

# PHENOMENOLOGY OF PREGNANCY

Edited by Jonna Bornemark & Nicholas Smith



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Nicholas Smith*

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# Feminist Phenomenology, Pregnancy and Transcendental Subjectivity

*Stella Sandford*

In 1930, in the Fourth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl famously wrote that “phenomenology is *eo ipso* ‘*transcendental idealism*,’ though in a fundamentally and essentially new sense.” The central difference between this and what he calls “Kantian idealism” is phenomenology’s refusal to countenance the possibility of a world of things in themselves, not even as a limiting concept. What phenomenology primarily owes to Kantian transcendental idealism is, of course, the idea of transcendental subjectivity. As Husserl wrote then, phenomenology is:

a transcendental idealism that *is* nothing more than a consequentially executed self-explication in the form of an egological science, an explication of my ego as subject of every possible cognition, and indeed with respect to every sense of what exists, wherewith the latter might be able to *have* a sense for me, the ego.

In transcendental-phenomenological theory, according to Husserl, “every sort of existent itself, real or ideal, becomes understandable as a ‘product’ of transcendental subjectivity, a product constituted in just that performance.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, this appears so inimical to the fundamental bases of feminist theory that the question of the very possibility of a “feminist phenomenology” immediately and inevitably arises. This is not only because feminist theory is explicitly tied to a political agenda for social change and therefore requires the staking out of positions and commitments rather than their bracketing; it is also because so much associated

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1960), 85, 86.

with the contributions of feminist theory to philosophy concern precisely the critique of the transcendental, isolated, disembodied subject. However, other writings by Husserl—on intersubjectivity, for example—along with the move away from strictly static transcendental phenomenology to its genetic, generative, existential and hermeneutic variants in particular have provided methods and concepts for the development of feminist phenomenology, the distinguishing features of which are its challenge to the presupposition of the sexless transcendental subject and its attempt to bring to light the specifically sexed aspects of experience, to “answer fundamental questions concerning the meaning of sexual difference, the gendered body, and equality in difference.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, some feminists, such as Linda Fisher, have argued that even the original project of phenomenology, in its classic forms, is not incompatible with feminism. According to Fisher, the tasks of describing the essential structures of subjectivity from the perspective of individual subjectivity and ownness, of eidetic or essential analysis, can all be understood in ways that not only do not conflict with the basic tenets of feminist theory but in fact chime with them.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, feminist perspectives in phenomenology open up new regions of analysis—for example, pregnancy and birth. For others, like Johanna Oksala, feminist analysis poses a much greater challenge to phenomenology as originally conceived, because the phenomena of pregnancy and birth force a radical rethinking of ‘such fundamental phenomenological questions as the possibility of a purely eidetic phenomenology and the limits of egological self-constitution.’<sup>4</sup> For Oksala, a feminist phenomenology is by no means impossible, but it is critical of aspects of the original project of phenomenology, destabilizing phenomenology as part of a permanent process of its transformation.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, phenomenology in the twenty-first century, feminist or otherwise, is not tied to Husserl’s original conceptions of method, of ego-logy, or even of the generative phenomenology that some have extrapolated and developed from a different Husserl. For many, the horizon of the

<sup>2</sup> Sara Heinämaa and Lanei Rodemeyer, “Introduction,” *Continental Philosophy Review* Special issue on Feminist Phenomenologies, 43: 1–11 (2010): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Fisher, “Phenomenology and Feminism: Perspectives on Their Relation,” *Feminist Phenomenology*, eds. Linda Fisher and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 28–9.

<sup>4</sup> Johanna Oksala, “What is Feminist Phenomenology? Thinking Birth Philosophically,” *Radical Philosophy* 126: 16–22, (2004), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Oksala, “What is Feminist Phenomenology?,” 17, 21.

transcendental in phenomenology is now intersubjective, historical, social and normative, and the original feminist critique of the individualist and subjectivist—even solipsist—nature of phenomenology no longer holds.<sup>6</sup> But as phenomenology has developed and transformed itself we are still entitled to ask what makes it *phenomenology*? What are the presuppositions of any feminist phenomenology if it is still to count *as phenomenology*, rather than descriptive social-psychology, feminist metaphysics or feminist ethics? Is phenomenology essentially tied to first-person description, or can third-person accounts be a legitimate part of its analyses? If third-person descriptions are accepted as legitimate, what considerations govern the inevitable interpretative aspect of their analysis? Can there be any phenomenology, feminist or otherwise, without some conception of transcendental subjectivity? And what is at stake in the continued use of the transcendental problematic, granted its immanent phenomenological criticism and its various theoretical transformations?

Some of these questions arise with a particular piquancy today because of the enthusiastic use of what are referred to as “phenomenological research methods” in a range of disciplines and professional practices—notably, for the purposes of this essay, health care and nursing—and reflections upon them. Researchers in these practice disciplines who use phenomenological research methodologies are engaged in empirical studies involving data gathering and analysis. While their analyses might in some way be based—often at several steps removed—in phenomenological philosophies, from wherever one stands within the heterogeneous discipline of philosophy it is clear that they are neither doing philosophy nor claiming to do so. Further, the non-philosophical status of these analyses has been used precisely to defend their description as “phenomenological” against the charge that they bear little or no relation to the philosophies from which they claim to derive their methods. That is, the charge that they are not really “phenomenological” because they are remote from philosophy is countered with the argument that this is to confuse philosophical phenomenology (as developed and practiced by Husserl, for example) with scientific phenomenology (the application of insights from philosophical phenomenology in the social sciences).

The feminist phenomenology with which this essay is concerned is distinguished from the use of phenomenological research methods in

<sup>6</sup> See Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, “Introduction,” 1.

practice disciplines precisely because it *is* philosophical phenomenology, because it does conceive of itself, *mutatis mutandis*, as part of the tradition of philosophy developed and practised by Husserl. This means that the question “what is *phenomenological* about feminist phenomenology?” must be a question about its relation to this tradition, about its *philosophical* specificity. In what follows I will address the question of the philosophical specificity of feminist phenomenology by pursuing its distinction from the use of phenomenological research methods in practice disciplines and qualitative psychology via two of the pivotal questions raised above: can there be any phenomenology, feminist or otherwise, without some conception of transcendental subjectivity? And what is the role of third person testimony in phenomenology? I will argue that the first of these questions remains a problem for feminist phenomenology, in a way that is not easily solved with recourse to third-person testimony, the use of which remains under-theorized in the feminist phenomenological literature. Finally, I will show how the problem of transcendental subjectivity is particularly acute for the feminist phenomenology of pregnancy and birth when we consider the generative metaphors of its philosophical origin in Kant’s philosophy.

### Phenomenology and the third person

Let us begin with an analysis of what is still the best-known essay in feminist phenomenology of pregnancy, Iris Marion Young’s “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” first published in 1983. What, we might ask, is specifically phenomenological in Young’s essay?

Young’s essay evokes (albeit only implicitly) the major distinction that structures Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir begins Volume I of *The Second Sex* with a discussion of objectifying discourses *about* women, before moving on to the lived experience *of* women in Volume II. Young reverses the direction while retaining the distinction, beginning with “some of the experiences of pregnancy from the pregnant subject’s viewpoint”<sup>7</sup> before considering the alienated experience of pregnancy and birthing which results from the objectification or appropriation of the woman’s body in institutionalised medical contexts. In the first part, Young

<sup>7</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like A Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

specifies two sorts of sources for material “from the pregnant subject’s viewpoint” to “let women speak in their own voices”: diary entries and literature and “phenomenological reflection on the pregnant experience.” After referring critically to the (classic) presumption in some phenomenological literature of the unity of the subject, she cites Merleau-Ponty and refers to various others as problematizers of this assumption, thus setting the theoretical context for the discussion of pregnancy.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the move to the phenomenological description of pregnant embodiment is presented, explicitly, as *confirming* the theoretical postulate of the split subject that Young associates here primarily with Julia Kristeva.<sup>8</sup> But the abruptness of the leap into phenomenological description in the essay, which seems to be employed as a formal device, severs the theoretical and phenomenological modes from each other. The specificity of the phenomenological description is marked through the shift to the first person:

As my pregnancy begins, I experience it as a change in my body, I become different to what I have been. My nipples become reddened and tender, my belly swells into a pear. I feel this elastic around my waist, itching, this round, hard middle replacing the doughy belly with which I still identify. Then I feel a little tickle, a little gurgle in my belly, it is my feeling, my insides, and it feels somewhat like a gas bubble, but it is not, it is different, in another place, belonging to another, another than is nevertheless my body.<sup>9</sup>

Young goes on to emphasise the private nature of the experience of the movements of the foetus: “Only I have access to these movements from their origin, as it were ... only I can witness this life within me ... I have a privileged relation to this other life.” And yet they are not *her* movements. What makes this experience unique (for, after all, all thoughts and all bodily feelings are to this extent private; feeling a foetus move is no different in this respect) is that she “feels the movements within me as mine, *even though they are another*’.”<sup>10</sup> Although the distinction between phenomenological description and a theoretical construction that would be dependent on it

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, 49: “I take Kristeva’s remarks about pregnancy as a starting point ... [but] we can confirm this notion of pregnancy as split subjectivity even outside of the psycho-analytic framework that Kristeva uses. Reflection on the experience of pregnancy reveals a body subjectivity that is de-centred, myself in the mode of not being myself.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, emphasis added.



then becomes blurred, Young speaks of “this sense of the splitting subject ... I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body.”<sup>11</sup> This ‘split’ is then characterised in various ways, but the central point remains the same. The theoretical presupposition of the unity of the subject of experience is undermined phenomenologically in the description of the pregnant subject as experiencing movement that both is and is not hers—as experiencing the inner space of her body as, simultaneously, an outer space for the foetus.

Although, as mentioned, Young explicitly presents her first-person account of pregnant embodiment as a phenomenological confirmation of Kristeva’s theoretical postulation of pregnancy as split subjectivity, its phenomenological specificity must be the result of having bracketed any theoretical presuppositions concerning subjectivity. If we presume that the natural attitude tends towards the presupposition of ‘the transparent unity of self, the achievement of the phenomenological description is, according to Young, the revelation of an alternative ‘paradigm of bodily experience’.<sup>12</sup> Young describes aspects of pregnant embodiment that, no doubt, are common to many women, for example, the failure to adapt completely to the changed shape and unusual protuberance of the (heavily) pregnant body: hence the possibility of being surprised by the feel of “this hard belly on my thigh”<sup>13</sup> as she leans over to tie her shoelace. But common experiences in pregnancy only become a philosophical phenomenology of pregnancy after a process of reflection, a reflection that must be worked through to achieve the status of a new paradigm for articulating bodily experience.

Young also quotes Adrienne Rich and Ann Lewis describing their experiences of pregnancy in the first person, but these are not, for Young, part of the phenomenological reflection in her essay; rather, they are the second hand reports from diary entries and “literature” that complement it. In Young’s essay the specifically phenomenological aspect of the analysis is limited to the first person description, and in this her work exemplifies what many—from within and from outside of the discipline of philosophy—still see as the classic practice of phenomenology, even one of its defining

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48,49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. Young does not explain whether this alternative paradigm is the revelation of a primordial and essential experience of split subjectivity writ large, or whether the experience of pregnant embodiment is unique in this respect. But the relation to Kristeva’s theoretical paradigm suggests that it is the former.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

features. Indeed, for most researchers using phenomenological research methods in practice disciplines and psychology—which might typically employ semi-structured but in-depth interviews of relatively small groups to gather data—the move from philosophical phenomenology to its adapted employment in empirical enquiry *is* the move from first-person to third-person experience.<sup>14</sup> In studies in phenomenological psychology, for example, the process might typically be as follows: after a process of selection, representatives of a particular group (usually very specifically defined—for example, first-time mothers who have recently given premature birth to very-low-birth-weight babies<sup>15</sup>) are interviewed, interviews are transcribed, commentaries on transcriptions are written, themes in these commentaries are identified, connection between or patterns across cases are found, and conclusions reached.<sup>16</sup> And yet it is precisely the aim of allowing people to speak “in their own voices,” which was also Young’s aim in “Pregnant Embodiment,” to allow others to describe their “lived experience,” that is often taken to characterise phenomenological psychology, for example. As Smith, Flowers and Larkin put it, the core *phenomenological* aspect of interpretative phenomenological analysis in psychology and other disciplines based on third-person data entails:

detailed examination of human lived experience. And it aims to conduct this examination in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be

<sup>14</sup> Amadeo Giorgi—whose work on the formalization of phenomenological methods for psychology is extremely influential and among the most frequently cited in phenomenological work in practice disciplines—uses this criterion to distinguish between philosophical phenomenology and scientific phenomenology (indeed, the terminology of “philosophical phenomenology” and “scientific phenomenology” is his). See, for example, Amadeo Giorgi, “The Theory, Practice and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as A Qualitative Research Procedure,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 28:2 (1997): 235–261. See also, for example, Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (London: Sage, 2009), 15 and 33: “the challenge for phenomenological psychology is to translate the insights of phenomenological philosophy into a practical but coherent approach to the collection and analysis of third-person data.” See also Amadeo Giorgi and Barbro Giorgi, “Phenomenology,” *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, ed. Jonathan A. Smith (London: Sage, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Nehami Baum, Zilla Weidberg, Yael Osher and David Kohelet, “No Longer Pregnant, Not Yet a Mother: Giving Birth Prematurely to a Very-Low-Birth-Weight Baby,” *Qualitative Health Research*, 22 (2012): 595–606.

<sup>16</sup> This characterisation is drawn from Smith, Flowers and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 79 ff., which is a textbook for researchers in qualitative psychology.

expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems.<sup>17</sup>

Since the late 1990s the use of phenomenological research methods in empirical studies of practice disciplines, particularly nursing, has been subject to sustained criticism. One aspect of this criticism concerns precisely the use of third-person accounts as if they are incorrigible, direct accounts of lived experience. For unless the researcher can be confident that the research participants (the interviewees) have themselves already performed some kind of phenomenological reduction, will what they tend to report not be described from the perspective of the natural attitude?<sup>18</sup> Of course the in-depth interview, in which researchers encourage participants to reflect, and from which they will select only that data that seems to be the result of such reflection, goes some way towards addressing this. Similarly, in the use of complementary third-person description in Young's essay—drawn from literature that is, precisely, a reflection on the experience of pregnancy—a degree of confidence in the testimony seems warranted. Nevertheless, this does give rise to questions that a rigorous philosophical phenomenology would be required to address. If third-person testimony is the basis for non-philosophical phenomenological analyses in, for example, some practice disciplines and qualitative psychology, what, exactly, is its role in philosophical phenomenology?

Prominent critics of classical phenomenology such as Daniel Dennett have questioned what they presume to be the purely “subjective” nature of introspective *first-person* phenomenological accounts. Dennett's hetero-phenomenology (not the proposal of a new theory but a description of existing practice in cognitive science, the analysis of *third-person* data) avoids this because, as Dan Zahavi explains, the primary data is the *reports of subjective experience*, not the reported experiences themselves.<sup>19</sup> But with

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>18</sup> For an account of criticisms of phenomenological studies in nursing in particular, see Annelise Norlyk and Ingegerd Harder, “What Makes a Phenomenological Study Phenomenological? An Analysis of Peer-Reviewed Empirical Nursing Studies,” *Qualitative Health Research* 20:3 (2010): 420–431, especially 428.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Zahavi, “Killing the Straw Man: Dennett and Phenomenology,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2007): 21–43, 23. Dennett's criticisms can be found in, for example, his *Consciousness Explained*, (Boston MA: Little, Brown & Co, 1991). Of course, there is a sense in which the “third-person” reports are also “first-person” reports; that is, they may be in the first person grammatically, but viewed from the perspective of the one who analyses them they are third-person reports.

the use of *third-person* testimony in philosophical phenomenology it is the reported experience, and not the report, that is being invoked as primary data, hence the problem becomes that of the status of the third person, not the first person, aspects of phenomenological analyses. How is its veracity as the description of lived experience to be verified? What is the relationship between these third person accounts and the interpreting phenomenologist? What are the criteria of selection of sources? What can those sources genuinely contribute “from themselves” if (as in Young’s essay) they are drafted in to confirm first person phenomenology? And is the phenomenologist obliged to take account of third person data that *conflicts with* their first person phenomenology?

Researchers in practice disciplines engaged in empirical studies can either avoid these questions or answer them directly by beginning with open research questions (for example, “how do pregnant women experience 12-week sonograms?”), explaining the selection criteria for research participants and showing the process of identification of common topics or themes across cases in the analysis, perhaps even making the unedited interview transcripts available for scrutiny. In all of this the first person experience of the researcher has no priority; indeed the research may be investigating experiences from which the researcher is, *per impossibile*, excluded. But philosophical phenomenologists may well have more trouble addressing these problems. Philosophical phenomenology is distinguished from the use of phenomenological methods in practice disciplines in attempting to move from description of phenomena or lived experience to the identification of what is essential to them or to the analysis of the constitution of their meaning, but what is the basis for this move by the phenomenologist when the source material is second hand? How does the move from empirical third person accounts to transcendental analysis *by the phenomenologist* distinguish itself from theoretical interpretations of others sorts?<sup>20</sup> What is the specifically phenomenological moment in that move?

These questions arise in a particularly acute form for what we might call the “non-standard” phenomenology that engages theoretically with non-

<sup>20</sup> In the use of phenomenological methods in practice disciplines the problem occurs in the opposite direction, as Jocalyn Lawler points out. Given that phenomenologies (she insists on the plural) were not intended to be employed “for field work or empirical inquiry” the difficulty faced by those who do so employ them is “in translocating or transforming philosophical systems into empirical ones for a practice discipline.” Jocalyn Lawler, “Phenomenologies as Research Methodologies for Nursing: From Philosophy to Researching Practice,” *Nursing Inquiry*, 5 (1998): 104–111, 110.

phenomenological discourses and non-philosophical disciplines. Although this engagement is often the basis for the most fruitful aspects of such non-standard—including, often, feminist—phenomenology, it also gives rise to specific problems for it *as* phenomenology. Heinämaa and Rodemeyer make this point in their review of the history of feminist phenomenology. That feminists should have forged connections between phenomenology and other philosophies is not, they argue, surprising:

as phenomenology shares several central topics—experience, subjectivity, duration, and intersubjectivity—with psychoanalysis, pragmatism, and social theory. Methodologically, however, these developments involved problems, as they neglected or abandoned the distinction between transcendental or ontological enquiries and empirical investigations.<sup>21</sup>

### The return of the transcendental subject

Of course, the relation between the empirical and the transcendental is itself one of the major issues in feminist phenomenology, addressed in several different ways and not primarily as a problem to be solved but as a contribution to a more adequate phenomenology. One of the main achievements of feminist phenomenology has been, precisely, to question the assumption in classical phenomenology of the sexed neutrality of the transcendental subject, and to some extent this has meant questioning the assumption of the possibility of the standpoint of transcendental subjectivity cleansed of all traces of the empirical ego. Emphasis on the sexed specificity of embodied consciousness and refusal to “shy away from the idea that the reflective activity or practice [of phenomenology] may itself be gendered”<sup>22</sup> are not—as early anti-feminist phenomenologists might have claimed—the result of an incomplete reduction. Rather, it is the assumption of the pure transcendental ego that fails to carry out the reduction to its fullest extent. As Alia Al-Saji writes, taking the transcendental ego to be phenomenology’s ultimate discovery leaves the “structures of experience that have been ‘naturalized’ to this ego” invisible. Further, the point here is “not simply

<sup>21</sup> Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

that the transcendental ego still carries traces of the empirical ego; it is that there is no ontologically prior level of subjectivity that can be so conceived.”<sup>23</sup>

To the extent that this is a claim about the essential structure of the subject (an emblematically phenomenological result) we may take Young’s analysis of pregnant embodiment as revealing the ‘split subject’ to exemplify the kind of phenomenological procedure that leads to it. Young’s analysis also exemplifies the performative (and perhaps productive) contradiction that would seem to be an ineliminable element of all first person phenomenology, grounded in the incorrigibility of lived experience, that describes or otherwise propounds the idea of a split subjectivity or of the essentially intersubjective grounding of subjectivity. That is, in the phenomenological description of pregnant embodiment Young stresses the private and exclusive nature of her experience: “Only I have access to these movements from their origin, as it were. For months only I can witness this life within me ... I have a privileged relation to this other life.”<sup>24</sup> Only she—this unique experiencing subject—can thus describe these experiences as they are for her, but in so far as she describes them, *as part of a philosophical phenomenology* (rather than, for example, as part of a quasi-medical report to an ante-natal nurse), she adopts the very position of the “unified” transcendental subject that the analysis aims to problematize.

This is not a contradiction in what is said, but a contradiction between what is said and the way of saying it or the position from which it is said—a performative contradiction. As such, one could argue, it is not a problem; rather, it is the difference between, on the one hand, a methodological necessity (the standpoint of the transcendental subject) and a philosophical result (the postulate of the split subject, or of the essentially intersubjective grounding of the subject). Heinämaa and Rodemeyer make a similar point in explaining the apparent contradiction between Husserl’s commitment to the idea of the transcendental ego and remarks about the necessarily worldliness of any subject: that is, “the distinction between the transcendental ego and the empirical ego is methodological, without any ontological implications ... the transcendental ego is not a separate being but a reflective modification or possibility of the mundane self.”<sup>25</sup> But granted that the transcendental ego may be understood in wholly methodological terms, does it

<sup>23</sup> Alia Al-Saji, “Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 43 (2010): 13–37, 16, n. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, “Introduction,” 5.

not nevertheless remain a *methodological* problem for feminist phenomenology? And could the use of third person description in feminist phenomenology in fact be an answer to this methodological problem?

Johanna Oksala addresses the first of these questions explicitly in a critique of what she calls the “classical” position in phenomenology, specifically a critique of the possibility of its accounting for gender. Oksala restates the basic form of the feminist criticism of traditional phenomenology in claiming that the classical position, with its commitment to the idea of a pure transcendental ego as “universal pure subjectivity,”<sup>26</sup> makes any feminist phenomenology impossible, given the oxymoron of “sexed universal pure subjectivity.” But Oksala also criticises the various phenomenologies committed to the fundamentally intersubjective nature or presuppositions of transcendental subjectivity.<sup>27</sup> If, she argues, intersubjectivity is understood as a constitutive element of subjectivity—an “apodictic structure of transcendental subjectivity”—the presupposition of this

“universal a priori structure” once again prohibits the consideration of that subjectivity as gendered. This problem is only avoided, according to Oksala, if intersubjectivity is understood, instead, as the situatedness of the incarnate subject in an “intersubjective, historical nexus of sense” in which meaning is “handed down,” such that the meanings that phenomena can have for me, including the meaning of my own body and gendered experiences, are intersubjectively constituted through learned systems of normality.<sup>28</sup>

For Oksala it is possible to understand the constitution of specific gendered meanings with this conception of intersubjectivity, where it is not possible with the other conceptions of intersubjectivity or with the classical or corporeal phenomenological approaches. But how, she asks, can we

<sup>26</sup> Johanna Oksala, “A Phenomenology of Gender,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39 (2006): 229–244, 231.

<sup>27</sup> Oksala is also critical of the essentialist tendencies of the Merleau-Pontian ‘corporeal’ phenomenology of feminists like Young and Sonja Kruks, arguing that their focus on the body, ‘is simply too limited a framework to support a philosophical understanding of gender’, which must also be able to take into account the linguistic, cultural and otherwise normative contexts that shape the value and meaning of corporeal experiences, including the apparent ‘givenness’ of sex duality itself. Oksala, “A Phenomenology of Gender”, 233.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* As Oksala explains, this does not mean that “normality” cannot be questioned. I learn what counts as normal; I know when I fail to live up to “normal.” The possibility exists of a communal challenge to “what counts as normal” on the basis of a new articulation of “failing” as “resisting,” for example, leading to the possibility of the constitution of a new normal.

undertake a phenomenological study of the constitutive role of intersubjectivity understood in this way? If intersubjectivity thus understood is historically and culturally conditioned, what could any phenomenology do with these conditions except bracket them? Oksala's point is that phenomenology cannot both "acknowledge the constitutive importance of language and cultural normality"<sup>29</sup> of mundane phenomena and retain the reduction to transcendental consciousness, as however this is understood it must involve bracketing those phenomena in the name of seeking a non-subjective "essence" or structure of some kind. For, we might add, if phenomenology is not seeking to do this, what is it seeking to do that distinguishes it from other (for example Foucauldian) ways of understanding the construction of gender, or from the empirical studies of the experience of gendered existence that use phenomenological methods?

Oksala's own answer to this question is that philosophical phenomenology of gender "is still understood as an investigation of the constitution of gendered experience, not as a conceptual analysis of language or a biological investigation of the body." But in order to do this, she argues, philosophers must not only give up the phenomenological reduction to transcendental consciousness,

We have also to give up the first-person perspective as the indispensable starting point of our analysis. In striving to understand the constitution of gendered experience it is more helpful to start by reading anthropological and sociological investigations, medical reports on intersexed children, or psychological studies of children's gender beliefs than by analyzing one's own normatively limited experiences.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to give up on phenomenology, she claims, because these empirical investigations can only reveal the constitutive structures of experiences when they are submitted to critical, philosophical analysis, and this reflection "must ultimately take the form of radical self-reflection. It is ultimately *I* who must read these investigations, and it is only in relation to my experience that they can reveal something previously hidden about its constitution, its limits and its supposedly natural and universal character." This, she says, is a form of reduction to the extent that it "makes us aware of the hidden aspects of our own thought ... and allows us to reveal and

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.



question its constitutive conditions.” This is not, according to Oksala, a move to transcendental consciousness, but to the level of transcendental discourse.<sup>31</sup> But it is difficult to see how this does not, in fact, return us to the same problem that Oksala identifies with the idea of intersubjectivity as historically and normatively constituted. For granted that this does not *start* with first person experience or any conception of transcendental subjectivity, it does seem to end up with them. Oksala claims that critical problematization of the structures of normality “is not possible without a first-person perspective: the subject must engage in the attentive and radical study of her own constitution.”<sup>32</sup> But what is discovered in such a study is only philosophically interesting, and can only have transcendental significance, if it is more than subjectively valid, if the structures revealed are shared structures: that is, only if the reflecting subject is understood in its universal aspect—as a transcendental subject.

### Parthenogenic birth

So far I have argued that if feminist phenomenology is to retain its specificity—if it is to be able to distinguish itself philosophically from, for example, a Foucauldian account of the constitution of subjectivities, or from the non-philosophical use of phenomenological methods in practice disciplines—it needs to be methodologically committed to *some* conception of transcendental subjectivity, even in its most, as it were, benign form, as first-person description. And granted the possibility that a recourse to third-person description or (as in Oksala’s argument) empirical data might seem to offer an alternative to the methodological commitment to transcendental subjectivity, this brings with it problems that any rigorous phenomenology would be required to address concerning the philosophical specificity of such a phenomenology and the criteria for reliance on third-person accounts, given what has been taken to be the essential role of the reduction (perhaps also of eidetic variation) in phenomenology. These are concerns for any feminist phenomenology.

But if it is right that any phenomenology necessarily involves some—perhaps implicit—conception of transcendental subjectivity this also raises

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 238, 239.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

a more specific concern for the feminist phenomenology of pregnancy and birth. This is not just because the methodological commitment implicitly presupposes precisely that ontological or existential commitment to the universality of the transcendental subject that any feminist phenomenology—in so far as it involves the elaboration of a specifically sexed experience—must deny, as Johanna Oksala argues. As the quotation from Husserl at the beginning of this essay reminds us, the phenomenological conception of transcendental subjectivity derives from, and can never fail to refer to, Kant. And while the phenomenological conception of transcendental subjectivity obviously departs from the letter of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* it is nevertheless stained through with some of its major presuppositions, especially as concerns the constituting function of the transcendental subject and its universality (in its distinction from the empirical subject). When the topics of pregnancy and birth are brought to phenomenology, every fibre of feminist phenomenology strains against this. But there is also evidence to suggest that a certain thinking of *generation* is already, problematically, the metaphorical or imaginary *basis* of the fundamental idea of transcendental subjectivity and the transcendental elements of experience.

In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, at the end of the transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant distinguishes the doctrine of transcendental idealism from competing theories of knowledge—or, more specifically, theories of the relation between concepts and experience—by characterising them in terms of various theories of biological generation.<sup>33</sup> Transcendental idealism, he writes there, is “a system of the epigenesis of pure reason,” while empiricism is akin to *generatio aequivoca* (what we now call “spontaneous generation”). If there is a “middle way” between these—Cartesian innatism, perhaps—it is “a kind of preformation-system of pure reason.”<sup>34</sup> Epigenesis and preformationism were the two main competing theories of biological generation in the eighteenth century. According to the various different versions of preformationism, the embryo either pre-exists, fully formed, in the maternal

<sup>33</sup> The following pages draw on the longer version of this argument on the gendered imaginary of Kant's transcendental idealism in Stella Sandford, “Spontaneous Generation: The Fantasy of the Birth of the Concepts in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*,” *Radical Philosophy* 179 (2013): 15–26.

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998, B167–8, 264–5. (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1 & 2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1956.)

ova or the paternal spermatozoon, or (the more common position by Kant's time) preformed germs contain all the essential parts of the foetus. In either case biological reproduction is understood as the provocation of the *development* or unfolding of pre-existing forms or parts, not the generation by the parents of a new organism. The theory of epigenesis, on the other hand, held that each embryo *was* a newly generated organism—the production of something new that had not existed before—the embryo and its parts developing from previously unorganised material.

Commentators who have tried to understand the meaning of Kant's characterisation of transcendental idealism as an “epigenesis of pure reason” have attempted to produce some accommodation between the biological theory of epigenesis and the doctrine of transcendental idealism, to lay out the terms of an analogy between them, with reference also to what is known of Kant's commitments—and indeed contributions—to biological theories of generation. This generally means that commentators try to understand how the generation of the categories or of metaphysical knowledge on the basis of the categories can be understood through the theory of epigenesis.<sup>35</sup> But if we put the single reference to epigenesis in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the context of its larger set of metaphors of generation, birth and biological ancestry, another form of reproduction emerges as the dominant imaginary or metaphorical basis for understanding the specificity of transcendental idealism and the role of the transcendental subject in the generation of the categories.

Although the first contrast in the passage containing the epigenesis metaphor is between transcendental idealism as epigenesis and empiricism as *generatio aequivoca* (spontaneous generation) the general tendency of the metaphors of generation that permeate the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, to the contrary, to characterise the production of the categories by the faculty of understanding as, precisely, a spontaneous generation. Contrasting the

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Günter Zöller, “Kant on the Generation of Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Kant: Analysen-Probleme-Kritik*, eds. Hariolf Oberer und Gerhard Seel, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988); Philip R. Sloan, “Preforming the Categories: Eighteenth-Century Generation Theory and the Biological Roots of Kant's A Priori,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 40:2 (April 2002); John Zammito, “‘This Inscrutable Principle of an Original Organization’: Epigenesis and ‘Looseness of Fit’ in Kant's Philosophy of Science,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 34, 2003; John Zammito, “Kant's Early Views on Epigenesis: The Role of Maupertuis,” *The Problem of Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Justin E.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

faculties of sensibility and understanding in the “Introduction” to the Transcendental Logic, Kant characterises the former as “the receptivity of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way,” while understanding is “the faculty for bringing forth representations itself [*Vorstellungen selbst hervorzubringen*], or the spontaneity of cognition.”<sup>36</sup> Kant frequently talks of the “origin” (*Ursprung*) of the categories in the understanding<sup>37</sup> and says that they “spring pure and unmixed from the understanding [*rein und unvermischt entspringen*],” a fact which a little later requires, he says, the production of “an entirely different birth certificate than that of an ancestry from experiences.”<sup>38</sup> Referring to them often as “ancestral concepts” (*Stammbeurteile*)<sup>39</sup> Kant speaks of the need to “bring [them] forth [*hervorzubringen*]” by a special act of the understanding;<sup>40</sup> they are, as the epigenesis passage itself says, “self-thought.” In the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, Kant speaks of the possibility of synthetic a priori judgements in the same way, as “this augmentation of concepts out of themselves [*diese Vermehrung der Begriffe aus sich selbst*] and the parthenogenesis [*die Selbstgebärung*], so to speak, of our understanding (together with reason), without impregnation by experience [*ohne durch Erfahrung geschwängert*].”<sup>41</sup> As all of these quotations show, then, but the last shows most explicitly, the most insistent generative model evoked in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is in fact neither preformationism nor epigenesis but something much more like *parthenogenesis*, in the sense of a spontaneous production without fertilisation or impregnation. The categories spring from the understanding as Athena sprang from the head of Zeus.

Elsewhere in Kant’s work there are what appear to be imaginative descriptions of something like parthenogenesis. In his review of Herder’s

<sup>36</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75, 193.

<sup>37</sup> For example, at A57/B81, 196; A62/B87, 199.

<sup>38</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A67/B92, 204; A86/B119, 221.

<sup>39</sup> For example, at A13/B27, 134; A81/B107, 213. “Ancestral concepts” are contrasted with “derivative concepts.”

<sup>40</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B111, 215.

<sup>41</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A765/B793, 656. Kant’s “so to speak” (*so zu sagen*) legitimates Allen and Wood’s translation of *die Selbstgebärung* as “parthenogenesis” (when Kant does not say, for example, *der Jungferzeugung*). Kemp Smith (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1933) translates *die Selbstgebärung* as “spontaneous generation”; Helmut Müller-Sievers (*Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy and Literature Around 1800*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, 49) translates it as “self-delivery.” Note also that *Vermehrung* in this passage has as well the sense of “breeding” or “reproduction.”

*Ideas*, for example, in denying the possibility of continuity between species, Kant reveals a kind of horror at the idea of a parthenogenic mother. Granting the possibility of describing nature in terms of the hierarchical categorization of species according to their similarities does not, for Kant, mean admitting to any affinity between species:

The smallness of the distinctions, if one places the species one after another in accordance with their *similarities*, is, given so huge a manifoldness, a necessary consequence of this very manifoldness. Only an *affinity* among them, where either one species would have arisen from the other and all from a single procreative maternal womb, would lead to *ideas* which, however, are so monstrous that reason recoils before them.<sup>42</sup>

In the Critique of Teleological Judgment Kant notes, similarly, that the resemblances between various natural forms reinforces the suspicion “that they are actually akin, produced by a common original mother,” and that the “archeologist of nature,” considering this,

can make mother earth (like a large animal, as it were) emerge from her state of chaos, and make her lap promptly give birth initially to creatures of a less purposive form, with these then giving birth to others that became better adapted to their place of origin and to their relations to one another, until in the end this womb itself rigidified, ossified, and confined itself to bearing definite species that would no longer degenerate, so that the diversity remained as it had turned out when that fertile formative force ceased to operate.<sup>43</sup>

The awful possibility that is being contemplated—effectively, self forming and active matter—is imaginatively described in terms of a maternal (hence female) generative power, labouring apparently parthenogenically, without any mention of a paternal partner.

In these passages Kant is rejecting something like the parthenogenic properties of matter itself, the initially unlimited fecundity and generative power of “a single procreative maternal womb” or “a common original

<sup>42</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Review of J.G. Herder’s *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*,” trans. Allan W. Wood, in *Anthropology, History and Education*, eds. Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 132.

<sup>43</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), § 80, 304 and 305. This passage is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as expressing Kant’s own view, but Kant is not the “archeologist of nature” who thinks this; he merely reports the possible view of such an archaeologist.

mother” spilling offspring from her lap: the *naturally* generatively self-sufficient virgin mother, matter giving birth to form. The model of parthenogenesis appropriated for the description of the generation of the categories seems, on the other hand, to be more like that of the *supernatural* virgin birth. But if a supernatural parthenogenesis provides the model for the monoparental generation or spontaneous self-production of the categories out of the understanding, the generation of intellectual form itself, this is now a *masculine* parthenogenesis, if we assume—as the quotations lead us to—that the conventional gendering of the matter/form distinction as female/male is at work here. Taken together these quotations from Kant reveal the transcendental subject imagined in terms of parthenogenic masculinity, spontaneously giving birth to form, to the principles of intelligibility, in a process of homo-production in the sense that the intellectual entities are born from the intellect itself, the same from the same.

How can feminist phenomenology deal with its ancestral relation to this parthenogenic transcendental subject, so inimical to the explicit standpoint and to the suggestions that have come from the phenomenology of pregnancy and birth? How can it be sure that it is not still haunted by it? On the other hand, perhaps the only phenomenology capable of disrupting the sovereignty of the transcendental subject in its own philosophical history is, precisely, the phenomenology of pregnancy and birth. But in order to truly accomplish this disruption such a phenomenology would have to become fully conscious of and fully explicit about its relation to that subject and about its own methodological presuppositions.

# Phenomenology of Pregnancy

*Edited by  
Jonna Bornemark &  
Nicholas Smith*

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