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Thinking the Body: Sexual Difference in Philosophy

An Examination of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Account of Embodiment in *Phenomenology of Perception*



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ABSTRACT

*Western Philosophy, for a very long time, concerned itself with the task of separating mind and body, reason and emotion, and thus men and women. As a result of women's disallowance to participate in philosophy, philosophy remained a faculty of the mind and women were relegated to the home. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a 20th century French philosopher, brought philosophy back to the body with **Phenomenology of Perception**. In this text Merleau-Ponty offers a universal account of how humans experience embodiment. This paper examines not only Merleau-Ponty's neglect, but also philosophy's neglect of the female body: Merleau-Ponty assumes that the male body serves as the universal body, the touchstone for all descriptions of embodiment.*

Introduction

The project of philosophy has always been to understand who we are and what we know. According to many in the past, the body detracts from this, and throughout the history of philosophy the body has been regarded as inconsequential in the realm of academia, so much so that there is often hostility when talking about the body in relation to reason. Reason harbors itself within the mind, and because of this, reason is considered superior to emotion and the body because emotion is considered distracting, burdensome, cloudy, and confusing.

The body became the target of hostility during the time of Plato in Ancient Greece. Plato had a theory of forms and in this theory he postulated that there exist ideals for every concept, such as Truth, Beauty, Love, and the Good. For Plato, we may access the forms (and truth) through the mind, which must get away from the body in order to know.

Following in Plato's footsteps was Rene Descartes, a late 16th- early 17th-century philosopher who reinforced the break between mind and body when he introduced the idea of the disembodied ego *cogito* with his famous statement, *cogito ergo sum* or, "I think, therefore I am." This simple assertion achieved a sort of abolition of the role of the body in rational thought – relegating the body to a place where it had no relevance in philosophical discourse. One of the consequences of this banishment was that women were now just as unwanted in the realm of the rational because they were seen as creatures of nature and emotion. Because of this alignment, women were subsequently affiliated with the body. They then became mistresses of the forgotten – inconsequential, trivial, and irrelevant. Furthermore, their exile from reason was not the only outcome of Descartes' work: many dichotomies other than reason/emotion



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sprouted. Two of these include public/private and subject/object.

Understanding the nature of subjectivity is a crucial issue in philosophical study. Subjectivity (I will explain in more detail later) is who we are as separate from the external world, but this disconnectedness does not mean that the outside world does not factor in our subjectivity. Indeed, if the externality of the world around us takes part in forming our subjectivity, so too must our bodies. Undeniably, the body is the bridge to the outside world; here subjectivity and objectivity meet. The body is fundamental in both ontological and epistemological realms. Who we are is not merely a construction or operation of the mind; our bodies and the external realm interact with one another, and how we interpret the data we receive from our senses constitutes not only knowledge, but also being. What this means then, is that if we maintain the old ideas of distinguishing the mind and body as two separate entities and through that make the mind the seat of knowing and being, we will forget, with serious philosophical consequences, an essential dimension of the human person. As we will see, the human person is both subject and object, a combination of the thoughts and feelings evoked by outside interaction and inner reflection.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Conception of the Body as an Agent in the World

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a 20th century philosopher authored a book called *Phenomenology of Perception* wherein he describes the body as an agent in the world. As he is the main focus of my research, it is important that we understand his theory of the body and its subsequent effects on philosophy and society. In his book, Merleau-Ponty describes how bodies are oriented in the world through the subject's use of perception. The bulk of my research

focuses on a chapter titled, "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility." The basic premise of this chapter states that we take in the world through our perceptions; in addition, our bodies are the vital link between the internal and external. The body is the bridge between how we operate as subjects and objects. To explain this briefly and at the risk of other problems, we are subjects in that we can say "I" and know that we mean ourselves; we are objects as well in that others perceive us and can say to us, "you." Because we use bodily perception to understand the space around us, how we perceive things thusly affects how we use and dwell in space and how we perform as humans in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of motility and spatiality attempts to explain that how we understand space and move within that space directly affects how we relate to our bodies and the bodies of others, and how that relation, for him, is a way toward accumulating knowledge:

The space and time which I inhabit are always in their different ways indeterminate horizons which contain other points of view. The synthesis of both time and space is a task that always has to be performed afresh. Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us a way of access to the world and the object... (162)

This passage asserts that as subjects we must always incorporate and synthesize our actual view of the world itself. We are always in motion and always occupying space, and we must not accept that taking up of space as a way of knowing; instead, we occupy space and move through time so that we may gain access to knowledge through this crucial interaction with what Merleau-Ponty above calls "other points

of view." This is important to keep in mind when thinking about the importance of sexual difference because different people experience spatiality in very different ways. A woman's body in space will not experience space and time in the same manner as a male because traditionally in society males are subjects and females are objects – meant for accepting the imposition of the subject's will.

Moving toward a knowledge of how space helps us orient our bodies in the world, I would like to offer a brief example: Imagine you are standing in a room and there is a box in your field of vision. You begin to understand the space lying between you and the box by taking a step toward it or reaching out your hand and touching it. Through this investigation of the box, you can relate this space to your body. Also, you will manipulate your body in order to make the most effective use of the space you occupy. Not only will this exploration of space aid in your comprehension of orientation, it helps you "see" objects around you so that you will grasp motility. Of this Merleau-Ponty writes:

Consciousness is being-toward-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made up independently of any representation. In order that we may be able to move our body toward an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the 'in-itself'. (M-P 160-161)

As we try to understand our spatiality, our motility, and what these mean, we incorporate our bodies' orientation into

our experiences of the world. As a result of comprehending the body as in-the-world, it is important that we now realize our subjectivity comes from how we inhabit the world through the body. What we experience directly affects knowing and being – or rather, epistemology and ontology.

It is important that I familiarize you with Maurice Merleau-Ponty so that I may properly demonstrate the need to investigate sexual difference. We now understand Merleau-Ponty's work is beneficial because he brought philosophy back to the body instead of it being ensnared in the mind. In addition to work in spatiality and motility, Merleau-Ponty theorizes about human sexuality. Layering what Merleau-Ponty states about sexuality over movement, we will be able to better understand why his theories are problematic.

Merleau-Ponty Assumes That This is a Universal Account of the Body

Throughout the chapter from which I quoted, Merleau-Ponty describes the human subject as undoubtedly male, and this is clearly demonstrated in "The Body in Its Sexual Being," another chapter from *Phenomenology of Perception*. His account of the neurological disorders of Schneider, a male patient to whom Merleau-Ponty refers recurrently in the book, extends into the effects these disorders have on his sexuality. What Merleau-Ponty discovers of Schneider he applies to all humans. How does Merleau-Ponty know that what is good for the proverbial goose is good for the gander? He does not know, and this is where the problem of sexual difference arises.

Going back to how our experiences in the world affect our very being and how we know, how can it be said that an account of male being is satisfactory for application to a female body? Clearly through our social interactions

throughout life and our upbringing we know that male and female bodies do not share the same experiences. The most obvious examples of course are menstruation and childbirth. Different sexes call for different accounts of experience; thus the need of a feminist rethinking of the body.

Judith Butler's and Iris Marion Young's Redescriptions of the Body **Iris Marion Young**

In rethinking the female body, we must rethink all aspects of it in order to underscore the gendered nature of any philosophy of the body. In an article entitled "Throwing Like a Girl" from the book *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, Iris Marion Young, a philosopher, discusses the motility of the female body and its stigmas as compared to the male-centered account of human motility as illustrated by Merleau-Ponty.

What troubles Young about the idea of "throwing like a girl" is that we do not examine the factors that would affect a girl's motility as related to throwing. It is almost as if throwing like a girl is a biological impairment; girls are born with a certain kind of throwing capability, and it is our job as members of Western society to fix them and teach them how to throw the "biologically correct" way, like a boy.

Ultimately, Young believes that the idea of throwing like a girl stems from a girl's motility. To throw like a girl basically means that the person is not using the body's potential momentum to throw the ball; instead one only uses the throwing arm. Young asserts that this limiting of movement comes from societal restrictions placed upon girls as they mature. Though these are generalizations, I think it is safe to assume that many times in a girl's life in Western society she will hear, "that's not very lady-like", or "act like a lady", or "ladies should sit with their legs

crossed." A girl's movement is to remain conservative, limited to only what is utilitarian. It is my idea that a possible result of this limiting, affects how a woman will conduct herself in the future. She may become afraid of any movement that would attract negative attention to her as perhaps her movements did in the past – the worst attention being rape.

Where Iris Marion Young's account of spatiality and motility in relation to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical account lies on a more practical plane of application, Judith Butler offers more of a theoretical approach to Merleau-Ponty in regards to his chapter on human sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Judith Butler

Judith Butler supports Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality; she believes it serves a political purpose for feminism because his account of sexuality bases human sexuality within a socio-historical context and point of origin rather than a biological one. In an article from *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* titled, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," Butler says:

Theories of sexuality which tend to impute natural ends to sexual desire are very often part of a more general discourse on the legitimate locations of gender and desire within a given social context. The appeal to a natural desire and, as a corollary, a natural form of human sexual relationships is thus invariably normative, for those forms of desire and sexuality which fall outside the parameters of the natural model are understood as unnatural and, hence, without the legitimation that a natural and normative model confers. (Butler 85)

Here, Butler is critiquing heterosexist culture, because where there exists an established norm, those who do not fit the norm are, quite simply, sexually abnormal. If we refuse to establish a singular sexual norm, those who were once “outsiders” will no longer be considered illegitimate or unnatural. In accepting other sexual orientations as normal occurrences in the world, we also allow for a greater number of accounts of embodiment.

Butler examines the chapter from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled, “The Body in Its Sexual Being” from a point of view that sexuality is coincidental with existence in that is “referential” and not “solipsistic”(Butler 87). What Butler is asserting here is that human sexuality forms in reference to other beings, it is not a process taking place solely within us. This is important to remember because a normative description of sexuality such as Merleau-Ponty offers only speaks from a male reference point. He neglects to offer a female point of reference for sexuality and is therefore saying that all human sexual reference is the same, just as his account of motility and spatiality is a universal one. One cannot declare that there are two different sexes and in the same breath claim the sexual reference for both males and females is the same.

In addition to this, Butler claims that, “Not only does Merleau-Ponty fail to acknowledge the extent to which sexuality is culturally constructed... his descriptions of the universal features of sexuality reproduce certain cultural constructions of sexual normalcy” (Butler 92). She then goes on to mention Schneider and Merleau-Ponty’s description of Schneider’s sexuality and sexual interest. According to Merleau-Ponty, Schneider’s disinterest in the opposite sex indicates his abnormality. This demonstrates Merleau-Ponty’s slippage into a normative view of

sexuality, which I will address momentarily. In “The Body in Its Sexual Being,” Merleau-Ponty’s description of Schneider’s sexual incapability focuses on his disinterest in the sexual object – the female form. Butler uncovers the problem in this when she writes,

Central to Merleau-Ponty’s assessment of Schneider’s sexuality as abnormal is the presumption that the decontextualized female body, the body alluded to in conversation, the anonymous body which passes by on the street, exudes a natural attraction. This is a body rendered unreal, the focus of solipsistic fantasy and projection; indeed, this is a body that does not live, but a frozen image which does not resist or interrupt the course of masculine desire through an unexpected assertion of life. (Butler 92-93)

One of Butler’s main concerns with Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of sexuality is that, as my project reminds us again and again, he forgets to acknowledge sexual difference. Not only does he neglect this crucial aspect of sexuality, he creates a contradictory account of the nature of sexuality. While Merleau-Ponty states that sexuality is socially prescribed and determined, he contradicts this argument with his account of Schneider. As we recall from earlier, Schneider was Merleau-Ponty’s patient upon whom he conducted various tests. These tests included monitoring his sexual interests and prescribing normality by way of showing Schneider pornography, questioning him about his physical reactions to contact with women, and asking his opinion of random women on the street. The problem with his prescribing normality is that the norm is heterosexuality, and positing the norm as heterosexuality means Merleau-Ponty states two different points of view. According to him, first, sexuality is a

social construction and therefore there are many possibilities as to sexual orientation based on a society; and second, heterosexuality is the only normal sexual practice, where the woman is the object of male desire.

Not only does Merleau-Ponty dehumanize female sexuality through his assertion of it as other-ness, he assumes through his description of the body’s spatiality and motility that all aspects of male and female embodiment are the same, so female sexuality need not be elaborated.

Butler suggests a feminist phenomenology of sorts as a way of remedying the social situation Merleau-Ponty created. She writes, “For a concrete description of lived experience, it seems crucial to ask *whose* sexuality and *whose* bodies are being described...” (98). This is such an important question because it addresses the root of the problem of sexual difference. If a man is discussing a body, we have to ask whose body of which he speaks because his frame of reference stems from his experience of spatiality as a *male*. And, this is important to keep in mind, not only must we be aware of sexual difference when we question whose body, we must remain conscious of other accounts of embodiment such as sexual orientation and race. For example, an African-American woman will not experience the world (and spatiality) as will a Caucasian woman. To return to Butler though, while ultimately she applauds Merleau-Ponty for his declaration of human sexuality as a historical and social construction, she prompts us to recall his neglect of sexual difference and our need for vigilance if we are to successfully formulate a phenomenology of the female.

Conclusion

The body puts us back in the world and it is our bridge to knowledge and being. Because of this, philosophy must be

attentive to how context is formative of the notion of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's account of the body shows us that embodiment is crucial in understanding who we are and what we know; but sex and gender must be a central feature of the discourse on the body. If they are not, we neglect half of the world's population. It is not enough that we understand the connection between mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity, and how only a universal body moves and relates to the world in a certain way. We must not be satisfied with current modes of thought concerning embodiment. Philosophy must account for how women's bodies move and are experienced differently in a fully analyzed and accounted for social, political, and cultural context. By doing so, we will open new doors, right any wrongs that occurred as a result of neglect, and make unprecedented progress that will affect not only this realm of academia, but also all future scholastic endeavors.

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