



3-27-2022

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The method of critical phenomenology: Simone de Beauvoir as a phenomenologist

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Abstract

The paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on critical phenomenology with reflections on its method. The key argument is that critical phenomenology should be understood as a form of historico-transcendental inquiry and therefore it cannot forgo the phenomenological reduction. Rather, this methodological step should be centered in critical phenomenology, and appropriated in problematized and rethought forms. The methodological assessment of critical phenomenology has implications also for how we read its canon. The paper shows that while Simone de Beauvoir did not adopt the phenomenological reduction in its full Husserlian meaning, her analyses of experience did not remain on the level of personal or experiential description either. The contention is that if we want to read her as a critical phenomenologist, we should focus on her seminal modification of the historico-transcendental method of phenomenology.

There has been a critical turn in phenomenology in recent years: phenomenology is increasingly understood as a form of politically and ethically engaged critique capable of analyzing and illuminating contemporary socio-political phenomena. The editors of the recently founded journal *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, for example, contend that “phenomenology is not a mere descriptive practice, but an enactment of critique, that is, an ongoing process of revealing and interrogating the concrete conditions, institutions, and assumptions that structure lived experience, phenomenological inquiry, and thinking” (Ferrari et al., 2018). This critical turn is evident also in the range of topics that phenomenology now covers. As Cressida Heyes writes, the annual meetings of the US Society for

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Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy, for example, still have “plenty of panels devoted to the minutiae of Heidegger’s *Nachlas* or the role of the transcendental ego in Husserl,” but there will also be “a parallel conference of presentations focusing on feminist and queer phenomenology, phenomenology of sexuality or disability, Black or Latinx phenomenology, and so on.” (2019, pp. 18–19).¹

The question of what critical phenomenology means is far from settled, however. The ongoing discussion on its meaning and remit should be welcomed and fostered, and we need to encourage the plurality of approaches to, and understandings of, critical phenomenology. As with any newly instituted field, a process of self-definition is also indispensable for the development of theoretically diverse, yet rigorous perspectives and methodological approaches. I hope to make a contribution to this task with reflections on the method of critical phenomenology. My key argument is that critical phenomenology should be understood as a form of historico-transcendental inquiry and therefore it cannot forgo the phenomenological reduction. Rather, this methodological step should be centered in critical phenomenology, and appropriated in problematized and rethought forms.

The discussion proceeds in three stages. I begin by affirming the insight that critical phenomenology should be identified by its method, not by its topics or subject matter, and I ask how this method should be understood. I will then discuss the method of Husserl’s phenomenology and defend the importance of the phenomenological reduction for the project of critical phenomenology. In the third section, I will ask whether we can read Simone de Beauvoir’s arguably most important philosophical book, *The Second Sex*, as a work in critical phenomenology, understood in the sense outlined in the first and second sections.

I am ready to concede at the outset, however, that if critical phenomenology is understood, not as a philosophical endeavor, but rather as a non-philosophical application of phenomenology, then it is not necessary to be concerned about the phenomenological reduction – or to read any further. Researchers in a multitude of disciplines should feel inspired by and entitled to use phenomenological notions such as the lifeworld, intentionality, intercorporeality, and the lived body. They should feel free to appropriate them for alternative and critical accounts of gender, race, sexuality, and disability without anyone “making them choke on methodological metareflections” or the minutia of *Husserliana* (Zahavi, 2019). Nor is my aim here to argue that first-person experiential accounts, by themselves, have no epistemic or political importance. They clearly have both. They can inform, educate, and contest; they can motivate us to attack injustices, resist oppression, and produce enriched cultural expressions, as well as to create solidarity with others whom we accept as different. However, if one wants to argue, as I do, that critical phenomenology should be understood as a philosophical endeavor that aims to provide an effective form of social critique, then it cannot amount to a project that merely incorporates first-personal accounts into our analyses of the social world. Rather, some version of the phenomenological reduction should be recognized as indispensable. In order for critical phenomenology to provide a philosophically rigorous and distinctive approach to social critique, it must accomplish a historico-transcendental analysis of experience.

1 | THE QUESTION OF METHOD IN CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Most critical phenomenologists hold that critical phenomenology cannot be defined merely by the topics it covers – the question of what critical phenomenology is cannot be answered with a list of topics such as gender, race, disability, and sexuality. In other words, critical phenomenology does not mean the same as applied phenomenology, a practice where the phenomenological method is assumed as complete and merely applied to new subjects or in relation to new objects. As a form of phenomenology, critical phenomenology too must be defined in terms of its distinct method, only this method must be understood to be somehow different from the method of “classical phenomenology” grounded in the research tasks set by Husserl. As Husserl did not understand phenomenology as a form of social critique, but rather as a method aimed at philosophical clarification, the question arises as to how this method can be appropriated for the task of contemporary social critique.

The methodological difference or modification that is often taken to be decisive for critical phenomenology is that it either forgoes the methodological steps of the *epoché*, the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and the eidetic reduction, or, it understands them as incomplete.ⁱⁱ Prominent thinkers in the field of critical phenomenology, such as Lisa Guenther and Gayle Salamon, for example, contend that the methodological alteration required by critical phenomenology entails following the lead of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, who doubted the possibility of complete reduction to transcendental consciousness.ⁱⁱⁱ Lisa Guenther rejects Husserl's thought as a form of transcendental idealism and builds her critical phenomenology on the work of Frantz Fanon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas (Guenther, 2013, p. xiii).^{iv} She criticizes the priority Husserl gives to *noesis* over *noema* and argues that this prioritization results in a mistaken account of the relationship between consciousness and the world. According to her, Husserl's transcendental idealism leads him "to make some rather unhelpful claims for the project of critical phenomenology, such as the thought experiment that even if a 'universal plague' had destroyed every other subject, leaving me utterly alone, I would still have access to 'a unitarily coherent stratum of the phenomenon world' as 'the correlate of continuously harmonious, continuing world-experience'" (Guenther, 2019, pp. 12–13). Guenther draws on her own groundbreaking work on solitary confinement to show that even a relatively short period of extreme isolation from others has a profound effect on the subject's experience by eroding their capacity to experience the world in a coherent and harmonious fashion.^v For Guenther, this proves that *noesis* cannot be absolutely prior to *noema*, but they must rather be implicated in a complex reciprocity.

Merleau-Ponty's account of the *relation* between *noesis* and *noema*, and his later account of the chiasmatic structure of intercorporeal Being-in-the-world, offers a more promising starting point for critical phenomenology because it acknowledges the weight of the world without treating it as an inexorable determinative force. In other words, Merleau-Ponty shows how the world shapes consciousness, without depriving consciousness of the agency to shape the world in return. I don't think critical phenomenology can get off the ground without these two insights (Guenther, 2019, p. 13).

Guenther thus contends that the phenomenological reduction in its Husserlian forms needs to be qualified or reworked because it leads to transcendental subjectivity. Critical phenomenologists must resist "the tendency of phenomenologists to privilege transcendental subjectivity over transcendental intersubjectivity" (Guenther, 2013, p. xv). Critical phenomenology must be understood as "a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but is also critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life" (ibid., xiii). In contrast to classical phenomenology, it must establish "a philosophical basis for acknowledging that contingent but persistent social structures influence our capacity to experience the world, not just in isolated instances but in a way that is deeply constitutive of who we are and how we make sense of things" (Guenther, 2019, p. 13). It is only once we have established the constitutive influence of social structures that the conceptual tools of classical phenomenology become useful for "tracking this influence." Guenther writes that "Husserl's concepts of transcendental intersubjectivity and the lifeworld are useful here, as are Heidegger's account of mood, interpretation, and historicity and Merleau-Ponty's account of operative intentionality, body schema, intercorporeality, and perceiving according to others" (Guenther, 2019, p. 13). Critical phenomenology would thus appropriate the conceptual tools of classical phenomenology, but it would apply them in a fundamentally different metaphysical framework as it begins from the constitutive importance of the social world.

The first problem with such an understanding of critical phenomenology is that it ignores, misunderstands, or downplays Husserl's seminal work on intersubjectivity. Husserl's mature, intersubjective phenomenology, developed with concepts such as the lifeworld, home world, and alien world, does not just provide us with useful theoretical tools which we can apply for our critical analyses *after* we have acknowledged the historical and social constitution of reality. Rather, intersubjective phenomenology establishes exactly this historical and political constitution of reality, or what Guenther calls the "philosophical basis for acknowledging that contingent but persistent social structures influence our capacity to experience the world" (2019, p. 13). The intersubjective constitution of reality is precisely

the key philosophical claim of Husserl's mature phenomenology and the core idea in his devastating critique of naturalism.^{vi} According to prominent Husserl scholars, Husserl accomplishes in his later writings nothing less than an intersubjective transformation of transcendental philosophy, and from “a purely quantitative point of view, he devoted more pages to this issue than any of the later phenomenologists” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 109). Husserl's late thought is characterized by a decisive rethinking of the relation between the transcendental and the mundane that ultimately forced him to reconsider the transcendental significance of issues such as generativity, tradition, historicity, and cultural normality.^{vii}

The second, perhaps even more serious problem is that critical phenomenology is now left with no credible philosophical method for investigating *how* the social world fundamentally constitutes experience. We cannot simply posit its constitutive influence as a dogmatic assumption but need to investigate it and argue for it philosophically. Such a claim also implies that our reflective inquiry into the constitutive role of the social world is not just situated, but constituted within the rigid confines of historically sedimented background beliefs, social norms, and power relations. How are we going to investigate experience philosophically when our reflective experiences themselves are formed within normative practices of power? If critical phenomenology starts from first-person descriptions of experience but then omits the methodological step that leads to the phenomenological investigation of constituting consciousness, we must also ask how the first-personal approach, understood to be characteristic of critical phenomenology, can be philosophically distinguished from other first-personal stances, such as autobiographical self-description, or the methods of empirical sciences based on data collected by ethnographical interview methods, for example. In other words, why are the first-personal descriptions phenomenological, and how are they critical?

My contention is that, for critical phenomenology to provide a philosophically rigorous and distinctive approach to social critique, it must seek to accomplish a historico-transcendental analysis of experience. This requires first returning to, and then critically modifying, the key methodological principles of classical phenomenology.

2 | THE METHODS OF CLASSICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

There exists extensive scholarly debate in phenomenology on how the methodological steps of the epoché, the phenomenological-transcendental reduction, and the eidetic reduction should be understood, and what their importance is relative to one another. As Sebastian Luft (2004, p. 198) writes, “anybody attempting to give an account of Husserl's method of the phenomenological reduction finds him/herself in an ungratified position. After all, this theme has been one of the main topics in more than sixty years of Husserl research.” Moreover, Husserl introduces the reduction in different ways in different texts and uses the terms phenomenological reduction, transcendental reduction, and transcendental-phenomenological reduction interchangeably.^{viii} My aim here is decidedly not to contribute to the scholarly and ongoing debate on the true meaning of the phenomenological method, nor to shed light on Husserl's methodological commitments at different points of his *oeuvre*.^{ix} My key question is how the phenomenological method can function as a form of social critique without losing its distinctiveness and becoming synonymous with a generalized sense of first-personal description. My summary overview of the phenomenological method here should be read with this aim in mind.

The epoché, which literally means suspension, is usually presented as the first step of the phenomenological reduction, and its function is to enable the investigator to bracket the validity and the manner of being of the world. In *Ideas I*, Husserl describes the epoché as “putting out of action” our natural way of believing in the existence of the world: we suspend our natural realist assumptions and bracket the presupposition that the world is simply there “on hand” in our everyday living (Husserl, 1913/1982, pp. 51–62). The epoché thus instigates a break with “the natural attitude,” the attitude in which the world we encounter in sense experience exists out there independently of our minds, experiences, and theories of it, and as it really is (*ibid.*). When we take this step back from our usual, unproblematic immersion in the world, we are able to appreciate our subjective contribution to the constitution of the world's meaning and validity and to recognize the perspectival nature of all experience. In this way, the epoché

clears the way for the transcendental reduction, which reveals the fundamental correlation between consciousness and the world and thus enables the systematic analysis of transcendental subjectivity. The processes by which reality is constituted in our perceptual experience – the way in which perceptual experience acquires world-presenting content – can thus be opened to philosophical investigation. In his late work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl compares the performance of the epoché illuminatively with the transition from two-dimensional to a three-dimensional life (Husserl 1936/1970, p. 120). The normally hidden dimension of transcendental subjectivity is revealed as the constitutive condition for the disclosure of reality.

Once we have established the necessary correlation between consciousness and the world, we can proceed to the attempt to establish the essential structures of constituting consciousness, such as intentionality and temporality. For this task, a second reduction, the eidetic reduction, becomes necessary. Its purpose is to enable the phenomenologist to identify the essential components of the given phenomenon or experience: to sort the essential from the inessential, the universal from the historically contingent, and the necessary from the merely accidental. While some experiences reveal their essences or essential structures with “a perfect eidetic insight,” the phenomenologist can never have direct access to all possible mental processes and their eidetically necessary correlates, and can therefore “use the resource of originary givenness only to a limited extent” (1913/1982, pp. 158–159). Husserl introduces the methodological device of free variation (sometimes called imaginary variation or eidetic variation) to overcome this limitation. The phenomenologist begins with an actual or imagined experience, but then proceeds to imagine multiple variants of it, which are not directly accessible in their originary perceptual givenness. This way they can distill the essential features or invariant structures of the experience – features without which it would no longer be thinkable as an experience of its kind. In this activity, the phenomenologist is not limited by the potentially poor capacities of their imagination. Husserl notes that “extraordinary profit can be drawn from the offerings of history, in even more abundant measure from those of art, and especially from poetry, which are to be sure imaginary but which ... tower high above the products of our own imagination” (ibid. 160). History and the fictional realm of art thus opens up a much richer, potentially limitless reserve of experiences for eidetic research than what the study of my personal and normatively limited experiences would yield.

My contention is that this second, eidetic reduction and the attempt to ground phenomenology as an eidetic science is problematic from the perspective of critical phenomenology and social critique more generally. The first problem is that, irrespective of how much I vary my imaginary experiences by including as much cultural and historical diversity in them as possible, my reflective experiences themselves are always normatively constituted. The second, and perhaps even more serious problem is the telos of this exercise: irrespective of how successful I might be in this universalizing endeavor, the aim of this exercise is to identify the similarities underlying the diversity and to ignore the differences. As feminist philosophers and critical race theorists have amply demonstrated, the attempt to universalize essential structures definitive of the human is precisely the theoretical project that has often scientifically grounded and politically legitimized forms of oppression and marginalization.^x

The function of the first reduction, the transcendental reduction, is almost diametrically opposed to the eidetic reduction, however. Instead of revealing the essential and the universal, it exposes the historically contingent nature of reality, its intersubjective constitution, and the perspectival nature of all our knowledge of it. When the transcendental, constitutive conditions of our experience of reality are shown in Husserl's mature philosophy to be intersubjective – historical, cultural and, not least, political – the reduction yields the crucial insight that the world is never the product of my constitutive activity alone, but of transcendental intersubjectivity.^{xi} This opens up these constitutive conditions for philosophical and political critique and, ultimately, for social change. Viewed in this light, the phenomenological reduction is essentially the device that turns phenomenology into a devastating critique of naturalism. This, in my view, makes it an indispensable methodological step for critical phenomenology.

If critical phenomenology wants to provide an effective form of social critique, then it must establish the metaphysical framework in which radical social critique, including critical phenomenology, becomes possible in the first place. Philosophically grounded social critique must begin by establishing what I have elsewhere called a politicized conception of reality: reality is not simply ontologically given, but the outcome of profound historical and political

constitution.^{xii} To be able to argue that our experience and understanding of gender or race, for example, is not a simple scientific fact that natural science can discover, describe, and refer to objectively, but rather the effect of specific power relations, unjust social practices, and deeply rooted patterns of prejudice requires a profound problematization of metaphysical naturalism.^{xiii} Philosophically, social critique must crucially build on the ontological insight that a critical analysis of sexist and racist society, for example, cannot be built on the acceptance of social reality at face value – on the assumption that our experience of it is direct and unmediated. Rather, we have to ask how we have come to experience and understand the world around us as gendered and racialized, and how race and gender could be experienced otherwise.

Consider, for example, the importance of the idea of “racialization” for critical analyses of race. This idea challenges the problematic understanding of race as a biological fact and assumes instead that race is socially constructed, historically malleable, and, importantly, produced through learned perceptual practice. In other words, while we must recognize that racism is often manifest at the level of perception itself, a set of intersubjective – historical, cultural, and political – conditions always mediate the way such racialized reality appears to us. A phenomenological, transcendental investigation of perception, as opposed to an empirical analysis of it, will analyze precisely these intersubjective, constitutive conditions. Critical phenomenology can show that racism is not the result of a simple process where people perceive other people with different skin pigmentation, for example, and then, through some kind of innate cognitive process, sort them into hierarchically ordered race categories. Rather, structural racism, understood as constitutive of the subjects' lifeworld, already forms the hierarchically ordered perceptual categories themselves, making it possible for us to perceive race in the first place. As Linda Alcoff contends, phenomenological investigation can demonstrate that “the process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized by type is a process preceded by racism, rather than one that causes and thus ‘explains’ racism as a natural result” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 18).^{xiv}

Accomplishing such a theoretical turn presupposes a reduction understood as a radical break with naïve and natural realism: we must refute the view of perception according to which it means simply pairing up ontologically given pseudo-scientific categories, such as race, with the perceived subjects who supposedly naturally and necessarily belong to them. The phenomenological emphasis on intersubjectivity and the constitutive importance of the social world implies, crucially, that the phenomenological reduction to transcendental subjectivity must be understood as a reduction to intersubjectivity: we must investigate the way that our subjective experiences are constituted as meaningful in constantly changing political, historical, and cultural practices. This is admittedly a difficult undertaking and, in the next section, I will discuss in more detail what it might entail in connection with Beauvoir's work. In a minimal but crucial sense, it nevertheless aims to enable the philosopher not merely to articulate their experience of the world, but to take critical distance from it to study its constitutive conditions.

While phenomenology is sometimes understood as a descriptive investigation of human consciousness with no metaphysical implications, this is thus a serious misunderstanding of its philosophical scope and significance. As Dan Zahavi (2018, p. 62) writes, phenomenology and metaphysics are clearly two different enterprises in the sense that metaphysics, when it is understood as an attempt to map out the ultimate building blocks of reality never leaves the natural attitude and therefore remains pre-critical or naïve: it does not accomplish the reflective move that is the defining moment of transcendental thought. But this does not mean that phenomenology has no metaphysical implications. On the contrary, the transcendental reduction is precisely Husserl's route to the core problems of metaphysics (Langrebe 1963, p. 26, cited in Zahavi, 2018, p. 61). My contention is that if critical phenomenology wants to provide an effective form of philosophical critique, then it must be able to show that reality is not simply ontologically given, but the outcome of profound historical and political constitution. And this means that it cannot discard the key methodological insights of phenomenology rooted in the idea of the transcendental reduction.

In sum, from the perspective of critical phenomenology, the phenomenological method harbors a tension between two different projects or directions: one aims at revealing the universal and the essential, the other seeks to expose the historical, intersubjective, and perspectival nature of all experience. My contention is that critical phenomenology must untangle this knot: it must explicitly problematize the different methodological steps in the

phenomenological method and appropriate the phenomenological reduction for a project of de-naturalization, politicization, and defamiliarization. By de-naturalizing phenomena that are essentially social and political, critical phenomenology can open up new kinds of political spaces for resistance and situated freedom. It could be understood as akin to genealogical critique in the sense that while it abstains from explicit normative judgements, it enacts a radical project of politicization.

3 | BEAUVOIR'S CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

The question I want to pose in this section is whether we can read Simone de Beauvoir's arguably most important philosophical book, *The Second Sex*, as a work in critical phenomenology, understood in the sense outlined in the previous sections.^{xv} Again, my aim is not to present a comprehensive scholarly argument about Beauvoir's work, but to test my abstract methodological argument by illustrating what it might entail more concretely.

Beauvoir is often read as “the founder of feminist phenomenology” and *The Second Sex* as “an exemplar of a feminist phenomenological approach” (e.g., Stawarska, 2019, p. 37). Beauvoir herself did not identify as the founder of feminist phenomenology, however.^{xvi} Similar to my attempt to read her here as a critical phenomenologist, reading her as a feminist phenomenologist is an interpretative claim that can only be made retrospectively by her commentators with the help of arguments and textual evidence. Moreover, the scholars who argue that Beauvoir is a feminist phenomenologist do so based on very different theoretical arguments, not only due to their differing interpretations of her work, but, more fundamentally, due to their disagreements on what feminist phenomenology is.^{xvii}

When commentators read *The Second Sex* as a work in feminist phenomenology, their focus is usually on the second section of the book, which has an explicitly phenomenological title, *The Lived Experience (L'Expérience Vécue)* and which contains numerous first-personal descriptions of feminine experience. The descriptions are collected from sources such as literary works, empirical surveys, and psychological case-studies, and they cover the life-span of women from childhood to old-age. Beauvoir also accounts for variations in how female sexuality and femininity is constructed and lived by discussing the experiences of motherhood, lesbians, and prostitutes, for example. Hence, it could be interpreted that if she appropriates the phenomenological method, she appropriates mainly the methodological tools of imaginative variation and eidetic reduction: she moves through a variety of feminine experiences in order to distil from them an essentially feminine way of relating to the world.

Reading her as a phenomenologist in this vein makes her an easy target for feminist critiques of essentialism, however. According to such critiques, Beauvoir would be essentializing the complex realities of women's lives and assuming implicitly that certain women – privileged, middle-class, white women like herself – could speak for all women. Critics such as Elizabeth Spelman (1988) and Patricia Hill Collins (2017), for example, have accused Beauvoir of overlooking the complex ways in which the identities of women intersect with race, class, and sexual identity.^{xviii} Collins (2017, p. 334) attributes these problems in Beauvoir's project to her “disciplinary location as a philosopher” which hampers her attempt at effective social critique by shaping the cognitive frameworks available to her.^{xix}

Beauvoir's framing of her project in the introduction to the book appears, at first sight, to provide further evidence for such accusations. After posing the abstract philosophical question “What is a woman,” Beauvoir directly notes: “Merely stating the problem suggests an immediate answer to me. It is significant that I pose it. It would never occur to a man to write a book on the singular situation of males in humanity. If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman;’ all other assertions will arise from this basic truth” (Beauvoir 1949/2010, p. 5). In other words, the philosophical question concerning woman as the other presents itself in a specific way to Beauvoir because she is a woman herself: her own personal experience of otherness comes to stand in for the experience of all women. However, when we read the introduction more closely, it becomes apparent that Beauvoir does not attempt to validate situated knowledge by claiming that her personal experience of gender oppression would provide a privileged perspective on the question of gender. She is not a standpoint theorist in the sense that women's socially constructed roles within a patriarchal society would provide them with a distinctive standpoint for

identifying problematic assumptions in dominant theories.^{xx} On the contrary, and perhaps surprisingly, she puts forward the *opposite* claim. She writes that “certain women are...best suited to elucidate the situation of women” precisely because they are *not* oppressed.

Many women today, fortunate to have had all the privileges of the human being restored to them, can afford the luxury of impartiality: we even feel the necessity of it. We are no longer like our militant predecessors; we have more or less won the game...many of us have never felt our femaleness to be a difficulty or an obstacle; many other problems seem more essential than those that concern us uniquely: this very detachment makes it possible to hope our attitude will be objective. Yet we know the feminine world more intimately than men do because our roots are in it; we grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we care more about knowing it (Beauvoir 1949/2010, pp. 15-16).

Beauvoir's claim that women were no longer oppressed in the context of 1940s France sounds incredulous today, and the seemingly direct link she establishes between privilege and methodological rigor in this the passage is also clearly problematic. I want to suggest that we nevertheless take seriously her attempt there to emphasize the need for a limited form of impartiality. While being identified as a woman gives her the advantage of a more immediate understanding of women's situation, it is not her experience of gender oppression, but the additional, deliberate, and partial detachment from this experience that makes it possible to problematize it. Beauvoir's aim is to provide an account of gender that is as impartial and critically reflective as possible, and, for her, a form of objectivity becomes possible, not because of her distinctive standpoint or first-personal experience of oppression, but because of her limited ability to detach from it. The importance of first-person experience, thus, does not lie in the direct access to reality that it provides nor in the presumed epistemic advantage that such direct access gives, but in the possibility of detaching oneself from one's singular experience by questioning at least some of its constitutive conditions such as the existing relations of power and the social and economic structures that uphold them. Such a detachment is, importantly, also a necessary precondition for a critical questioning of her privilege as a white, educated, and middle-class woman. In other words, precisely because privilege often gravely distorts and diminishes the capacity to bring social, economic, and cultural structures into a critical frame, it is necessary to try to contextualize one's experience and critically reflect on the effects of power in its constitution.

Such critical questioning of one's privileges, biases, and blindspots is always limited and partial and therefore, by necessity, bound to fail. Reading *The Second Sex* today, more than 70 years later, its flaws are in many instances strikingly obvious: its discussion of motherhood, race, and queer sexuality, for example, are highly problematic or appear outdated. Beauvoir herself anticipates this, however, in recognizing acutely the perspectival nature of experience, as well as the limited forms of knowledge available to her. Her position is phenomenological in the fundamental sense that she denies the possibility of a form of objectivity that penetrates behind all subjective appearances to reveal the way things really are, independent of any point of view whatsoever. The intersubjective conditions constitutive of our experience can never be rendered totally transparent and explicit, because they are irrevocably embedded in our language, methods of reflection, and ways of seeing the world. This means accepting the always fragmentary, fallible, and preliminary character of any social critique concerning ourselves.

A phenomenological reduction, understood as an instrument of politicization and historicization, is nevertheless a fundamental precondition for Beauvoir's philosophical critique of femininity, often summed up in the single most famous sentence of the book “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient” (Beauvoir 1949/2010, p. 283). A phenomenological reduction must be understood to initiate the methodological process, which will render all essential conceptions of femininity historically contingent – whether they are originally derived from biology or religion – and this allows her philosophical analyses to have a bite in the real world. Hence, my contention is that Beauvoir does not discard the methodological steps of the epoché and the reduction, but rather transforms them in some respects, in order to engage in a radical social critique of gender oppression.

Bonnie Mann (2018) provides an important explication of the phenomenological method in Beauvoir's work. Mann too argues that Beauvoir does not discard the epoché and the reductions, but rather modifies them. While Beauvoir clearly recognizes the need to problematize one's prejudices and presumptions, she does not hold that one can simply bracket them at the outset of an inquiry; instead, one must pass through them. In other words, it is not possible to loosen the intentional threads that attach us to the world through an act of will; rather, the epoché should be understood "a matter of labor, not of willpower" (Mann, 2018, p. 56). Mann suggests that Beauvoir's infamous practice of citation, in which long paragraphs, sometimes pages, are borrowed from other authors, should be understood in this light.

Setting aside our preconceptions turns out to be tedious, enraging, and exhaustive hard work; a painstaking reconstitution of our ability to perceive and imagine in ways that exceed the rigid confines of historically sedimented prejudice. Those hundreds of pages addressing the data of biological science, history, literature, specific case studies, and the myths of sexual difference are that work; a working-through which slowly, painfully reinstates the contingency of the contingent-which-has-been-rendered-necessary. (56)

Hence, in Beauvoir's work, the phenomenological reduction can be understood to function as an attempt to critically construct one's understanding on the difference between alternative perspectives using each to overcome the limitations of others, without assuming that a view from nowhere becomes possible. She moves away from a purely self-reflective investigation of consciousness to the study of forms of knowledge such as history, biology, sociology, and psychology, but not to distill from them the essential structures of femininity. Rather, this knowledge is appropriated in an attempt to make visible the presumptions and implicit ontological commitments that constitute one's normatively distinct lifeworld, and to show how our essentialist views of gender collapse under such scrutiny.

It should be emphasized that while the aim of the reduction is to accomplish a certain kind of detachment which allows the philosopher to critically investigate their own prejudices and presuppositions, this detachment does not mean the same thing as ethical and political neutrality. Beauvoir makes this clear in the introduction. Immediately after defending the need for objectivity, in the limited sense that she understands it, she notes the fundamental difficulty of approaching any human problem without partiality: "even the way of asking the questions, of adopting perspectives, presuppose hierarchies of interests; all characteristics comprise values; every so-called objective description is set against an ethical background" (Beauvoir 1949/2010, p. 16). She contends that given this inevitable moral perspectivism, objectivity cannot mean concealing the normative principles that always implicitly guide our inquiry. On the contrary, perspectivism requires making them explicit. Owning up to our normative commitments constitutes the only form of impartiality available to us. Beauvoir then continues to lay out hers: the normative principles of her investigation of gender relations are derived from existential ethics, the most important tenant of which is that humans must will themselves free.

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into "in-itself," of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil (Beauvoir 1949/2010, 16).

For Beauvoir, the objectification of a person – the degradation of existence into "in-itself" – is not just morally wrong, but "an absolute evil." This is a strikingly strong normative claim, and, a refutation of the idea that Beauvoir's phenomenological analysis would be merely descriptive.^{xxi} If we want to identify what distinguishes Beauvoir's critical phenomenology from Husserl's classical phenomenology, my contention is that it is not the fact that she forgoes

the phenomenological reduction, but rather the fact that she brings to the critical phenomenological project a strong normative grounding lacking from Husserl's analyses. It is important to recognize, however, that this normative grounding is not derived from such liberal political principles as equality or universal human rights – the normative principles that liberal forms of feminism today usually build on. Her project is not essentially 'political' in this sense, contrary to what we often assume. Rather, the justification of her critical project in *The Second Sex* ultimately relies on existential contentions about the human condition – the inescapable moral freedom of human beings.

My assessment of critical phenomenology thus also has implications for how we read its canon. Franz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir are sometimes taken to be its most central thinkers because of their deployment of phenomenology for understanding gender oppression and colonial racism.^{xxii} While Beauvoir did not adopt the phenomenological reduction in its full Husserlian meaning, her analyses of experience did not remain on the level of personal or experiential description either. If we want to read her as critical phenomenologists, we should therefore focus on her seminal modifications of the historico-transcendental method of phenomenology, not solely on her experiential accounts of sexism. The word "critical" embedded in the notion of critical phenomenology should not be understood to refer only to a critical investigation directed outward to surrounding society but must also refer to a form of self-critique: critical phenomenology is phenomenology that is critical of its own methods, concepts, and limitations. The two aims are, furthermore, intertwined: we can detect significant modifications or transformations of the phenomenological method in the work of thinkers such as Fanon and Beauvoir precisely because their focus is on critiques of oppression. When phenomenology is made to respond to the experiences of oppression and marginalization, its foundational ideas and methodological commitments must necessarily become unstable. To be clear, my contention is not that Beauvoir's method is somehow superior to the methods of contemporary critical phenomenology. My suggestion is merely that reading her as a critical phenomenologist can open up one possible avenue for investigating the vexing question of what the method of critical phenomenology is.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

My defense of the importance of the phenomenological reduction for critical phenomenology is motivated by the desire to see this academic field grow, but also by the political stakes of the question of what critical phenomenology is. My worry is that forms of theoretical inquiry that focus excessively on personal descriptions of experience risk naturalizing and fetishizing experience, as well as potentially leading to politically naïve forms of identity politics.^{xxiii} Critical phenomenology needs to foreground the recognition that a political formation such as patriarchy or white supremacy cannot be understood, or transformed, by reducing it to the individual experiences of marginalized individuals. Nor can we simply reiterate the racialized or gendered accounts circulating in a racist and sexist culture, but must attempt to disrupt and reorient them. This requires theoretical attempts that are capable of unmasking and problematizing the constitutive conditions of marginalized experiences. We have to be able to analyze the intersubjective structures and power relations, within which experiences, subjectivities, as well as the political practices effective in changing them are constituted.

This means that critical phenomenologists must be ready to pose challenging questions about the possibility of immanent critique and the meaning of social justice, the philosophical role of experience and intersubjectivity, as well as the phenomenological method itself. We must contest our standard reading of the phenomenological canon, but not in any categorical way. Beauvoir and Fanon might be central thinkers for critical phenomenology, but so is Husserl. There might be elements in these thinkers' work that will be of use for our projects, but also aspects that need to be criticized and revised. Ultimately, we must not lose sight of the radical metaphysical ambition of the phenomenological enterprise in attacking the natural attitude and its self-certainties. Our critical phenomenological investigation of the social world can only ever begin there.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ For other recent publications on critical phenomenology, see for example, Pitts (2018), Ahmed (2018), Chandler (2019), Weiss, Salamon, and Murphy (2019). Salamon (2018a) traces the term “critical phenomenology” to Donn Welton and Hugh Silverman’s book *Critical and Dialectical Phenomenology* (1987), a volume of collected papers from the annual meetings of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in 1984 and 1985.
- ⁱⁱ See, for example, Ferrari et al. (2018), Salamon (2018a), Guenther (2019), Heyes (2020).
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, p. xiii).
- ^{iv} Gayle Salamon (2018a, p. 9) also reiterates what she calls “a common critique against phenomenology” according to which “its methods are insufficient for describing the relation of self to world, despite having this as its explicit goal” because in the phenomenological method, the world “is collapsed back into consciousness.” Cressida Heyes suggests that the philosophical and critical importance of first-person description in critical phenomenology is that it can provide articulations of embodied experiences by oppressed people, which are “an important window onto the epistemic elisions of frameworks of understanding that pass as universal” (Heyes, 2020, p. 13).
- ^v See, Guenther (2013).
- ^{vi} See, for example, Husserl (1913/1970), (1931/1991), (1910–1911/2002).
- ^{vii} See for example, Carr (1973), Zahavi (2001), Steinbock (1995).
- ^{viii} See for example, Husserl (2019, pp. 284, 331).
- ^{ix} For some seminal accounts on how to understand the role of the reductions in the phenomenological method, see, for example, Schmitt (1959), Boehm (1965), Mohanty (1991), Depraz (1999), Luft (2004), Zahavi (2018), (2019).
- ^x Phenomenologists such as Gayle Salamon (2018b) have appropriated the eidetic reduction for feminist phenomenology in a fruitful way by arguing that it can be read as an attempt not to essentialize gender, but to “possibilize” it, meaning that we understand the essence of gender as an open unity. Bonnie Mann (2018, pp. 56–57) also argues that in Beauvoir’s hands the eidetic reduction becomes a way of demonstrating the impossibility of isolating the essential aspects of such social and historical phenomena as gender, rather than the means of accomplishing an eidetic study of them. My aim here is to focus specifically on the importance of the transcendental reduction for critical phenomenology, however.
- ^{xi} The tradition of “Continental philosophy” is often said to begin with Kant’s transcendental inquiry, but what characterizes this tradition are the varying attempts to historicize the transcendental conditions of experience and to understand them as a set of historical and cultural presuppositions that mediate the way reality appears to us. This is notable in the phenomenological tradition, but also in the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault. See, for example, Foucault (1966/1989).
- ^{xii} See, for example, Oksala (2012), (2016).
- ^{xiii} The critique of naturalism is at the heart of Husserl’s understanding of phenomenology and is developed explicitly in texts such as *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, for example. See Husserl (1910–1911/2002), (1913/1970).
- ^{xiv} Alia Al-Saji (2010) makes a similar argument about what she calls “racializing vision” in the context of the perception of Muslim veils.
- ^{xv} Beauvoir’s philosophical project in *The Second Sex* builds, in important ways, on the analyses of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, published two years earlier. She notes explicitly in the introduction that she is working from the perspective of existentialist ethics (1949/2010, p. 16). Her philosophical ideas are also developed in her essays, articles, as well in her fictional and autobiographical work. See, for example, Beauvoir (2004).
- ^{xvi} Beauvoir has also been read through several interpretative frames other than phenomenology, such as Hegelian recognition theory, Sartrean existentialism, and the archaeological-historical methods of French epistemology. Barbara S. Andrew (2003, p. 42), for example, situates Beauvoir in philosophical thought by placing her work in four areas of contemporary philosophy where her ideas remain influential: existentialism, phenomenology, social and political philosophy, and feminist theory.
- ^{xvii} Sara Heinämaa (2003), for example, reads *The Second Sex* as a phenomenological inquiry into the phenomenon of woman or sexual difference. According to Heinämaa, Beauvoir should be situated in the tradition of classical phenomenology developed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, only her phenomenological question about the constitution of meaning is directed towards the meaning of sexual difference: “what does it *mean to be* a woman, and how does the world appear

to such a being” (Heinämaa, 2003, p. xvii). Bonnie Mann (2018), in contrast, reads Beauvoit as a political phenomenologist, who constructs a critique of gender oppression. Mann argues that Beauvoit's practice of phenomenology changes phenomenology in important ways, “bringing it up to the task of feminist inquiry by making it a *political* phenomenology” (23). See also, Mann (2014, pp. 23–29).

- ^{xviii} As Debra Bergoffen notes, *The Second Sex* has been strongly criticized for being “emblematic of what was wrong with the feminism of the 1970s” (2012, p. 3).
- ^{xix} Beauvoit (1949/2010) emphasizes in the introduction to the second part of the book that when she uses the words “woman” and “feminine,” she does not refer to immutable essences or eternal truths; the phrase “in the present state of education and customs” must be understood to always follow them. She nevertheless attempts to describe the historically and socially constituted common ground “from which all singular feminine existence stems” (328).
- ^{xx} Standpoint feminism originated as a political and epistemological position in the 1970s among Marxist feminists. Early standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding contended that there was something distinctive about the experiences of women in virtue of their socially constructed roles within a capitalistic patriarchal society, and this distinctive standpoint provided them with resources for identifying problematic assumptions in dominant theories. See for example, Hartsock (1983), Harding (1986). On contemporary developments in standpoint theory, see, for example, Intemann (2016).
- ^{xxi} Mann (2018, p. 57) contends that in the case of feminist phenomenology, the inquiry often begins with a deep sense that something is wrong and must be righted. She notes, for example, how Beauvoit was clearly outraged when she spent nine pages at the beginning of her chapter on motherhood exploring the hypocrisy of French anti-abortion politics. The affective modalities of Beauvoit's work must be read as signalling that her writing is “a deeply interested endeavor... fundamental values are at stake” (57).
- ^{xxii} See for example, Heyes (2020, p. 18); Fanon (1952/2008), Beauvoit (1947/1997), (1949/2010).
- ^{xxiii} Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is arguably the most prescient and influential critique of identity politics within the specific discourse of feminist theory, but a number of other important feminist thinkers such as Wendy Brown and Joan Scott also published groundbreaking work during the 1990s, demonstrating the limits of identity politics for feminism. Joan Scott's important essay “The Evidence of Experience,” first published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1991, has arguably been one of the most explicit and influential critiques of first-person accounts of experience in feminist theory and politics in recent decades. In his recent book *Mistaken Identity*, Asad Haider launches a renewed attack on identity politics that appropriates this feminist theoretical framework, but focuses exclusively on race. See Butler (1990), Scott (1991), Brown (1995), Haider (2018).

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How to cite this article: Oksala, J. (2022). The method of critical phenomenology: Simone de Beauvoir as a phenomenologist. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12782>