

Luna Dolezal and Danielle Petherbridge (editors)

Body/Self/Other: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters

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Reviewed by Benjamin P. Davis, 2018

In her discussion of personal freedom and others in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship" (Beauvoir 2015, 78). Already in its title, *Body/Self/Other* takes up this claim from different angles. Avoiding dissolutions and resolutions, the contributors employ the original concept of "body/self/other" to suggest that interwoven relations constitute society. Two methodological claims underwrite the collection: (1) that social differences, oppressions, and supports function less in abstract ways (such as through legal codes) and more in material ways (such as through embodied contacts); and (2) that phenomenology is a helpful approach because it begins from a sense that habits, perceptions, and practices are strung together meaningfully with others.

By connecting phenomenology to social theory and everyday situations, this volume will appeal to those looking to understand better the complex, confusing, and often conflicting distinctions socially operative among "bodies" of all kinds, "selves" of multiple definitions, and "others" taken in different ways. As such, it makes an accessible and insightful contribution to a wide range of readers, such as critical race, decolonial, and legal theorists.

The collection's first four chapters consider the politics of racialized perception. In the first chapter, Rosalyn Diprose sets out to understand violence in liberal democracies. She looks at the ways in which *framing* society through fear and exclusion disables agency and interaction. Such framing not only limits those targeted--for example, foreigners by xenophobia--but also pulls on the fabric of the entire community. The social problem, then, doesn't arise from a government entity *per se*, but rather occurs when any sense of belonging is posited as closed and determined, which occurs in isolation and homogenization. In the former, the community rejects some individuals; in the latter, absorption through the community's "ideal shared identity" precludes the sharing of individuals' unique insights (34). Diprose argues that homogenization is "bound to fail" because a common, fixed identity that serves as the basis for exclusion is a "stagnant mode of existence" (36). Against such stagnation, the ideal role of government, she concludes, is to provide "the *institutional support* for the collective exposure of uniqueness" such that meaning can be shared (39, emphasis mine).

Examining a prison hunger strike, Lisa Guenther performs a "critical phenomenology." By "critical phenomenology" she suggests both a practice of consideration regarding the structures that allow for experience and meaning and a practice of politics that seeks to re-structure the world in a way that allows for liberation. Re-orienting the phenomenological language of Edmund Husserl, she writes that racism produces a "colonial 'natural attitude' that unreflectively shapes the meaning of the world and the shape of consciousness, both for the colonizer and for the colonized" (54). Phenomenology is helpful, here, as a way to "bracket" that attitude such that it can be reflected on and challenged. Ultimately, Guenther's project is more ambitious, gesturing toward resistance: the task of the critical phenomenologist, she claims, is to "support and amplify" the resistance of those isolated and criminalized (65).

How else might a (political) natural attitude be problematized? Gail Weiss examines responsibility through a critique of taken-for-granted agency and anonymity. Drawing on Frantz Fanon and Iris Marion Young, she suggests that merely living without attracting unwarranted attention, much less without being a victim of oppression, is itself an unacknowledged privilege drawn on racialized, gendered, class-based, and able-bodied lines. How, then, to challenge such a sedimented attitude? Weiss finds resources in Beauvoir's account of her US travels, where she not only placed herself in a new situation less accommodated to her habits, but she also moved beyond perception. Indeed, to practice "antiracist habits of perception" is not sufficient; structural challenges must also be put forward as the privileged work to take responsibility for their perceptual habits (84).

Danielle Petherbridge provides an account of the phenomenology of invisibility in order to consider how to see others differently, given the harm of racialized perception. Following Alia Al-Saji, she looks to the possibility of a "rupture" in perception through the form of "affective hesitation" (116). This rupture, as a pause, allows for the social frameworks that structure perception to be seen more clearly, which in turn allows for reorientations and, ultimately, recognition. If, with Axel Honneth, recognition *precedes* cognition, then the temporal order of what Petherbridge is outlining is as follows: hesitation allows for recognition, which gives space and time for rehabilitating perceptions.

The collection's middle five chapters address ethics and otherness. Shaun Gallagher connects critical theory to questions of recognition in phenomenology through the concept of "interaction," which he defines as a mutually engaged and mutually affective relation between two or more autonomous agents. He argues that ethics is built on interaction: meanings made in interaction call for responses, interpretations, and communications (145). With Honneth, Gallagher invites considerations of "relational autonomy" where recognition is required for autonomy. He thickens this description by accounting for the "dynamical contingency" of human existence in its variability and temporal fluidity (135).

For Donald Landes, who draws on Merleau-Ponty to levy a critique of Emmanuel Levinas, others are not radically Other, nor do they emerge transcendently from beyond history. Rather, others are historical, and they can be engaged in communication precisely because Merleau-Ponty's "operative intentionality" intertwines immanence and transcendence, past and present, ideal and real (166). The other poses a question *to my body* from outside my body. The question for ethics, then, relates to a practice of reading: How to take up the *sens* (meaning, direction) of another? Two important points follow. First, Landes argues that Merleau-Ponty does indeed have a conception of difference: difference requires (and prevents) a (complete) reading, and each trajectory of becoming will take on a different direction. In this way, ethical reading is a response to the other that allows for their inexhaustible unfoldings. Second, if total comprehension is forever deferred, the question becomes how to gear into the other more precisely. Living face-to-face with another demands "a phenomenological understanding, a genuine communication with all of the rich dimensions of that trajectory, and this is the task that can never be wholly without violence" (178).

Beata Stawarska weaves phenomenology with speech-act theory, calling on both to be used to examine conditions of power and histories of discourses. She focuses on social processes of language to describe how forms of speech are legitimated and to develop therefrom different practices of legitimation through "[a]ctive heeding," which challenges the disempowering lack of uptake on the part of the dominant hearer by reauthorizing the historically marginalized speaker (192). Thus she points out J. L. Austin's "partial neglect" of

interlocution in his attending more to the issuing of the utterance than to how it is received (197). Listening, not only speaking, is performative, and "open listening" requires a suspension of prior knowledge and of present judgment such that she who may speak can emerge in her own, often surprising, ways (202).

Sara Heinämaa claims that wonder can renew and recreate intersubjectivity. She follows Luce Irigaray in trying to sketch an ethics across sexual difference, where habitual ways of evaluating the other (respect, attraction, enjoyment) all fall short. Descartes shows that wonder (*admiration*) allows for noticing and learning what was unknown or different, and it is the passion of the soul that leads to encounters with what is new and strange. Merleau-Ponty is helpful here in using *étonnement* (surprise)--the word Descartes reserves for wonder in excess--for a suspension of this natural attitude that must be an "unnatural, exceptional way of attending" (217). Such *étonnement* allows for an ethics of sexual difference in the sense Irigaray intends, namely, as "receptivity to the unprecedented" (217). *Pace* Descartes, this wonder does not just occur to us. We have to take it up in active struggle, which is difficult to sustain yet transformative as it delays "the normalization and habitualization of our cognitions, perceptions, and emotions" (219).

Katherine Morris looks to a sense of "bodily reciprocity" in order to understand others. Morris uses Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "body schema" and "equivalent" to argue that others are understandable (245). The body as experienced is not an object but a schema that moves toward certain purposes. Those purposes are informed by the perspectives of others, for they are not independent but "slip into" one another such that human behavior shares meanings in a given milieu. Because the relation between the individual and the milieu is intelligible, Morris argues, we cannot suppose that others are opaque. Further, because perceptions are embodied, understanding among others is not simply cognitive or abstract; rather, it is materially situated. This argument avoids both leaving others fully Other and rendering them the same. Understanding, Morris concludes, if "limited and circumscribed," is nevertheless possible (255).

The collection's final four chapters examine embodiment and intercorporeality. Dermot Moran provides an excellent introduction of the body and its relation to meaning in phenomenology. In order to express a certain pliability or fragility and density or thickness (*l'épaisseur*) to the body, both Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty employ the concept of "flesh" (*la chair*). This flesh, palpating and in motion, casts itself into an already meaningfully layered context, which Edmund Husserl called a "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*), hence a kind of philosophical anthropology in phenomenology: "Human beings are essentially *meaning-weavers* comporting themselves corporeally" within a context "always already invested with significance" (273). For this reason, Moran writes that the body itself is a network of relations and openings, and that phenomenologists prefer to say I *am* my--not I *have* a--body.

Luna Dolezal moves the consideration from the body generally to the maternal body specifically by examining the ontological status of the maternal-fetal relation, especially in regard to surrogacy. In doing so, she disrupts the logic that sees surrogate mothers as "human incubators" and instead focuses on pregnancy and the maternal-fetal relation (327). The metaphors of economics and storage--women as labor, property, containers, hosts, carriers, and rented space--erase both pregnancy and kinship ties. For Dolezal, newborn infants present a kind of body schema, so intercorporeality begins not among others but *in utero* as the body schema of the mother incorporates another in a "nesting relation" (323). The bioethical intervention of this piece, then, is to claim that any consideration of gestational surrogacy must address the meaningful role of surrogate mothers.

Dylan Trigg treats agoraphobia, showing how it reveals insights about human experience. Attention to how agoraphobia gives itself to the body/self/other reveals it as more than just a reaction to political, cultural, or spatial contexts. Place is not just objective; it is part of a convergence with the body involving being seen by another, a perspective that calls me into question and hence produces anxiety. The agoraphobe, then, is not different in kind from nonagoraphobic subjects. Trigg sensitively moves to a subtler suggestion: agoraphobia is not a rupture but "an *amplification* of themes that are already of issue" (341, emphasis mine).

Lisa Käll explores dementia in its relation to intercorporeality. All capabilities, she claims, are essentially intercorporeal, by which she means expressive, contested, and re-establishing "a weave of impressing and being impressed upon" (368). Dementia is an important case to consider because persons with dementia--simultaneously no longer what they once were yet remaining who they are--must (re)habituate themselves amid cognitive decline. This is not different in kind from what all persons are undergoing each moment, just as the caretaker-patient relation is "in important respects not any different from what happens in all interaction" (375). Like agoraphobia, dementia reveals something fundamental about human existence.

Before concluding, I would like to present two generative tensions, though not strict contradictions, that emerge from how different contributors approach similar concerns. First, whereas Diprose argues for government to provide institutional support to its electorate, Guenther consistently calls into question appeals for reform, even in democracies so-called, invoking the claim that the present carceral system is not "broken," but rather working as it was intended, that is, operating to keep a white elite in powerful positions. Second, whereas Landes argues that face-to-face interaction demands "genuine communication" in all its "rich dimensions" (178), Gallagher draws attention to the fact that day-to-day interactions, such as transactions at the local café, can be mutually beneficial even when they do not carry with them the weight of rich dimensions or any such "phenomenological understanding" (178). The precise political form and quotidian ethics suggested, then, remain contested, open-ended, unfolding.

*Body/Self/Other* is an exemplary collection in regard to its gender balance. Precisely because it is a collection that takes seriously first-person experience in a world racialized differentially and oppressively, however, its lack of contributions by philosophers of color is both noticeable and noteworthy.

Let me conclude by raising a question of the text. Weiss, Petherbridge, and Landes refer to Alia Al-Saji's recent discussion of "hesitation" (Al-Saji 2014, 133-72). Hesitation suggests that, if we account for how habits are formed over time and are thus maintained through reiteration, then we could see, reorient ourselves to, and interrupt our patterns of actions, now

understood as historical and contingent. In a nuanced development of her concept, Al-Saji nevertheless recognizes, following Linda Martín Alcoff, that we live *through* our habits more than we are aware of them (Alcoff 2005, 188). We cannot simply *will* a change in habit, and even if we tarry in those moments when our habits have broken down, there is still work to do beyond the hesitation itself. "Hesitation interposes an opening," Al-Saji writes, that "must yet be *taken up* for [a] new possibility to be created" (Al-Saji 2014, 149). This raises a question of social organization: What practices of coexistence, of dwelling and feeling together and differently, are conducive to taking up the insights of this text on the level of customs--habits writ collectively? *Body/Self/Other* does not tie up this question; it invites its readers to weave alternative textures of relation in living toward this practical task.

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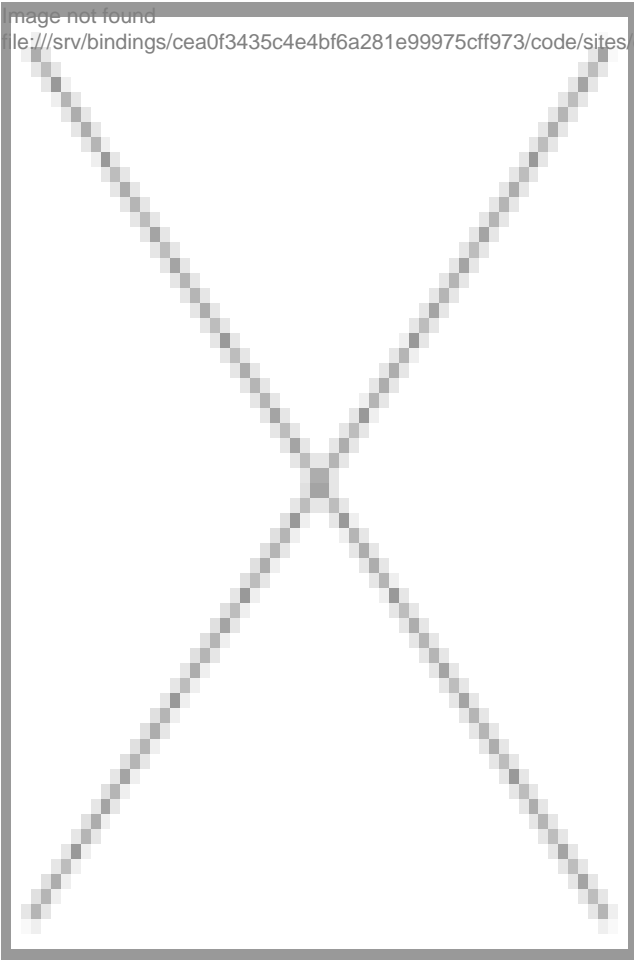
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