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## **Language and the Gendered Body: Butler's Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty**

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Through a close reading of Judith Butler's 1989 essay on Merleau-Ponty's "theory" of sexuality as well as the texts her argument hinges on, this paper addresses the debate about the relation between language and the living, gendered body as it is understood by defenders of poststructural theory on the one hand, and different interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on the other. I claim that Butler, in her criticism of the French philosopher's analysis of the famous "Schneider case," does not take its wider context into account: either the case study that Merleau-Ponty's discussion is based upon, or its role in his phenomenology of perception. Yet, although Butler does point out certain blind spots in his descriptions regarding the gendered body, it is in the light of her questioning that the true radicality of Merleau-Ponty's ideas can be revealed. A further task for feminist phenomenology should be a thorough assessment of his philosophy from this angle, once the most obvious misunderstandings have been put to the side.

One salient issue in contemporary feminist philosophy has been how to understand the relationship between language or discourse and bodily existence, in particular the gendered body. According to Judith Butler, the body is wrapped up in an unstable system of multiple and discursive power relations: not only gender but also sex is constituted by language.<sup>1</sup> Some feminist theorists have been concerned by this radical understanding of the culturally constructed character of the body: Susan Bordo, for example, accused Butler of being a linguistic or discursive foundationalist (Bordo 1992, 169; 1993, 291; 1998, 89), and Seyla Benhabib reproached her for deprecating the notions of selfhood and agency altogether (Benhabib 1995, 21).<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body-proper has appeared to several interpreters as a fruitful alternative to poststructuralist philosophy in that it gives room to the more "material" aspects of bodily existence: either Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is interpreted as taking into account a pre-given meaning independent of language (Bigwood 1991; Gendlin 1992), or it is his depiction of the expressivity of the living body that is emphasized, as being compatible with and complementary to the poststructuralist point of view (Alcoff 2000a; 2000b; Stoller 2000; Vasterling 2003; Stoller 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2010b).

Some theorists, however, have wanted to reject the phenomenological perspective altogether, either as a consequence of the poststructuralist dismissal of the notion of experience<sup>3</sup> or because of a skepticism toward the transcendental attitude thought to be lingering even in a phenomenology of lived corporeality such as that of Merleau-Ponty.<sup>4</sup> The very possibility of a feminist phenomenology is under scrutiny, and Merleau-Ponty's thinking has been an important source for the effort to formulate an account of corporeality beyond the traditional dualisms and consistent with the aims of feminism (Grosz 1993; 1994; Heinämaa 1997; Stoller and Vetter 1997; Alcoff 2000a; 2000b; Fisher and Embree 2000; Heinämaa 2002; Vasterling 2003; Stoller, Vasterling, and Fisher

2005; Stoller 2008; 2009; Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010; Stoller 2010a; 2010b).

Rather than addressing these issues directly, I will here go back to Butler's early essay "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception," where she examines Merleau-Ponty's depiction of sexuality in his work from 1945 (Butler 1989).<sup>5</sup> Although at first acknowledging the promising character of his theory of sexuality as coextensive with existence,<sup>6</sup> Butler criticizes his analyses for containing "tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality," which precludes us from grounding a politically significant theory of sexuality on his work (Butler 1989, 86, 99). However, I believe that a thoroughgoing assessment of Butler's objections to Merleau-Ponty in this paper, based on a detailed analysis of the well-known Schneider case, will show that her deconstructive procedure is not necessarily at odds with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions. Silvia Stoller has made clear that Butler's thought has early roots in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (Stoller 2010, 363ff.), and her attitude even in this highly critical paper remains paradoxical.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the wounded body draws attention to the limits of that discursive constructivism Butler sometimes tends to, whereas her uncompromising political stance points out both the radicality of his endeavor, if we read it in the right way, and certain blind spots in his descriptions that need further examination. For this reason, I am convinced that a reading of this early essay is important if phenomenology is to be developed in a feminist direction as discussed above.<sup>8</sup>

The starting point for Butler's analysis is the significant contributions that Merleau-Ponty's ideas seem to offer feminist theory, in that he makes important arguments against "naturalistic accounts of sexuality that are useful to any explicit political effort to refute restrictively normative views of sexuality" (Butler 1989, 85). For Merleau-Ponty, the living body is constituted and continually reconstituted within a field of possibilities that are appropriated and transformed into the body's own structure. It is, in Butler's formulation, "the 'place' in which possibilities are realized and dramatized" (86), and she approvingly cites Merleau-

Ponty's statement that the human being is "a historical idea, not a natural species" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 199; 2012, 174).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, promising as Merleau-Ponty's theory might seem when it comes to liberating our understanding from a naturalizing ideology of hierarchical heterosexuality, Butler claims that it hides certain normative suppositions about sexuality. First, that it is, after all, heterosexual; second, that masculine sexuality is "characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body" (Butler 1989, 86); third, that the sexual relation between man and woman follows the model of the relation between master and slave. So, although Merleau-Ponty "generally tends to discount natural structures of sexuality," Butler writes, "he manages to reify cultural relations between the sexes on a different basis by calling them 'essential' or 'metaphysical'" (86).

In other words, the potential that Merleau-Ponty's ideas appeared to have for feminist theory, in characterizing the living body as a historically and culturally constituted "dramatic structure," vanishes when we recognize their tacit normative, and therefore exclusionary, assumptions (Butler 1989, 86). In their appeal to a natural sexuality, these assumptions turn out to contradict his general theory of the living body. Uncovering such presuppositions is indeed the most important task for feminist theory, as Butler understands it: if we read the essay in the light of her later work, her goal is not just to refute an outright normative, naturalistic, or biologicistic view. Rather it is to show how a certain theory, despite its efforts to the contrary, confirms what she in *Gender Trouble* calls the "heterosexual matrix": the discursive grid that defines bodies in terms of oppositional and hierarchical gender categories (Butler 1990/1999, 9, 194). There can never be a question of refuting or escaping the heterosexual matrix; instead we have to perform a critical, feminist genealogy of those categories from within the discursive field of power that produces the categories of gender (9f., 42f., 187f.).

## MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL GENEALOGY OF OBJECTIVE THINKING

To what extent is Butler's feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty justified? In order to answer this question, we have to look at the context of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of sexuality as they appear in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

One thing that must be noted is that Merleau-Ponty does not so much put forward a theory of perception and the body but instead carries out his own version of a genealogy, or "archaeology," as he later calls it (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 13; 1970, 4), in examining the emergence of what he labels "objective thinking" and its inherent contradictions. "Objective thought ignores the subject of perception" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 240; 2012, 214):<sup>10</sup> it conceives the world as a complete, entirely explicit and determinate extension, understandable independent of the perceiving and moving body-proper. The objects of this world consist of parts that are wholly external to each other, and the relations between them can likewise only be external and mechanical. Objective thought demands unequivocalness, a reasoning in terms of either-or, and its categories are therefore mutually exclusive (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 60f.; 2012, 50).

Objective thought is the thinking of the philosophical tradition, whether it takes the form of empiricism or "intellectualism" (Merleau-Ponty's term for rationalism).<sup>11</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, empiricism is more naïve than intellectualism since it presupposes that everything can be explained in the guise of objectivity: not only objects, but also the experience of objects: perception. Intellectualism takes one step further since it asks for the necessary conditions of possibility of our objective knowledge. Nevertheless, intellectualism does not question the definition of objectivity itself; therefore, it merely doubles the pure, completely determined objectivity with a pure and absolute subjectivity, fully transparent to itself, into which objectivity is copied.

The consequence of intellectualism's reflection on the conditions of knowledge is dualism: on the one hand the object, a substance wholly external to itself, pure extension; on the other the subject, a substance

wholly internal to itself, pure thinking, untouched by space, time, and facticity, with full possession of the world and of itself.

Merleau-Ponty does not criticize objective thinking as if it were just a bad habit, an antiquated custom we had better get rid of. On the contrary, objective thinking comes all too naturally to us. This is, he says, because our perceptual experiences are intentional: they are directed to an object—in a wide sense—that gives unity and organization to these experiences. When we try to understand the experiences that led to the object in the first place, we transfer the categories of objectivity to them and understand the constitution from what is constituted.<sup>12</sup> Objective thought is “unaware of itself and installs itself in the things” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 31; 2012, 24).<sup>13</sup>

Objective thought is the theoretical version of our everyday thinking—our “natural attitude.”<sup>14</sup> For this reason, we cannot, as phenomenologists, just leave it behind or refute it with an alternative theory. Rather, Merleau-Ponty sets out to show how it is that objective thinking arises, in digging up its hidden conditions and pointing to its internal inconsistencies.

Thus, a theory that would not be caught up in the incoherencies of objective thought would have to constitute a radically new form of thinking: one that accepts indeterminacies and ambiguities, and can therefore capture the coming-into-being of the meaningful object, the birth of categories and reason.<sup>15</sup>

It must not be taken for granted, however, that this new form of thinking that Merleau-Ponty announces in *Phenomenology* has already been accomplished. On the contrary, this work should primarily be read as preparing the ground for such thinking, devoted as it largely is to a genealogical critique of objective thought.

One of Merleau-Ponty’s main tools for breaking up objective thinking from within is by taking examples from pathology that cannot be accounted for. One recurrent case is the patient Schneider, who was injured during World War I by a shell splinter at the back of his head. He was treated by the neurologist Kurt Goldstein and the gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb from the middle of the war and onward, and it is their work and studies based on it that Merleau-Ponty relies upon.<sup>16</sup>

Butler's critique of what she calls Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality hinges upon the latter's assumption that Schneider's sexuality is abnormal. I will discuss Schneider's story at some length, since it is important for the evaluation of Butler's as well as Merleau-Ponty's arguments.

### THE SCHNEIDER CASE

Traditional psychiatry would have diagnosed Schneider as "psychically blind," but his troubles manifest themselves in various ways that cannot be explained by a loss of data in the visual field (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 119f.; 2012, 105f.). Merleau-Ponty states that neither empiricism nor intellectualism can account for Schneider's troubles: empiricism considers the body in purely physiological terms, governed by mechanical laws, whereas intellectualism understands the living body in terms of a symbolic, representational function, which unifies the experiences of the body into an intelligible whole. For Merleau-Ponty, empiricism has an advantage over intellectualism, in this case, since it can account for illness as such, in terms of physical and chemical effects on the body. So although intellectualism has the merit of taking into account the conditions of experience, instead of treating the latter as an assemblage of pure empirical data, it ends up in an absolute consciousness unsusceptible to the factual situation, and thus to disease.

If Schneider is asked to point at his shoulder, he is incapable of doing so, although he can perform the exact same movement, "with an extraordinary swiftness and precision," if it has a concrete further goal, such as if a mosquito bites his shoulder and he wants to slap it, for example (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 120; 2012, 106). The only way for Schneider to execute a movement in abstraction from the concrete situation is to make preparatory movements with his whole body that allow him to "find" his arm or his head, or else to retrieve the complete bodily position that is needed in the concrete case (121; 106f.).

Schneider's example illustrates Goldstein's distinction between concrete and abstract attitudes:<sup>17</sup> abstract movements do not address an actual situation but are those that, for instance, are carried out upon

order, such as moving a limb or pointing at a particular part of one's body.

The case is intriguing since Schneider's inability to perform movements abstractly can neither be explained in purely physiological terms—he can perform the very same movements in a concrete situation—nor can they be described as a lack of intellectual understanding on his part. He does comprehend the meaning of what he is supposed to do, but in this situation he cannot “find” his limbs. The command lacks what Merleau-Ponty calls motor signification: it merely has an intellectual signification that Schneider must subsequently translate into movements (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 128; 2012, 113).<sup>18</sup>

If Schneider is presented with a familiar object outside of its context of use, such as a fountain pen, and is asked what kind of thing it is, he responds: “Black, blue, shiny. And white patches on it. It resembles a stick. Since it is long. It could be some sort of instrument. It glitters. It shines. Could also be colored glass” (Hochheimer 1932, 49).<sup>19</sup> Through a careful analysis where he is led from one step to the next by language, he can finally recognize the fountain pen. In this procedure, Merleau-Ponty writes, what is given by the senses “suggests” certain significations “in the manner that a fact suggests to the physicist an hypothesis” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 152; 2012, 133). Schneider is groping in darkness: whereas for the normal perceiving subject, the signification or the concrete essence of the object is “immediately readable,” for Schneider the world does not have a physiognomy or style anymore (153; 133).<sup>20</sup>

In more general terms, Merleau-Ponty describes Schneider's troubles as an incapacity to relate to possible and imaginary situations; the future and the past as well as the spatial horizon beyond his immediate grasp do not mean anything for Schneider. When he complains about the weather and is asked if he feels better in winter, he answers: “I can't say now. Only what's here at the moment” (Hochheimer 1932, 33).<sup>21</sup>

It seems as if Schneider is imprisoned in the actual situation: he cannot hear the background noise if he is talking to someone, and claims that one can see only what one is looking at. In a conversation he has to deduce the meaning of the other person's words and can afterwards only recall the general theme of the discussion and the final decision that was made. He can neither remember the other person's words nor his own:



he can recall only what he has said according to the reasons he had for saying it. “There is,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “something meticulous and serious in all of his behavior, which comes from the fact that he is incapable of playing” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 157; 2012, 136). Playing involves putting oneself in an imaginary situation, and Schneider cannot relate to the imaginary. He can act only if he has a specific, concrete goal. When the issue of his sexuality is brought up for the first time in *Phenomenology*, it is in this context:

Schneider would still like to form political or religious opinions, but knows that it is useless to try.... He never sings or whistles on his own. We will see below that he never takes the initiative sexually. He never goes out for a walk, but always on an errand, and he does not recognize Professor Goldstein’s house when walking by it “because he did not go out with the intention of going there.” (156–57; 136, my emphasis)

The problem, says Merleau-Ponty, is neither Schneider’s intellect or his sensibility, but the union and the “existential conditioning” of the two (152; 132); therefore, a third term is needed between the psychic and the physical, called “existence” (142, n. 1; 520, n. 58). We can understand Schneider’s troubles only if we analyze the structure of his illness as part of a total form of being. Schneider’s existence is “[affected] from a certain ‘side’” (159; 138)—that is, the part of his brain governing vision is attacked—but his whole way of projecting himself to the world is altered. Intellectualism does not make clear how consciousness can be injured at all, and empiricism cannot explain the all-embracing effects that an injury has. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, we have to understand the living body as an expressive unity, whose acts assume a given situation and are sedimented in the world as a natural and cultural history—as existence—if we are to account for the vulnerability of consciousness.

#### BUTLER’S FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MERLEAU-PONTY

Schneider’s case is described in an earlier chapter of *Phenomenology*: “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility.” Thus, it is already supposed

to be known when the issue of sexuality is brought into the picture. This is something that Butler does not take into account in her study, nor does she consider any other parts of the work. Instead, she reads out of context the chapter on the body as sexual being as a statement of a full-fledged theory of sexuality.

Butler carries out her critique in three steps. The first aims to show that Merleau-Ponty fails to acknowledge “the extent to which sexuality is culturally constructed” (Butler 1989, 92). The second step is more radical and involves the assessment of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the sexuality of Schneider. Butler argues that Schneider is deemed abnormal in comparison with a culturally constructed normality, which Merleau-Ponty, against the grain of his general arguments, assumes to be a “natural” sexuality. This is the most important part of her argument and the one I will focus on here. The third step is an elaboration upon the results from the former, and involves the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s theory turns out to reify a relation of domination between the sexes, formulated in terms of a dialectic between master and slave.

Butler’s objection to Merleau-Ponty’s handling of Schneider’s sexuality is that he declares it abnormal; thereby, he assumes a certain culturally constructed form of sexuality as the standard of normality. The norm Merleau-Ponty assumes is, according to Butler, that of a “masculine subject as a strangely disembodied voyeur whose sexuality is strangely non-corporeal” (Butler 1989, 93), and a decontextualized, fragmented female body that is the object for the male disembodied desire, described mainly in “visual metaphors” (93). The heading of this part of Butler’s essay is consequently entitled “Misogyny as an Intrinsic Structure of Perception” (92).

The basis for Butler’s judgment is Merleau-Ponty’s description of Schneider’s sexual behavior. In this chapter, we are told that the patient no longer seeks the sexual act of his own volition. Obscene pictures, conversations on sexual topics, the perception of a body do not arouse desire in him. The patient hardly ever embraces, and the kiss has no value of sexual stimulation for him. Reactions are strictly local and never begin without contact. If foreplay is interrupted at that point, there is no attempt to pursue the sexual cycle. During intercourse, *intromissio* is never spontaneous. If the partner reaches orgasm first and moves away,

the initiated desire vanishes. Things happen at each moment as if the subject did not know what to do. There are no active movements, except for a few instants prior to orgasm, which is quite brief. (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 181; 2012, 157)

To Butler it is not obvious that this behavior is pathological; she even claims that Schneider in the end appears as a “feminist of sorts” (Butler 1989, 95). Her more general objection to Merleau-Ponty’s account of Schneider’s sexuality is that it reveals the assumption that the normal subject is a male, disembodied subject gazing at a fragmented female body. This interpretation seems to be corroborated by Merleau-Ponty’s further depiction of Schneider’s case:

For Schneider, it is the very structure of erotic perception or experience that is altered. For the normal person, a body is not perceived merely as any object, this objective perception is inhabited by a more secret one: the visible body is underpinned by a sexual schema, strictly individual, which accentuates erogenous zones, outlines a sexual physiognomy, and calls for the gestures of the masculine body, which is itself integrated into this affective totality. For Schneider, on the contrary, a woman’s body has no particular essence: it is, he says, above all character which makes a woman attractive, for physically they are all the same. (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 182; 2012, 158, my emphasis)

Here Butler contends that Merleau-Ponty presupposes that “the ‘normal subject’ is male, and ‘the body’ he perceives is female” (Butler 1989, 93).

It must not be forgotten, though, that Schneider is a patient suffering from a series of troubles related to an injury in the occipital region, who himself describes his troubles. Schneider is aware that there are things he would like to do that he is prevented from doing: not only to pursue sexual relationships but also, for example, to establish friendships with other people. In the report elucidating his sexuality, Schneider several times remarks that his behavior and reactions were “different before” (Steinfeld 1927, 176).<sup>22</sup>

The studies that Merleau-Ponty relies upon for the Schneider case were written at Goldstein’s institute in Frankfurt. Goldstein’s method

was that of the “unequivocal description of the very essence, the intrinsic nature of the particular organism” (Goldstein 1934, 2; 1939/1995, 25). The symptoms of the patient should be accounted for in minute detail and put in relation to his individual needs and tasks (see, for example, Goldstein 1934, 13f.; 1939/1995, 37f.; 1967, 151f.). This methodology was developed out of dissatisfaction with the traditional methods of biology and their elementistic presuppositions, which not only gave inaccurate theoretical results but also, and above all, were inadequate “in medical practice” (Goldstein 1939/1995, 28).

Thus, the particular individual is the main object of analysis, so the first part of the assumption attributed to Merleau-Ponty by Butler—that the subject is male—is not hidden at all. Schneider is married, and he has also after his trauma had an affair with a girl whom he made pregnant (Steinfeld 1927, 175). In other words, the assumption of Schneider’s heterosexuality is not the consequence of a general norm about sexuality, as Butler believes, but of certain known facts about the patient.<sup>23</sup>

Given this context, the standard of normality that is presupposed in the account of Schneider’s sexuality is not “normal male sexuality” and even less “normal human sexuality,” but rather a healthy Schneider, as he was before his injury, and as he still sometimes would like to be.

It is also clear that Merleau-Ponty refers to Schneider’s “sexual inertia” in the context of his general incapacity for acting in situations that do not have either a habitually or an intellectually defined goal (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 181; 2012, 157). As noted, Schneider could execute a certain movement perfectly well if he had a concrete purpose, whereas he had to “find” his limbs if he were to perform the same movement abstractly. If he is asked to make a military salute or to make the gesture of combing his hair, he must put himself mentally in the situation and show all the other signs of respect, or pantomime the hand that holds the mirror (121; 107). In a similar way, he can act sexually only if another person takes the lead and creates the concrete situation for him.

In Butler’s view “Schneider is subject to the clinical expectation that sexual intercourse is intrinsically desirable regardless of the concrete situation, the other person involved, the desires and actions of that other

person” (Butler 1989, 92). But if the descriptions of Schneider’s sexuality are interpreted in the context of his full story, it appears that he is diagnosed to have a problem, not because he wrongfully takes the concrete situation into consideration, but because he is locked up in it, and not because he fails to perform according to a misogynous norm for masculine sexuality, but because he does not perform at all of his own accord. Schneider has no difficulties in going on errands or accomplishing his job as a wallet manufacturer,<sup>24</sup> or getting an erection if a woman touches his penis: but in the erotic situation he does not know “what is to be done” at each stage any longer. This circumstance indicates that sexual behavior is not like “blowing one’s nose.” The normal sexual behavior that Schneider’s is compared to is rather that which takes place in the openness of a situation where the goals are not set up beforehand, but have to be continually reinvented, such as when one is singing to oneself or fantasizing or playing, or having a conversation with someone without that “plan settled in advance,” which Schneider stands in need of (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 157; 2012, 136).

### SCHNEIDER—A FEMINIST?

The second part of Butler’s assumption—that the perception of a normal male subject is directed at a fragmented female body—is even more problematic. Butler’s analysis depends on her claim that the sexual schema in Merleau-Ponty’s description becomes a reduction of the body “to its erogenous (to whom?) parts,” and thus decontextualizes and fragments it even further (Butler 1989, 93). This schema, however, must be understood as a version of the bodily schema that Merleau-Ponty appealed to earlier as one of those ambiguous notions “that appear at turning points in science” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 114; 2012, 101). The bodily schema is the particular unity of the living body that takes place “in between” body and mind, physiology and representation; it is a dynamic unity acquired in interplay with others, where actions are sedimented as habits and become part of the body’s structure.<sup>25</sup> This habitual—and thus “culturally constituted”—system of transposition

ensures, for example, that a verbal order immediately has a motor significance, or brings about that the gestures of a particular masculine body are integrated into an affective totality that may include a female body.

The erotic perception that Merleau-Ponty refers to as normal is a way of perceiving a body that emphasizes the erogenous zones. But nothing in his case indicates that erotic perception is restricted to male perception of females. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty assumes that the emphasis on erogenous zones is what makes the perception of a body erotic, but that does not determine what zones are to be considered erogenous, and by whom.

In Butler's view, perception appears to have a misogynist structure in Merleau-Ponty, not only because the perceiving body turns out to be male, but also since the body perceived is condemned to be a female essence. In Butler's view, it is for this reason that Schneider can be called a feminist: by "refusing to endow a woman with an essence, Schneider reaffirms the woman's body as an expression of existence, a 'presence' in the world" (Butler 1989, 95). The basis for Butler's claim is Merleau-Ponty's characterization of Schneider's perception quoted above: "[For him], a woman's body has no particular essence..."

Butler's assumption is that being an existence is opposed to and therefore excludes having an essence. This is true only if essence is understood in intellectualist terms, as a pure *eidōs*, determined once and for all and separated from existence. But the whole point of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* is to uproot this dichotomous thinking and show how essences can, as he puts it in the preface, "bring back all the living relations of experience, as the net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, x; 2012, lxxix) or, in short, how they can be incarnated in existence.<sup>26</sup>

What Schneider is incapable of perceiving is a particular essence, that incarnated meaning or style that makes one woman's living body distinguishable from another body. When Butler writes that Schneider "reaffirms the woman's body as an expression of existence ... Her body is not taken as a physical and interchangeable fact, but expressive of the life of consciousness" (Butler 1989, 95), she has forgotten that Schneider sees only amorphous patches and has to guess what they are. "Through

vision alone, Schn. does not recognize any object” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 131; 2012, 115). In the street, Schneider manages to distinguish human beings from cars, since, in his own words: “‘Human beings are all alike, thin and long; cars are wide, it is obvious, they are much thicker.’ The patient spreads out his arms” (Goldstein and Gelb 1917, 108).<sup>27</sup> He recognizes a woman’s body only with the help of particular, obvious clues, such as hair length, breasts, and the triangular form of her genital area (Steinfeld 1927, 176). As to the “character” that Schneider is said to appreciate in a woman, it has to do with the fact that he distinguishes one person from another only if she takes an interest in him in some way. If this doesn’t happen, people are “all alike” (177).

What is more, the allegation that Merleau-Ponty focuses only on “visual metaphors” might be countered by recalling that it is primarily Schneider’s vision that is impaired; therefore the visual sense is the focus of the descriptions. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty makes numerous references to the tactile sense, contrary to Butler’s claim. In the passage quoted earlier, he wrote: “The patient hardly ever embraces, and the kiss has no value of sexual stimulation for him.” In the same paragraph, we are told that tactile stimulations, in spite of the fact that the sense of touch is not directly affected by the injury and that it functions perfectly well in other circumstances, “have lost their sexual signification,” that “close bodily contact only produces a ‘vague feeling’” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 182; 2012, 158–59). It is only in the situation where his organ is manipulated—touched—by a woman, and where she performs all the activities of sexual intercourse that he is capable of feeling a drive and a sense of well-being albeit for just a few seconds (cf. Steinfeld 1927, 176).

## INCARNATED EFFECTS OF DISCOURSE

Butler further criticizes Merleau-Ponty’s reference to certain structures of the living body as “metaphysical” or “essential,” as well as labeling the body “a natural self.” Merleau-Ponty would hereby separate a primordial level of biological subsistence, and even of natural sexuality, from a posterior level of cultural signification. In this respect, Butler’s interpretation coincides with that of some of her own critics who, as I mentioned earlier, believe that Merleau-Ponty can help us “renaturalize”

the body: reconquer its nondiscursive meaning from the constructions of poststructuralist feminism.

The common presupposition here turns out to be that the gendered body must either be totally constructed—and in that case the mere mentioning of the word “nature” will be a contradiction in terms—or there must be a level of pure bodily meaning, as yet unaffected by culture. Butler writes: “it is unclear that there can be a state of sheer subsistence divorced from a particular organization of human relationships” (Butler 1989, 91). But claiming that there are several levels of existence, and that respiration and nutrition are primordial to active, experiencing life, is not to assume that we can come across “a state of sheer subsistence” or a pure, natural meaning prior to culture and discourse. It is only to assume that we, through acts of discourse, can distinguish analytically between events that might be called “natural” or “biological” and discursive incidents in a general sense: between an injury from a falling tree and a wound from a kick in the head by the boot of a skinhead, or between brain-damage, as in the Schneider case, and the psychic (and curable) trauma suffered by the aphonic girl described in the same chapter (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 187f.; 2012, 163f.).

Furthermore, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of metaphysical significations, it is in the sense of incarnated essences I referred to above rather than a “reification” of cultural relations, as Butler claims: they can always be taken up anew and transformed. In fact, this notion does not appear to be far from what Butler in *Bodies that Matter* calls “materializing” effects of discourse, “constructions without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all, those which have acquired for us a kind of necessity” (Butler 1993, xi).

For Merleau-Ponty, our acts of expression and thinking—of discourse—must be seen as rooted in a world we did not create, and that we can ultimately never view in its entirety. An injury to the occipital region can radically transform not only the patient’s perception of the world, but his very capacity to relate to others. The point is precisely to show that sexuality is not an autonomous apparatus in humans, but that it is “geared into the total life of the subject” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 185; 2012, 161).



## TOWARD A GENDERED BODY-PROPER

Butler's early reading of Merleau-Ponty's chapter on sexuality works under the assumption that one particular case of sexual behavior we are presented with—that of the brain-damaged Schneider compared to a “normal” male (presumably Schneider himself before injury)—can be generalized to a theory of sexuality. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty is here rather offering a “genealogical” critique of objective thought: offering a theory of sexuality at this stage would indeed be premature, given that the stated purpose of the chapter is to show how meaning comes into being for us: it is a step on the archaeological route leading from the constituted object of perception to its constitution in experience.

For Merleau-Ponty, sexual desire is an example of affectivity, and thus of a region that more obviously makes resistance to the dualistic categories of objective thought. It seems to form a realm precisely in between subjectivity and objectivity. Through examining that realm, we can come closer to an understanding of being in general, and the “in between” may come to characterize being as such.

The problem with Butler's position in the article discussed here is that it does not allow for a distinction from within discourse, between discursive events and nondiscursive events, and hence for an adequate description of the wounded body. Therefore, the sufferings of the brain-damaged Schneider will magically transform him into a feminist of sorts, and the accusation of “discursive fundamentalism” seems founded with respect to her argument here.

Certainly, Butler does not put forward a discursive reductionism in a metaphysical sense, and in her work subsequent to *Gender Trouble* she endeavors to clarify her position in this respect. When Merleau-Ponty's ideas appear in her later texts, they are clearly taken to be in line with her own thought; for example, when she in *Undoing Gender* states, with reference to the by now familiar chapter of *Phenomenology*: “to a certain extent sexuality establishes us as outside of ourselves; we are motivated by an elsewhere whose full meaning and purpose we cannot definitively establish” (Butler 2004, 15).<sup>28</sup> The “deception” she speaks of in the German postscript, with regard to Merleau-Ponty's work, no longer seems to be in play (Butler 1997b, 185).

We saw that Merleau-Ponty's critique of objective thought and his efforts to formulate this region "in between," provide a framework that breaks up and thus points beyond the opposition between sex and gender, body and language, nature and culture. The living body that is at the center of his account is an expressive and yet brutally material structure that a nonnaturalistic feminist theory of sexuality cannot avoid taking into consideration.<sup>29</sup> That being said, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of "the body as a sexual being" are—rather than "abstract and anonymous," as Butler writes (Butler 1989, 98)—surprisingly rudimentary in that they hardly mention the question of sexual difference or consider the gendered body as a significant phenomenological example in itself. Even if this were not the place for a radically new theory in the sense that his general philosophy would have demanded, the question remains why his account of sexuality is limited to a few pathological cases and some scattered general remarks, while giving such rich and detailed descriptions of the spatiality and the expressivity of the body.

Even though Butler in her 1989 essay fails to recognize the gist of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of sexuality, she discerns a point of weakness that is of fundamental importance for feminism: concerned as he is with the objectivistic "matrix," he is not aware of the heterosexual and sexist one. A thorough assessment of his work from this angle, and of the possibility to develop his account of the gendered body is, in my view, a future task for feminist phenomenology.

## NOTES

I am indebted to the anonymous referees of *Hypatia* for valuable comments on this article.

1. This idea was introduced in Butler 1986 and developed in particular in Butler 1990/1999 and 1993.

2. Veronica Vasterling wants to attenuate this criticism of Butler's position (Vasterling 1999), showing that it is not "incompatible with the goals of feminism", as Benhabib claims (Benhabib 1995, 20).

Rather than characterizing Butler's theories as discursive monism, Vasterling uses the term "epistemological linguisticism" to describe her viewpoint, which is not without its own problems. See Vasterling 2003, in particular 209f.

3. For example, Joan W. Scott, "Experience" (Scott 1992), among other texts, whose position Stoller thoroughly discusses (Stoller 2009, 707f.).

4. One example is Shannon Sullivan's criticism of Merleau-Ponty (Sullivan 1997), which according to Stoller represents a "dubious Merleau-Ponty skepticism" (Stoller 2000, 180). Johanna Oksala's "post-phenomenological" account in Oksala 2006 is arguably a more nuanced reading.

5. According to a footnote, this essay was written in 1981. It was republished in German translation in 1997, with a postscript by the author (Butler 1997b). More precisely, Butler is referring to chapter 1:V of *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The Body as a Sexual Being."

6. This favorable judgment is repeated in Butler 2004, 33.

7. This is clearly formulated by Butler herself when she states that "feminist theory... has both something to gain and something to fear from Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality" (Butler 1989, 86).

8. Butler's paper has been discussed by Elizabeth Grosz, who believes she makes "a most convincing case" against the purported neutrality of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on sexuality (Grosz 1993, 58; 1994, 221); by Linda Martín Alcoff, according to whom the analysis shows that his "account of sexuality is patriarchal heterosexuality, and ... naturalizes current gender relations" (Alcoff 2000b, 50); and by Stoller, who is less convinced by Butler's reading, although her aim is mainly to show the general compatibility between phenomenology and poststructural feminism: therefore, she gives no detailed assessment of the arguments (Stoller 2010).

9. I have occasionally changed the translations. The statement quoted also constitutes one of the starting points for Butler's more sympathetic account of phenomenology in Butler 1988.

10. Ignorer in French is ambiguous: it can mean both “ignore” and “be unaware of,” “not know.” Both senses are clearly in play here.

11. Merleau-Ponty’s notions should be seen as characterizing certain tendencies in the history of thought, especially from the so-called scientific revolutions and onward, rather than generic terms supposed to cover all possible definitions of empiricism versus rationalism. Examples given of intellectualists/rationalists are certain propensities in Descartes and Kant, as well as Ernst Cassirer, Jules Lagneau, and Alain. Empiricists are those heirs of Hume who during the nineteenth century tried to explain perception in mechanistic and elementistic terms, and who were subject to the Gestalt theorists’ criticism, so important for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development.

12. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty does not mean by “constitution” a transcendental ego’s production of transparent meanings, but rather the reconstitution of a nontransparent sense by the perceiving, incarnated subject.

13. The French term for “unaware” here is ignorer; cf. note 10.

14. Edmund Husserl’s label for the implicit ontological convictions we have about the world and ourselves as part of this world, which precede the phenomenological conversion, is natural attitude: see Husserl 1971/1976; 1982, §§27f. For Merleau-Ponty, the certainties of the natural attitude are precisely the theme of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1945, viii; 2012, lxxvii).

15. See, for example, Merleau-Ponty 1945, 139–40, 278f., 419; 2012, 122, 250f., 382.

16. Schneider was a patient of Goldstein and Gelb at the Hospital for Brain Injury in Frankfurt (later the Institute for Research on the After-Effects of Brain Injuries). Created by Goldstein, its main purpose was to rehabilitate soldiers who had received brain injuries in the war. Goldstein’s writings were important for Merleau-Ponty at an early stage, especially his work *Der Aufbau des Organismus* (Goldstein 1934; 1939/1995).

17. The distinction between concrete and abstract or categorial functions was first made in Goldstein 1924/1971, and developed in several later works. It was also formulated as a difference between showing and reaching in Goldstein 1931/1971.

18. For an excellent discussion of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Schneider's case in relation to the French philosopher's notion of motor intentionality, see Jensen 2009.

19. My translation. Quoted in Merleau-Ponty 1945, 152; 2012, 132.

20. "*immédiatement lisible*"; *lisible* in French can mean both readable, legible, and, by extension, visible.

21. My translation. Quoted in Merleau-Ponty 1945, 158; 2012, 137.

22. My translation.

23. Therefore, it does not seem likely to presuppose that he is in reality homosexual, as Butler does in the later postscript (Butler 1997b, 185).

24. Where his productivity equals three quarters of that of a normal worker (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 120; 2012, 105).

25. The terms "body schema" and "body image" were developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, but it is the work of neurologist Henry Head (Head 1920), and psychiatrist Paul Schilder (Schilder 1923; 1935/1999) that have become the main literature on the subject. Recently, the American philosopher Shaun Gallagher has taken up these notions: see Gallagher 1986; 1995; 2005, 19f.

26. Linda Fisher points out that feminist theory can hardly avoid essences in this sense, generalizations based on particular experiences: it cannot rely upon singular, ineffable experiences (Fisher 2000, 28f.).

27. My translation. The passage is quoted in Merleau-Ponty 1945, 131, n. 3; 2012, 519, n. 36.

28. Already in her article on Irigaray, written in 1990 according to a footnote, Butler defends Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy of the flesh (Butler 2006). In the postscript mentioned, she writes: "I also believe that today I would no longer romanticize

Schneider's asexuality" (Butler 1997, 185, my translation), a formulation that indicates a certain ambiguity toward her earlier ideas.

29. Note that Merleau-Ponty's notion of expression is not the literal, mechanistic one that Butler often relies upon (for example, in Butler 1988). As Stoller has shown it comes rather close to Butler's own idea of performativity (Stoller 2010).

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