence and openness to the world, it is an ambiguous transcendence, a transcendence which is at the same time laden with immanence." Ibid, 145.

¹⁰⁷ "Women tend to locate their motion in a part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile" Ibid, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 145.

own body's ability to move. Hence, the feminine body is never fully a subject capable of transcendence¹⁰⁹, but is pervaded by immanence which keeps her to the status of object. But why are women bodies unable to perform whole-body movements, are women embodied differently? Before answering this question however, she stresses the importance of not taking this a universal particular. This understanding of female embodiment is not necessarily the same for women in societies different from her own, urban, industrial Western societies. And this relates to the answer she offers, the body as a socio-historical idea. An argument picked up from Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir.

Thus, the object of inquiry is how women learn to act in a certain way, the manner in which girls are socialized to be unable to mobilize their bodily resources unlike their male counterparts. This is done through the process of young girls acquiring a feminine gender, through which they will acquire a feminine body by extension. Hence, this is not just an application of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on how the subject drives towards the world and does that by using his/her bodily skills, but it is also a criticism. If we are to believe that the embodied subject is not defined by its biological body, but rather his/her interactions with the world, other subjects, socialization, cultural practices, and so on there is still a co-option of female embodiment. The body, let it be Körper, Leib, or Leibkörper is still gendered.

IV. Beyond Beauvoir and Beyond Dichotomies

By now, it is very obvious that the majority of feminist phenomenology is more interested in reading Merleau-Ponty's work; while feminist engagement with Husserl's theory of the body is rather limited and not as developed¹¹⁰. The reason behind this, is the role that

¹⁰⁹ I think Young uses transcendence and immanence the same way Beauvoir does. So, transcendence is a characteristic of the male subject; active, productive, powerful. While immanence refers to the status of women and objects characterized by passivity, staticity, etc....

¹¹⁰ This thesis is by no means an exhaustive account of the vast and rich feminist literature, and of course there must be a text, a manifesto, reading through Husserl. One of these texts is Fisher, Linda. "Feminist phenomenology", 1-15. Where she suggests the reworking of Husserlian theory of the body.

Körper plays in the twofold-ness of embodiment. As discussed by Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler, the return to pre-discursive subjectivity where biological features do not play a significant role, is one of the foundational pillars for feminist phenomenology. However, simply because a theory of body indicates a strong Körper-Leib relation, it does not necessarily mean that it should not be engaged with. This may lead to a weak feminist philosophical foundation of the phenomenological body, since even if we are to correctly assume that the constitution of the subject is an historical process, we are still tied to this world by being embodied.

Secondly, it may be considered as poor intellectual practice; disregarding a theory simply because it does not fit or it is not easy. This is neither to diminish the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, nor to crunch feminist reworkings of his notion which have also been critical for his failure to address sexual difference. This statement is a simple intellectual trigger, meant to enrich the literature. In fact, this is where, I would like to bring to the table Alia Al-Saji¹¹¹'s reworking of Husserlian embodiment through his account of touch; inspired by the works of Gail Weiss¹¹² and Sara Heinämaa¹¹³. On one hand, Weiss highlights the systematic and rigorous character of Husserlian phenomenology and the possibility its methodology holds for feminist theory¹¹⁴. On the other, Heinämaa is more focused on how influential *Ideas II* was for Beauvoir's philosophy of the male-female /subject-object theorization.

Al-Saji appeals to Husserl's double sensing body. The latter is both a sensing and sensed object, it is a Corporeal body¹¹⁵, not because it is at once sensed as an object, and then is itself sensing other objects. Instead, she chooses to read it as an ability of the body to be both

¹¹¹ Alia Al-Saji, "Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory." *Continental Philosophy Review* 43, no. 1 (2010): 13-37.

¹¹² Gail Weiss, "Ambiguity, absurdity, and reversibility: Responses to indeterminacy," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 26, no. 1 (1995): 43-51.

¹¹³ Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a phenomenology of sexual difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003)

¹¹⁴ Gail Weiss, *Body images: Embodiment as intercorporeality*, (New York: Routledge, 1999) 39-49.

¹¹⁵ In German he refers to it as Leibkörper. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 144 -155.

at the different times for different purposes, leaning toward the instrumentalization of a subject embedded in the world. Which, is very much similar to the flexibility displayed by Merleau-Pontian embodiment. The twofold-ness of Husserlian embodiment is no longer viewed as philosophical liability with the heavy weight of a natural Körper, but rather as an ability to be sensing and sensed without the need of being in opposition to another object. This way embodiment becomes a plurality of sensing, it can do and be multiple things at the same time through sensation, perception, movement. All which intertwine in the body creating the richness of embodied experience¹¹⁶. Thus, her main argument is to claim that the body is really constituted through touch which would not need to involve an opposite object. This is indeed a radical shift in feminist perspectives because this way, the subject does not need an object to constitute itself because it is both at once. This reading can be a turning point because it would really un-stuck feminist theory from the pattern of situating male-subject and female-subject in an either-or relation.

¹¹⁶ Alia Al-Saji, *Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory*, 13-37.

Chapter Three

Returning to the Phenomenological Body

In the previous chapter, different feminist approaches to Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology have been examined. I have located the phenomenological turn in feminist theory within the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who revised the notions of body and embodiment offered by Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.¹¹⁷ Her reworking allowed a feminist interpretation of embodied subjectivity and experience of women not linked to the biological gendered body. Which, however, resurfaces under a different form, the body of ambiguous transcendence. A body which is an historical idea with a gender that is constructed by cultural practices and the co-option of society.

The turn of phenomenology in feminist theory seems to need, what I call in this thesis, a **return** to the phenomenological body. In this chapter, I mark this return in Alia Al-Saji's essay *Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory*, not only because it offers a new interpretation of Husserlian theory that goes beyond criticizing his *Körper*; but also, because it allows the constitution of the female subject and her embodiment beyond the barriers of dichotomies.

I. The Dissatisfaction of Theory

Al-Saji begins by asking a very important question; are feminists ready to rethink the classical understandings of the body, as being on the other side of the dichotomy, namely; other, object, passive, instrumental, and subordinated to reason? This is a particularly salient question, because the problem here is not merely of reading a text, identify the dichotomy, and

¹¹⁷ Of course, Beauvoir has engaged with the works of many more philosophers; nevertheless, they are the most relevant for this thesis.

overcome it. But is rather a problem of situating ourselves phenomenologically. As I read feminist texts, there is this pattern of engagement which involves the insertion of oneself within the examined theory. Like the carving of a space for a feminist subject in a discourse where it does not belong. It is a dialectical power struggle between the female reader and male writer; where the negation of the female subject in discourse is the constitution of the male philosophical authority, falling once again in the subject-object framework. This is very much the criticism and praise, in a sense, that Butler raised when writing about Irigaray writing about Merleau-Ponty.

I argue that if we are really to develop sound feminist phenomenology, we must change our point of view. By point of view, I mean the way we situate ourselves as female subjects not just in the literature, but in the world. It is like the hand example provided by both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, to overcome the dichotomy, we need to stop situating ourselves, metaphorically speaking, in the left hand, the object of intentionality of the right hand. Nor we should be the latter. Instead, we should begin the inquiry from the standpoint of the subject whose hands are touching one another. When scholars like Irigaray and Butler attempt to go beyond the dichotomy they remain trapped in it, because sexual difference and gender remain the object of inquiry, but are also fundamental in the constitution of the subject inquiring.

They have criticized Merleau-Ponty for erasing sexual difference by blurring the lines between visible and invisible; however, praised his work for allowing the body to become an historical idea, and by extension making embodiment non-biological. The obsession with the non-biological body is both productive and counter-productive. Productive because it attempts to dissociate the traditional gender roles attributed to women because of their physical features. However, it is counterproductive for two reasons; first, because we are embodied beings. In both Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian our relation to the world is focused in our body, make that because of touch, movement, perception, and so our view of the world is necessarily

conditioned by how we feel. Second, when the body is only an historical idea, and embodiment the by-product of memories and behaviour, then it is going to be shaped based on elements outside of one self. When I say outside of me, I mean the behaviour and perception of others about myself. This way the subject is really stripped of her own agency in creating and constituting herself, since it becomes contingent to all those practices that co-opt women¹¹⁸

This is where Al-Saji's work can contribute, she argues that, besides the natural body¹¹⁹, another reason for feminists to doubt in Husserl is his phenomenological reduction; whereby our natural attitude is bracketed away and with it, our Körper with its gender. The result of this bracketing is a universalized consciousness, which is for obvious reason masculine¹²⁰, and what is being excluded, bracketed away, is the feminine body. This interpretation and criticism are very similar to the ones raised against Merleau-Ponty's visible. And so, it appears that the erasure of sexual difference, the allowing of non-biological embodiment, and the bracketing of a naturally gendered body are not enough. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that it is only in contemporary Husserlian scholarship¹²¹ that we rediscover his appreciation for the body. Also, it is important to highlight that for Husserl the main aim of his phenomenological investigations was not the body itself. Rather, he wanted to create the foundations of all the human sciences. In fact, his philosophical foundations provide the space to develop more socially and culturally understandings of embodiment.

II. Breaking Free from The Hand of Minas

¹¹⁸ What I refer to here is self-constitution. Ethically speaking, through self-constitution/self-generation, the subject her self sets the means through which she becomes morally valuable. Through self-constitution/self-generation, she becomes a moral subject whose moral status is not binded by the other (male subjects).

¹¹⁹Körper

¹²⁰ I say obvious reasons because as it has been discussed, according to Beauvoir's theorization, reason and consciousness are always attributed to the male subject, while the biological body is the female object.

¹²¹ Ongoing projects which I believe are very relevant are the one funded by the Husserl Archives in Leuven and of course, Al-Saji, Weiss, Heinämaa, Carman, and Moran.

I argue that this more inclusive, yet premature, notion of embodiment needs to rework one major problem; the female body as trapped in opposition to the male one. For the development of this aspect of embodiment, Al-Saji suggests touch as a way ahead. Touch, is re-discovered in his theory of sensing, *Empfindnisse*, elucidated in *Ideas II*. In this theory, Husserl attempts to connect both touch and kinaesthesia¹²² to create a more dynamic understanding of sensation. *Empfindnisse* is actually the combination of two important dimensions of the body, lived experience and sensation. It also represents the kind of sensuous experience that is lived through without being objectified, it is that pre-intentional stage of sensuous experience which characterizes the lived body.¹²³¹²⁴ I quote the same passage Al-Saji cites from Husserl:

*“Moving my hand over the table, I get an experience of it and its thingly determinations. At the same time, I can at any moment pay attention to my hand and find on it touch-sensations, sensations of smoothness and coldness, etc. In the interior of the hand running parallel to the experienced movement, I find motion-sensations, etc. Lifting a thing, I experience its weight, but at the same time I have weight-sensations localized in my Body. And thus, my Body’s entering into physical relations (by striking, pressing, pushing, etc.) with other material things provides in general not only the experience of physical occurrences, related to the Body and to things, but also the experience of specifically Bodily occurrences of the type we call sensings. Such occurrences are missing in ‘merely’ material things”*¹²⁵

This example can be reconnected to the previous hand example provided in Chapter One. The goal of this example and of sensings, is the differentiation between my own bodily self-awareness and my body as very own. Me touching the table is the kind of experience that I live through without self-ascribing to my body, to do that I need to be in the context where I differentiate myself from the other, I need to make the table the object of my intentionality. Nevertheless, the element of novelty in sensings is movement, that element that provides

¹²² What he refers to as one’s body self-awareness of movement.

¹²³ Donn Welton, *The other Husserl: The horizons of transcendental phenomenology* (Indiana University Press, 2000) 44-48.

¹²⁴ Alia Al-Saji, *Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory*, 13-37.

¹²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 146.

temporal continuity, that same unity that was lacking in the feminine body described by Young. Sensings can also have an affective dimension. This means that, as explained when the concept of double sensing was introduced previously, the body is both touching the world but is also touched by it. Very much of what Merleau-Ponty has to say about the body and the universe, both are made of the same fabric.¹²⁶ Sensings becomes a central theme in Husserl, especially because our body is covered in skin, the largest sensing organ. And so, the body is constantly and intimately in contact with itself, others, and the world. Thus, the body is a living surface which can and is affected. Affectivity, indeed, is Al-Saji point of entrance for a feminist interpretation of Husserl's theory. As she writes:

*“Specifically, this affectivity means that, while perceiving or being-acted upon by the world, the body feels and undergoes this experience in terms of sensings. ‘Sensings’ is a concept that, I think, can be used to undermine the dichotomies of activity and passivity and of subject and object as applied to living bodies. It offers a conceptual tool for feminism in its theorization of embodiment as affectively lived in whatever it does or undergoes, as dynamic and resistant while at once objectified. To see this, we need to turn to Husserl’s account of how sensings are localized and come to constitute a living body”.*¹²⁷

Unsurprisingly, the account she is referring to is double-sensing, an notion initially understood by feminists as inadequate because of its relation to Körper. When sensings is localized in or on the body, it is perceived from both within and without, like in the case of my body touching itself, i.e., my two hands touching one another example. Why is this so important for a better understanding of embodiment? Because in self-perception (me touching myself), I appear to myself as a living body and not as an extended substance. As Husserl writes:

“On this surface of the hand I sense the sensations of touch, etc. And it is precisely thereby that this surface manifest itself immediately as my Body.”^{128/129}

¹²⁶ Please refer to the section on Merleau-Ponty for the discussion on the *Gestalttheorie*.

¹²⁷ Alia Al-Saji, *Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory*, 13-37.

¹²⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 150.

¹²⁹ Alia Al-Saji, *Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory*, 13-37.

The Husserlian account in question, actually avoids the subject-object dichotomy which feminist criticized Merleau-Ponty for. Because in the *Phenomenology of Perception* the touching-touched bodily experience is described as a subject-object kind of relation. While for Husserl, double-sensing is not my right hand being subject and actively touching the other, while my left-hand slides into passivity. The Merleau-Pontian account is taken as if my left hand cannot feel itself being touched by my right hand; which is relatively dubious. And this interpretation can become problematic, because if the experience is already being described from the male view point, then, as the male subject engages with the female subject, she is thrown into passivity like my left hand. This would not only include female subjects, but rather all subjects. As if the male subject absorbs the activity of the female subject, and her embodied experience is that of an object, constantly trapped in the dichotomy.

Thus, feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are correct, and not unfounded at all. However, what the Merleau-Pontian account is really targeting is the absence of coincidence of sensation, for him is more of a giving and taking. Non-coincidence is important because it helps him avoid a situation where touching-touched do not fuse in one single sensation, in which case subject-object would become one. A monism he is not trying to achieve. This marks a vital difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The former finds the touching-touched relation as a localized tactile experience, while for the latter is a form of reflective consciousness¹³⁰.

The major problem here is understanding if touch, like the Hand of Minas¹³¹, turns subjects into objects. For Husserl this would be a no, because through sensings, when the body is being touched, it does not lose its ability to touch. While for Merleau-Ponty, a temporary

¹³⁰ "The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates 'a kind of reflection.'" Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 93 -110.

¹³¹ This is a Greek myth, whereby the hand of King Midas, turned everything it touched into gold.

“exchange of abilities” occurs. If my Leib is being touched, it does not automatically turn into Körper, because by being touched my body is still also sensing the touch of the thing or the person whose touching it¹³²

It is in this understanding of touch, that feminist phenomenology can make a return to an understanding of embodiment that does not involve a strict dichotomy of subject-object, self-other, active-passive, and ultimately male-female. This theoretical base can really open up possibilities for the body and embodiment whereby the subject forms his/herself within the world they live in. If my body is does not lose its subject status while interacting with other subjects, then differences like gender, race, religion, appearances, and more become self-generating. By self-generating I meant the process through which one understands where certain modes of embodiment come from. If my embodied experience as a woman is that of a limiting and painful one, whereby my body is being co-opted into being touched and perceived as an object of male pleasure for example; the problem lays in the perception of the male subject, and not in my body or in my experience of embodiment.

Conclusion

The importance of the thesis lays in the support of a return to a more flexible interpretation of a Husserlian understanding of the touching-touched body, because it does not only provide a solution for the strict dichotomies in which almost all feminists find themselves in, but it points to a rather more difficult problem; the other. The other which affects the embodied experience of women negatively. The thesis discussed how women are often objectified because of their bodies, and how they are co-opted to lose their subject status to be the object of men. Phenomenology and its feminist critique helped explain this phenomenon and develop a new

¹³² Dan Zahavi, *Self-awareness and alterity: A phenomenological investigation* (Northwestern University Press, 1999) 104- 107.

understanding of female embodiment. But feminist phenomenologists get trapped in de Beauvoirian dichotomies, and so a return to the Husserlian notion of touch can help escape from dichotomies.

Finally, I would like to conclude by saying that I learnt a lot during the writing process, especially because I initially believed that Merleau-Ponty's position on the body as being an historical idea was correct. However, through research's progression I realised it was not the case. I strongly believe that this account of touch must be developed further especially because it could solve the issue of dichotomies not only in the field of gender but also race.

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