

Edited by
SARAH LACHANCE ADAMS
and CAROLINE R. LUNDQUIST

Coming to Life
*Philosophies of Pregnancy,
Childbirth, and Mothering*

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York ■ 2013

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	
Eva Kittay	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xv</i>
Introduction: The Philosophical Significance of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering	
Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist	<i>1</i>
PART I: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANON	
1 Plato, Maternity, and Power: Can We Get a Different Midwife?	
Cynthia D. Coe	<i>31</i>
2 Of Courage Born: Reflections on Childbirth and Manly Courage	
Kayley Varnallis	<i>47</i>
3 Original Habitation: Pregnant Flesh as Absolute Hospitality	
Frances Gray	<i>71</i>
4 The Birth of Sexual Difference: A Feminist Response to Merleau-Ponty	
Lisa Guenther	<i>88</i>

PART II: ETHICS	
5 Birthing Responsibility: A Phenomenological Perspective on the Moral Significance of Birth Gail Weiss	109
6 Birthmothers and Maternal Identity: The Terms of Relinquishment Dorothy Rogers	120
7 What's an Adoptive Mother to Do? When Your Child's Desires Are a Problem Melissa Burchard	138
PART III: POLITICS	
8 The Pro-Choice Pro-Lifer: Battling the False Dichotomy Bertha Alvarez Manninen	171
9 The Political "Nature" of Pregnancy and Childbirth Candace Johnson	193
10 Disempowered Women? The Midwifery Model and Medical Intervention Sonya Charles	215
PART IV: POPULAR CULTURE	
11 Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Hollywood Film and Popular Culture Kelly Oliver	241
12 Exposing the Breast: The Animal and the Abject in American Attitudes Toward Breastfeeding Rebecca Tuvel	263
PART V: FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY	
13 The Order of Life: How Phenomenologies of Pregnancy Revise and Reject Theories of the Subject Talia Welsh	283
14 The Vision of the Artist/Mother: The Strange Creativity of Painting and Pregnancy Florentien Verhage	300
<i>Notes</i>	321
<i>Bibliography</i>	371
<i>List of Contributors</i>	393
<i>Index</i>	397

Foreword

EVA KITTAY

What a joy to see a collection such as this. In it, Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline Lundquist realize one of the hopes of the earlier generation of feminist philosophers of which I am a part: that philosophy takes seriously the experience and lives of women. Every woman, whether she has embarked on the path of motherhood and whether she has gotten there via pregnancy and childbirth, is faced with the default social expectation that maternity is her destiny and her principle source of accomplishment and joy. A concomitant ideology, found not only in Western society but also more globally, is that not only the social but even the ontological status of woman is tied to her capacity to bear children, give birth to them, and rear them. Therefore, *every* woman is touched by the topics covered here, whether they are part of her actual experience or the imaginary through which women's subjectivity is constructed. Hence, these concerns are central to any philosophical project that takes the lives of women seriously.

The essays here place the nurturance, physicality, and situatedness of mothering in dialogue with the abstraction and putative universality of philosophy's canonical works. They explore the profound shaping of a woman's identity and subjectivity through the process of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering both when there is and when—through miscarriage, abortion, or adoption—there is no child to nurture and raise. The essays are explored through the works of traditional male philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, as well as the groundbreaking works of feminist philosophers such as Sara Ruddick, Iris

The Order of Life

How Phenomenologies of Pregnancy Revise and Reject Theories of the Subject

TALIA WELSH

Phenomenologies of pregnancy offer important contributions to feminist scholarship surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. Feminists explore how traditional philosophical accounts of a "universal" or "generic" human experience are at minimum complicated and at maximum refuted by theoretical attention to the creation and care of children. A universal account argues that, while not inclusive of the obvious diversity of human experience, a generic description of the subject as autonomous, rational, genderless, unified, and discrete from other subjects is philosophically sufficient. On the face of it, this does not deny difference but merely denies the philosophical import of our all-too-human differences. Working against this tradition, feminist theories about pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering are both descriptive and prescriptive; they point out lacunae in universal theories of the subject as well as the political dangers of consciously or unconsciously ignoring our experiences of birth and dependence. Feminist thought continues to explain how a lack of attention to traditionally female concerns has shaped theories that go far beyond the direct discussion about the creation and care of children.

This essay explores the challenges to universal accounts of the subject raised by phenomenologies of pregnancy. It outlines how phenomenologies of pregnancy indicate a need to rethink classical theories where human experience is considered to be commonly defined as autonomous, rational, genderless, unified, and discrete. It asks if these phenomenologies are a critical expansion upon generic accounts of human experience or if they indicate

the impossibility of any such account. Do phenomenologies of pregnancy illustrate the need for a more complex philosophical understanding of the human subject or do they highlight the futility of any such account?

Phenomenology asks for careful descriptions of experience while bracketing other philosophical investments. Thus, it is an ideal method for considering the possible relevance of an unexplored territory of human experience. Existential phenomenological accounts are particularly open to exploration without limiting the kind of truth that must be discovered. For many existential accounts, the philosophical subject is always already the human subject, and as such, human concerns are at least potentially relevant. Merleau-Ponty's existentialist embodiment theory provides a phenomenological method for exploring uncharted territory in lived experience.

A careful description of pregnancy brings to our attention the depth of the philosophical potency of pregnant embodiment. Merleau-Pontian-inspired phenomenologies of pregnancy reveal that pregnancy is a significant subject matter for philosophy. Phenomenologies of pregnancy challenge the validity of a theory that suggests a universal account will suffice. We ask here: what does the critical approach in phenomenologies of pregnancy call upon us to do? Are we to *reject* the subject altogether as central? Or are we to *revise* our traditional descriptions of the subject? We examine these two options and argue for the latter. Pregnancy can be seen to operate as a kind of Foucauldian limit-experience that rejects the centrality of the subject. But the exploration of pregnancy in feminist theory upholds the value of working from the subject's lived experience, rather than from the subject as a disembodied universal monad. Such an approach does not isolate pregnancy as supplementary to phenomenology. Phenomenologies of pregnancy show us how the diversity of experience is a conclusion of phenomenological reflection and not, as some critics suggest, an indication of the failure of phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Phenomenology

While the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, spent little time discussing gendered experiences, much less pregnancy, he did say that I experience pregnancy through the teleology of all monads.¹ In this fragment, Husserl acknowledges the difficulty he has as a man understanding birth. However, he concludes that since teleology encompasses all monads, pregnancy would also necessarily be brought into the fold of phenomenology. As Johanna Oksala notes, such a cursory view upholds the universalizing tendency in Husserl's phenomenology: phenomenology as a study that does not take into account the contingencies of history, class, race, or gender.²

Importantly, such a tendency fails to adequately reflect upon the lived body. Since pregnancy is very much an embodied matter, phenomenologies of pregnancy draw inspiration from the more embodied philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty's masterpiece, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), is often read as an existentialist revision of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Alongside Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), *Phenomenology of Perception* explores how a careful phenomenology tells us that phenomenology's point of departure has not only methodological implications but also philosophical ones. Merleau-Ponty famously indicates in the preface that Husserl too realized that "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction."³ Since I must always start from my located, historical, cultural, and embodied experience, I find that while a phenomenological exploration can clarify my experience, it cannot transcend it. Thus, phenomenology can provide us with generalizations but not with universal truths that stand outside the human, embodied condition.

However, despite Merleau-Ponty's appeal to phenomenologists who wish to address pregnancy as one of the important lacunae in Western philosophy, Merleau-Ponty has been critiqued for having a gender-neutral phenomenology. His account is seen to pass over important differences in embodied experience and thus to fail to capture our lived experience fully. Linda Fisher summarizes this critique:

An account that fails to recognize that its descriptions omit particularities of women's experience, such as pregnant embodiment, betrays the underlying (masculinist) assumption that the generic (male) account sets the standard and encompasses all possibilities, and in this manner functions to diminish and marginalize the experience and perspectives of women.⁴

Feminist works that highlight differences in female embodiment illustrate how Merleau-Ponty's work seems devoid of considering diverse gendered experiences. It is true that his most famous works do not contain careful comparison of gendered experience. But I have argued elsewhere that his lectures in child psychology and pedagogy do explore the experience of pregnancy seriously and carefully.⁵

In a critical vein, Shannon Sullivan argues that Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists fail to accurately portray our true existential condition since they describe the body in "neutral" terms. Unless Merleau-Ponty is describing a pathological embodied condition, such as Schneider's,

the body in the *Phenomenology* has no distinguishing gender traits. This reflects a continuation of the Western philosophical tradition of assuming a universal experience lies at the core of all diverse human embodiments and thus eliminates the philosophical need for careful discussions of difference. Sullivan claims that Merleau-Ponty's body passes over the determining effects of "gender, sexuality, class, race, age, culture, nationality, individual experiences and upbringing, and more" and hence his body becomes a "solipsistic subject's monologue."⁶ Fisher makes the same argument, saying that:

As such, it is argued that lived experience, especially bodily lived experience, cannot be treated in a generic analysis: bodies are sexed, and individuals are gendered, to follow the well-known feminist distinction of sex and gender. This points then to the irreducible particularity of women's experience that, it is argued, phenomenology has ignored.⁷

Merleau-Ponty's work in *The Phenomenology of Perception* does concern itself most famously with embodiment rather than the effects of history, class, language, race, and gender. Does a feminist who is concerned with lack of attention to female experience in Merleau-Ponty's most famous works find herself with the task of correcting this problem by continuing the spirit, if not the practice, of Merleau-Ponty's work, or is she now required to call into question phenomenology in its entirety?

One conclusion is that there is not a problem *in principle* with a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, but rather a problem with Merleau-Ponty's *execution*. What Merleau-Ponty outlines in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is a valuable method to explore gendered experience, even if he failed to accomplish such an undertaking. Gail Weiss and Silvia Stoller additionally point out that Sullivan's critique of Merleau-Ponty is based in a serious misreading.⁸ Sullivan equates Merleau-Ponty's discussion of "anonymous" with "neutral" and then critiques Merleau-Ponty as offering a gender-neutral, and hence insensitive, analysis of embodiment. Stoller and Weiss point out that Merleau-Ponty does provide room for considering race, class, and gender. His entire approach is deeply defined by the necessity of taking into account the complexities of the situation and not seeing bodies as "neutral" entities that float above their environmental contexts. "To say that an experience operates anonymously, then, is not equivalent to saying that it is universal or that it is trans-historical."⁹

The promise of Merleau-Ponty's work has naturally inspired feminist phenomenologists because his approach to lived experience works against the disembodied, universalizing tendencies in Husserl. Oksala notes that

most feminist appropriations of phenomenology have opted for the Merleau-Pontian version, which builds upon the premise that complete reduction to transcendental consciousness is impossible. This is generally interpreted to mean that the phenomenological investigation must focus on the lived body as opposed to transcendental consciousness.¹⁰

Attention toward the lived body in feminist theory shows that a "one size fits all" phenomenology fails to live up to its very promise of truly starting from experience. Indeed, careful attention to our experience would reveal the manner in which our gender, for instance, impacts our cognition, our intersubjective life, and our encounters with the world.

One of the most famous pieces in feminist scholarship that arises from and reacts to Merleau-Ponty is Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl." Therein, Young notes that due to the ways in which women are raised, valued, and situated in society, feminine embodiment "exhibits an *ambiguous transcendence*, an *inhibited intentionality*, and a *discontinuous unity* with its surroundings."¹¹ We have not been socialized to take the world as our theater, to extend our bodies without question into the world, to take up space. Instead, we question our actions before we accomplish them; we worry about how we look, if it is acceptable, and thus become stilted and uncomfortable in our very embodied existence. Young's work shows us a way to engage in a culturally, historically, and socially sensitive phenomenological analysis of our embodiment.

Phenomenologies of Pregnancy

Within the lectures on child psychology and pedagogy that he gave from 1949 to 1952 at the Sorbonne, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the experiential transformation that occurs during pregnancy. Heavily influenced by the psychoanalyst Hélène Deutsch's two-volume text *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1944–45), Merleau-Ponty sees pregnancy as a time of extreme ambivalence for the mother.¹² Pregnancy evokes the pregnant woman's pre-existing conflicts with her mother, her husband, her other children, and her situation in a sexist society. While the sources of conflict are seen largely through the psychoanalytic lens of Deutsch's psychology of women, Merleau-Ponty also draws some general existential themes from pregnant embodiment.

In the lecture "The Adult's View of the Child," Merleau-Ponty argues that pregnancy is a "major mystery" that brings the pregnant woman to "the order of life," adding, "During the entirety of her pregnancy, the

woman is living a major mystery which is neither the order of matter nor the order of the mind, but, rather, *the order of life*.¹³ Pregnancy disrupts the woman's existence as a self-enclosed individual and thus threatens phenomenology, which sees the ground of philosophy as a philosophy of the subject. The "order of life" brings her both an expanded experience as well as being the source of extreme ambivalence due to the loss of the unity of selfhood. The idea of an order of life that stands in the background of the subjective perceptual experience foreshadows Merleau-Ponty's later work on flesh. While most feminist embodiment theorists that draw upon pregnant experience do not appeal to his Sorbonne lectures in child psychology, most do draw attention to the themes of flesh and intertwining in Merleau-Ponty's late work.

One of the most celebrated discussions regarding Merleau-Ponty and pregnancy comes not from his own work, but from Luce Irigaray's discussion in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Therein, Irigaray ties her thought on the history of philosophy to Merleau-Ponty and argues that he did not realize the real significance of his phenomenology. His oculo-centrism can be seen to "blind" Merleau-Ponty to "interuterine life."¹⁴ What Merleau-Ponty refers to as "the order of life" could be understood in Irigaray's language as the need for philosophy to go back and reconsider its roots in pre-discursive experience:

My reading and my interpretation of the history of philosophy agree with Merleau-Ponty: we must go back to a moment of pre-discursive experience, recommence everything, all the categories by which we understand things, the world, subject-object divisions, recommence everything and pause at the "mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity."¹⁵

Grosz discusses how Irigaray presents us with a model where Merleau-Ponty is in debt to femininity and maternity because the tactile underlines the visual. Merleau-Ponty's very conceptual foundations are based in "femininity and maternity, a debt whose symptoms reside in the kind of language of pregnancy he continually invokes to articulate the emergence of that torsion within the flesh that constitutes and unites the seer and the visible."¹⁶ Thus it is not just that pregnancy is a subject area that can and should be discussed by phenomenology, but that pregnancy is at the heart of the phenomenological project.

By focusing upon pre-discursive experience, "maternalizing flesh," Irigaray calls to our imaginations the experience of being in utero. This common ground to all our experiences can be seen as a critical expansion upon

phenomenological themes outlined in Merleau-Ponty. Such a psychoanalysis of our lived experience broadens phenomenology since it demands that we take into account not only a discussion of the historical, cultural, social, and political milieu in which the pregnant woman is situated, but also a developmental account of her experience including conflicts that cannot be exposed by traditional phenomenological methods.

In Irigaray and in other feminist adoptions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we find a common theme that inherent within Merleau-Ponty's work the seeds of a more nuanced philosophy of experience exist. He failed to see or did not live long enough to fulfill the promise of his own ideas. Irigaray addresses Merleau-Ponty's refusal to see how flesh is situated in "a maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction, subsistence there of the amniotic, placental tissue, which enveloped subject and things prior to birth, or of tenderness and the milieu that constituted the atmosphere of the nursing, the infant, still of the adult."¹⁷ Thus, we return to the subject not as an embodied being living with other such beings, but as part of a continuum of existence that is behind the categories of subject, perception, visibility, and invisibility.

We find here the first revision to a traditional account of the subject. A phenomenology of pregnancy exposes how the historical fact of our prenatal life is philosophically significant. Our life in utero is not autonomous or discrete. This is not merely a historical fact, but such primary experience remains also primary in adult life. Thus, any account of the human subject would have to reconsider its designation of human life as an independent monad.

When we turn to the pregnant woman's experience, we find additional critiques of the traditional conception of the subject. Iris Marion Young's piece "Pregnant Embodiment" departs "from the pregnant subject's viewpoint."¹⁸ Therein she finds a split in her subjectivity: her inner movements belong to another being, her bodily boundaries shift during the manifold transformations. What this splitting causes is a disruption in the transparent unity of the self. From this description, Young returns to the theory of Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty admittedly provides us with an embodied, rather than a dualist, vision, however as Young points out, this embodied self is still a unified self. Young stresses how pregnancy disrupts the "integrity of my body" because "in pregnancy I do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins." When her pregnant belly bumps up against her legs, Young is aware of this body and is aware it is not all hers anymore. She argues against Merleau-Ponty's suggestions that such objectification of one's body is negative. Instead, she argues that in such a moment it is not that her

body has become an object, but she is rather "conscious of the physicality of my body not as an object, but as the material weight that I am in movement."¹⁹

Young appeals to the work of Kristeva, Lacan, and Derrida as better models to explain the split subject. Importantly, Young's account, while in parts consistent with such deconstructive and psychoanalytic accounts of a split subject, is derived not from a rejection of phenomenology as being able to accept a split subject, but from a phenomenological description itself. Instead of seeing phenomenology as inherently tied to a model of the subject as self-enclosed, self-conscious, and unified, as many poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theorists are likely to do, Young finds within pregnant experience a subject who is not just a subject. She writes that the pregnant woman is both "source and participant in a creative process."²⁰ Young's work thus draws her to the "order of life" in Merleau-Ponty's terms, or in Irigaray's our "prediscursive experience." Rosalyn Diaprose argues that Young's work shows that "pregnancy, to return to the body in question, involves profound changes to bodily capacities, shape and texture with attendant shifts in the awareness of the body. Yet, as Young argues, pregnancy can be better understood as an expansion in the borders of the self than a collapse of its structure."²¹ This is similar to the idea in Merleau-Ponty that the "order of life" is not something opposed to the self, as the body as object (or Körper) is, but instead the place in which the self finds itself located.

Other phenomenologies of pregnancy have tended to minimize the language of splitting seeing it as too reductive and negative, in favor of a positive view of the collapse of the boundaries of self and other as well as self and world. For instance, Gail Weiss writes of her own pregnancy as an experience that is defined not by ambivalence but rather by expansion: "Fluidity and expansiveness, rather than the myths of wholeness and closure (which I don't believe any of us, male or female, ever truly experience) were the tangible signs of this newly discovered bodily integrity."²² Likewise, in her discussion of her pregnancy, Carol Bigwood argues that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body recovers a "noncultural, non-linguistic body."²³ She calls for a "world-earth-home" as the site of this nonpersonal body.

Bigwood, like many feminist theorists influenced by Merleau-Ponty, disagrees with Judith Butler's characterization in *Gender Trouble* of bodies as cultural signs. With such a view, we reinforce the notion that we are alienated from nature, and that culture stands prior to, over, or against nature. Bigwood acknowledges that Butler is right to "argue that there is no 'pure' body or untouched nature prior to culture." But Bigwood criti-

cizes Butler for making the opposite mistake, for asserting some kind of "pure" culture that would always be present. "The female experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding perspicaciously shows up a female bodily wisdom and fleshly openness that intertwines with a mother's personal and cultural life." Turning our attention toward our everyday experience, we find the "nonpersonal perceptual existence that underlies and intertwines with our personal cultural and intellectual lives."²⁴

Our second revision of traditional accounts of the human subject is that a phenomenology of pregnancy from the pregnant woman's experience indicates that the human subject is not necessarily genderless or unified. Instead, we find a subject that is either characterized as "split," as in Young, or as continuous with a larger continuum of life, as in Bigwood and Weiss.

As summarized briefly before, these descriptions appear to develop the idea that a characterization of the human subject as autonomous, autonomous, rational, genderless, unified, and discrete is not philosophically sufficient. Instead our experience is grounded upon a continuous, indeterminate, prediscursive experience that subtends all individual experience. Many see the work in feminist embodiment theory on pregnant phenomenology as fulfilling Merleau-Ponty's late promise of "flesh" and "wild being." In explaining the importance of these ideas, Grosz writes that we can find in Merleau-Ponty "a 'wild being,' and uncultivated or raw sensibility" and this is found in prediscursive experience "before the overlay of reflection, before the imposition of metaexperiential organization and its codification by reason."²⁵

Yet, it seems that Irigaray's prediscursive life, Young's split subject, Weiss's expansiveness, Bigwood's nonpersonal, and Merleau-Ponty's order of life are all descriptions that could be universally true for all human experience. Thus we return to the three questions we brought up in the introduction. What is the relevance of these accounts for our philosophy? Do they revise a general account of the human subject, but leave in place the centrality an existential phenomenology? Do they call upon us to replace our phenomenology with another kind of analysis of experience?

The Subject Rejected

Even if we start with a more sensitive interpretation of the manifold ways in which our embodiment is constituted by social, political, and historical forces, we still seem to be providing a general theory that would apply to all human experience and thus appear to be returning again to a generic account. Thus, gender becomes a kind of additional concern that we add onto our previous philosophical conceptions, such as the idea that the way

to overcome dualism is to add the body to our preexisting qualifications of what a subject is. If this is the contribution of gender-sensitive scholarship to phenomenology, it is not a slight one. After all, providing complete phenomenological accounts of gendered experience is no small task. However, it appears clearly that the desire of feminist phenomenologists and phenomenologies of pregnancy is to indicate the specificity of experience against the tendency of generic phenomenologists account to absorb all criticisms as merely suggestions of additional areas for phenomenology to explore (but the idea remains that such criticisms do not threaten the phenomenological project's universalizing tendencies).

While the fact that one common experience is being in utero, pregnancy is a particularly difficult experience to absorb into a universalizing account, since the experience is foreclosed for men and not a part of every woman's life. Oksala argues that pregnancy gives us "a need to rethink such fundamental phenomenological questions as the possibility of a purely eidetic phenomenology and the limits of egological sense-constitution."²⁶ The provocative idea of an "order of life" was obviously not revealed to Merleau-Ponty through his own pregnant embodiment. When discussing the condition of women, Beauvoir wrote that "the most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman's concrete situation."²⁷ Can a person who has never been pregnant understand the concrete reality of pregnant embodiment?

Many experiences are difficult, if not impossible, to convey to others who have not shared in them. Experiencing the death of a loved one, flying an airplane, hallucinating, having religious conversion, and fighting a chronic illness appear to demand having had the experience to be truly understood. A sufficient number of parallels to common experience do not seem available to draw a sketch of what hallucination is "like" to someone who has not had one. Pregnancy might be a kind of limit-experience that refuses the subject, embodied or not, as a universal concept with which to explore our human condition.

The idea of a limit-experience is taken from Michel Foucault. His discussion of limit experience is often tied to his own personal stories of taking acid in the Mohave and engaging in sadomasochism. In James Miller's controversial biography of Foucault, he explores how central such experiences were to understanding the development of Foucault's thought.²⁸ Foucault discussed limit experiences as contrasted with phenomenology, noting that phenomenology tried to "organize perception" and "grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject." Instead of this limited, unimaginative, Cartesian approach, Foucault celebrates the philosophies of Nietzsche, Bataille, and

Blanchot, who "try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme." In so doing, we can see a path to "'tearing' the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely 'other' than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation."²⁹

In Foucault, the idea of limit-experience is one that is "internal" insofar as it is an experience a subject has that includes the taste, if not reality, of the subject's own dissolution. The splitting that Young speaks about, or the expansiveness in Weiss, or Irigaray's maternalizing flesh could be seen as pointing toward a dissolution of the self-other distinction and hence could be a limit-experience for the pregnant woman. While it is true that the metaphor of death and annihilation is present in Foucault, Bataille, and Blanchot's discussions of limit-experience, rather than birth and creation, limit-experience captures the idea of pregnancy being both a rootedly lived experience, something accessible only through a consideration of that experience, but yet something that defies the traditional knowledge that experience is something "owned" or "had" by a subject "about" or "directed toward" an object. Thus, a limit-experience can be viewed as very much a lived "experience" but not the experience of traditional phenomenology.

If we are to reject the subject as the center of our phenomenological inquiries, it seems difficult to know what the place of a descriptive philosophy such as phenomenology now is. As a philosopher, I can meaningfully capture the sense of Descartes in his dressing gown or Husserl considering trees and birds in the garden.³⁰ But Bataille's discussion of taking eroticism to its ends in sadomasochistic practices is less approachable.³¹ One is the standard armchair philosophy and the other transgressive, but it is more critical not that one is more or less socially acceptable, but that armchair philosophy is *accessible*. Leaving aside the important critiques of the phenomenological tradition's oculo-centrism, most persons can consider the key lessons in a static phenomenology. While it is feasible to consider the celebration of intense, forbidden, and transgressive behaviors in Bataille and Foucault as kind of a pop psychology of living life to its fullest, the limit-experiences push the boundaries of access to philosophy and are not just narratives of radical behavior. They are indications of what cannot be open to all and indications of the limits of traditional phenomenological inquiry.

Unlike an argument that presents us with a theory of why we should reject the *idea* of the unity of the subject, a limit-experience provides us with a concrete test of those limits. It communicates without abstract intellectual theory. It is possible that the content of any experience is always-already

lost in the abstract philosophizing experience. The idea that pregnancy is a limit-experience might help to highlight the potential relevance of an experience that cannot be circumscribed by a traditional phenomenological inquiry, but that appears in its heart deeply wedded to lived-experience. As such, we can see the idea of pregnancy as a limit-experience as continuous with the spirit, if not the execution, of a Merleau-Pontian inspired embodiment theory and harmonious with the challenging descriptions of split-subject, earth-world-home, maternal flesh, and an expanded self outlined in phenomenologies of pregnancy.

Limit-experiences can function as way in which to consider an experience that tests the boundaries of our subject-centered philosophy. But at the same time, unlike a descriptive phenomenology of perception, a limit-experience seems to require a kind of initiation that can appear impossible to enter. We can consider Descartes's writing desk quite clearly and follow the line of his argument through his description. But we cannot follow Foucault's Mojave Desert experience in the same fashion. Going the desert and taking acid will not necessarily provide us with Foucault's insights whereas reflecting upon whether or not we are dreaming does provide us with Descartes's. If we adopt this idea that pregnancy is a kind of limit-experience that indicates the limits of a general phenomenological approach, it might appear that we have lost phenomenology, a claim to which Foucault presents a sympathetic defense. Would we then be left with truths accessible only to pregnant women? Or is the point that pregnant experience simply destroys the subject, embodied or not, as the place from which phenomenology should depart?

The Subject Revised

The idea that pregnancy might call upon us to reject the subject and its centrality in phenomenology allows phenomenologists to think outside some of our traditional language and possibly to incorporate more of the variety of experience in our descriptions. However, the idea of a limit-experience outside of the subject paradoxically creates a greater isolation of experience within the subject instead of freeing our discussion from subject-centered philosophies. Feminist thought about revising the idea of the subject in considering gendered-experience is far more fruitful than jettisoning the project of phenomenology in its entirety. We should be careful to not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

If limit-experiences are not accessible to a phenomenological analysis, they operate without possibility of questioning, without the possibility of analysis, and without the possibility of suggesting political change. I

cannot access the other's limit-experience if she refuses any validity to any of my tentative attempts at understanding. The more she rejects the idea of her experience being accessible through any kind of phenomenology, the more tightly she restricts it to herself. But even within herself, she is also excluded from knowing her experience. It operates like a peculiar kind of internal God whose mysteries are in principle unknown to the very person engaged in a limit-experience and certainly foreclosed to any "outsiders." Given this mysterious veil, it seems impossible to consider such experiences as revealing things as concrete and immediate as our social and political world, our personal histories, or our cultural norms. While pregnant embodiment pushes the limits of traditional phenomenological language, this tension does not require us to adopt an even more inaccessible language that further separates us from concrete engagement with our lived experience.

We find a richer language in phenomenologies of pregnancy themselves that call upon us to *revise*, rather than reject, our theories of the subject. Weiss points out that the expansiveness she feels in pregnancy is a sense of "fluidity and expansiveness" rather than "wholeness and closure."³² She also parenthetically comments that she does not believe that any of us, male or female, experience wholeness and closure. Thus perhaps the truth of pregnancy is a deeper, all-too-human truth that is obscured by our linguistic and historical tendency to consider human experience at base a subjective, unified, self-enclosed sphere.

The revised subject fits well within the embodiment tradition. The myths of wholeness and closure could stem from an overinvestment in the separateness or at least the primacy of a disembodied mind. But once dualism is left behind us, attention to our everyday experience will reveal that we are unable to extricate our "mind" as something distinct from the living body. Turning toward our embodied existence, we find a basic experience that is much more continuous with the rest of the world and the rest of other human beings. We can revise a traditional conception of the human subject as being defined through mental characteristics—autonomous, rational, genderless, unified, and discrete—and explore a subject defined through its existential, embodied, and all-too-human experience.

Merleau-Ponty writes that viewing any experience as a combination of a machine-like physical body and a soul-like mind is thoroughly discredited by both our philosophy and science. The argument that substance dualism is wrong is hardly novel or rarely appreciated. Most philosophers willing to consider the relevance of phenomenology would almost surely agree that the mind and body are not two metaphysically distinct substances. But beyond noting their necessary connection, Merleau-Ponty's embodiment theory points out that what moving beyond dualism means

is returning to existence and not seeing the body as added onto the mental. "The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence."³³ If the point of overcoming dualism was merely to suggest that we need to say the mind and body are connected, we would need to go no farther than Descartes, since he noted the complexity of their connection in the sixth *Meditation*. The idea of embodiment theory is not just to add "having a body" onto our list of essential characteristics of the human subject, but to suggest that embodiment is prior to all of the other characteristics. It is not an addition but a revision of the philosophical account of the human subject. Pregnancy is a clear manner in which to bring this truth to the forefront by noting that phenomenologies of pregnancy indicate the primacy of embodiment over a self-enclosed mental experience and also remind us that our first experiences are ones of inseparableness from our mothers in utero.

Yet, while the idea of revising the concept of the subject toward a more embodied, inclusive one fits well within the tradition outlined by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it seems to not quite capture the uniqueness of *pregnant* embodiment. After all, it appears that we could come to this conclusion of interconnectedness via a wide array of experiences. We can ask along with Oksala if from such a perspective feminist phenomenologies of pregnancy and birth just "add some missing descriptions of embodiment to the phenomenological project" but they fail to "change the core of it in any essential way."³⁴ Thus, they fail to live up to the challenges of feminist philosophy to the tradition.

Fisher writes that feminist phenomenology searches to go beyond the "generic human experience." "To the extent that the objective is to provide an account of essences or essential structures, phenomenology tends to the generic description, treating experience generically, as pertaining to a generic human individual."³⁵ Fisher goes on to point out that this is often taken as problematic by feminists who want to engage with difference, inequality, and oppression. When pregnancy's specificity is removed and one draws out general phenomenological conclusions about our connection to the world and others, then it seems we have returned to a generic phenomenology simply through a different source.

Thus, thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosalyn Diaprose employ embodiment theory not as a "natural" place outside of the contingencies of social, historical, political, and cultural forces, but as a site wherein we can see how female subordination plays out in female (and male) embodiment. Sensitive to such concerns, Oksala cautions us against the dangers of a certain brand of Merleau-Pontian embodiment theory in feminist

theory, what she calls the "corporeal reading," because it reduces phenomenology down to a kind of essentialism. It threatens "to push us back into defending a form of corporeal essentialism that potentially precludes political changes in the situation of women." In the corporeal reading, the focus on the body removes it from a more complex social-political understanding of gender—"the fact that the focus on the body is simply too limited a framework to support a philosophical understanding of gender."³⁶ We can ask if such discussions of a continuum of life revealed by examining pregnancy or all of our prenatal life falls into a type of corporeal reading where we do explore the embodied condition more fully and certainly more gendered experiences, but now they pass over important social, cultural, and historical differences and fall into an almost romantic, "naturalist" reading of the human subject.

Feminist phenomenology provides us a way to acknowledge the relevance of experience in political discussions, but the question has been raised if it is sufficient to full address the social, political, cultural, and linguistic context. Does a focus on embodiment encourage a lack of serious engagement with these issues? There are two possible aspects to this concern. One is to suggest that without phenomenology, one cannot *diagnose* the ways in which women's bodies have become constituted. Without an appeal to how gender and power relations draw around ideologies of gender shape our experience, we cannot properly understand our embodiment. The other aspect is to suggest that without phenomenology, we cannot *cure* gender imbalances.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz explores this tension. An exhaustive exploration of embodiment would, at least in part if not in full, reveal political, cultural, and social tensions. It is impossible to discuss female embodiment without considering how women's bodies are modified, disciplined, celebrated, and blamed. As a wealth of literature including famously Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, has documented, in the West, contemporary women's bodies are objectified and controlled through a micropolitics of size. Grosz also explores the notion that not only are discussions of bodies inevitably discussions of power, politics, and knowledges, so too is the phenomenological project of working from experience. "But it is clear that experience cannot be taken as an unproblematic given, a position through which one can judge knowledges, for experience is of course implicated in and produced by various knowledges and social practices." But Grosz continues to point out that a phenomenology of experience is needed to provide the point of departure for challenging any given knowledge or institution: "Nevertheless, I would contend that without some acknowledgement of the formative role of experience in the establishment of

KNOWLEDGE, EMBODIMENT HAS NO GROUNDS FROM WHICH TO DISPUTE PATRIARCHAL NORMS.³⁷

We can see a famous and clear example of how we can explore embodiment without ignoring the social, political, cultural world by reading Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" in conjunction with "Throwing Like a Girl Twenty Years Later." Feminist embodiment theory is not doomed to be essentialist and incapable of discussing the way in which social and political changes affect experience. Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" demonstrates that a phenomenological exploration of gendered embodiment is not necessarily essentialist, if by essentialist one means conditioned by biologically given differences. Indeed, the piece would not be sensible without understanding the larger cultural world and how it shapes and molds female embodiment.

Young's latter piece, "Throwing Like a Girl: Twenty Years Later," provides examples of how social progress has positively changed female embodiment. Young notes that much has changed in her bodily comportment and that of her daughter, born two years after "Throwing Like A Girl" first appeared. "It seems to me that she and her friends move and carry themselves with much more openness, more reach, more active confidence, than many of my generation did." The hesitation of Young in throwing a ball versus her daughter's active enjoyment of sports illustrates that a phenomenology of embodiment is by no means static. Young comments that her original piece might see women as too oppressed, too objectified, as "inhibited, hesitant, constrained, gazed at, and positioned." Young accepts that her depiction in "Throwing Like a Girl" emphasized the ways in which women are restricted and judged according to a universal masculine standard, and she writes that one might "also look for specifically valuable aspects of women's experience." It would be these valuable aspects of women's experience that could provide the political grounds to reject limiting structures. While Young does acknowledge that the exploration of women's experience might aid out political goals, she also emphasizes that "a primary feminist task must continue to be exposing and criticizing the violence, overwork, and sexual exploitation that many women suffer as women."³⁸ This brings to light that we cannot approach our existence from a disembodied, nonphenomenological approach where one looks at bodies and how they are treated from the outside, understanding embodiment is required to right certain wrongs.

Many have argued that the focus on embodiment in a more Merleau-Pontian phenomenology better lives up to the promise of phenomenology as a descriptive philosophy. Thus, the argument that one needs to account for class, history, gender, and race is not a political principle that is imposed

from without on phenomenology, but that a careful phenomenological discussion shows that phenomenology is ideally disposed toward a more historical, and politically progressive, analysis. The preceding discussion has illustrated that a feminist embodiment theory is attuned to differences in phenomenological descriptions and seeks to avoid condensing embodied experience into a naturalist, nonpolitical mold.