Interview with Professor Gail Weiss

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You have published extensively on the philosophy of the body and embodiment. Why are you drawn to this field?

I was first introduced to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* as a senior philosophy major in a semester long course, and even though I found the text very difficult at the time, his arguments against mind-body dualism and his own understanding of the body-subject immediately resonated with me. I had already read Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* with deep interest earlier that year and Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis upon the primacy of embodied experience poignantly revealed the shortcomings of Sartre’s Cartesian distinction between being-for-itself (-être-pour-soi) and being-in-itself (être-en-soi), particularly his association of the body with the immanence of being-in-itself. A few years later, I read Iris Young’s classic essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” and her critique of Merleau-Ponty’s allegedly gender-neutral account of embodiment also struck home. While I agreed with Young’s argument that Merleau-Ponty ignored the significance of gender differences in bodily experience, and that these latter are primarily due to differences in how boys and girls are taught to view their bodies and bodily capabilities, I also thought (and still think) that Merleau-Ponty’s work provides the best starting point for theorizing the centrality of the body in all aspects of human experience.

In your work you address the body as it is marked by gender, social class and race. Why do you think the matter of bodily difference important for philosophy?

There are really many answers to this question but I will focus on one in particular, namely, that the work that has been done in the last couple of decades on bodily difference has been some of the most exciting work to read and discuss in our discipline today. Whole fields including feminist theory, critical race theory, and more recently, disability studies take bodily difference as a primary subject of investigation and taking bodily difference seriously has not only opened up provocative new ways of thinking about ethics and politics but has also posed challenges for psychoanalysis and phenomenology that have significantly re-shaped both methodologies. Acknowledging the significance of bodily differences is important for
philosophy because it leads to the rejection of narrow understandings of what philosophy is and what philosophers should be doing. To take bodily difference seriously means to reject “armchair” philosophizing and to take a self-reflexive stance towards how one’s own embodied experience has helped to shape the understandings of truth, knowledge, beauty, and goodness that philosophers hold dear. Of course, this need not mean rejecting these notions altogether, but it does involve taking them off their lofty pedestal to examine which bodies are seen as having the most privileged access to these “eternal” values.

**Phenomenology and feminist theory are major influences on your research on the body. What do you think the role of feminist philosophy is in the project of phenomenological philosophy in general?**

For me, feminist philosophy and phenomenology go hand in hand. Both affirm the primacy of lived experience (and the central role of the body in particular) and both seek to uncover the hidden presuppositions that underlie our taken-for-granted notions of that experience with the ultimate aim of offering a more accurate and more comprehensive description of that experience. However, this doesn’t mean that all feminist theorists should be phenomenologists or that all phenomenologists should be feminist theorists. If I’m doing feminist logic, for instance, it is not as obvious how this project can or should be phenomenological (though I must confess I think a case can still be made for the latter!). On the other hand, it is harder to think of phenomenological investigations that would not be significantly improved by the insights offered by a feminist perspective precisely because the latter often reveals the crucial “blind spots” in what had hitherto been presented as a thorough investigation. Feminist philosophy, then, offers an invaluable means of testing the rigor of phenomenological insights, keeping us honest in our claims to be offering a comprehensive description of a given phenomenon by forcing us to question continuously who and what might be excluded by the analysis we are providing.

**Much of your work combines the insights of social constructivism with phenomenology. Are these theoretical approaches to the body compatible?**

My short answer is “absolutely.” There is a surprisingly pervasive misunderstanding about phenomenology that circulates among many poststructuralist continental thinkers and that is articulated by Pierre
Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice*. The claim is that phenomenology is a subjectivist philosophy, primarily concerned with the Husserlian project of providing an eidetic (essential) description of consciousness. Hence, the story goes, phenomenology is an ahistorical, apolitical, solipsistic approach that has nothing important to say regarding contemporary social and political issues. If one accepts this view, then there definitely seems to be a tension between social constructionism and phenomenology. Yet, this is a totally false dichotomy. Phenomenology, as Husserl first articulated it, is committed to describing (some aspect of) lived experience as accurately, comprehensively, and rigorously as possible without appealing to prejudices or presuppositions about that experience. Insofar as our understandings of the world, of others, and of ourselves both effect and are affected by our ongoing social interactions, it would be remiss of any phenomenology worthy of the name to ignore this constitutive aspect of lived experience. Indeed, if one artificially isolated a phenomenon from its social and political context, denying the influence of the latter, one would get a distorted view of the phenomenon as it actually presents itself in everyday life.

I notice that you have written about bodily ambiguity and anonymity. Why do you think these themes are important in investigations of the body?

Both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty have been strong influences on my work on bodily ambiguity as well as, in Merleau-Ponty’s case, anonymity. By embracing ambiguity, both Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir are able to move decisively away from an either/or dualistic ontology and affirm the way in which human experience is always a “both/and.” While Beauvoir focuses on the ethical and the gendered implications of the ambiguity of human existence, arguing that we must embrace our transcendence and our immanence and refuse to see one sex as more transcendent or immanent than the other, Merleau-Ponty develops a new ontology of the flesh that traces the ambiguities that both separate and unite bodies (human and nonhuman) with other bodies. For both of these authors, to say that human existence is ambiguous is to say that it always has more than one possible meaning, and both see the multiplicity of meaning as a positive phenomenon that gives richness to our experience. Not only do I share their view that ambiguity is a lived intercorporeal experience but I also understand anonymity to one of the ways in which that ambiguity is lived on a daily basis. In his *Phenomenology of the Social World*, Alfred Schutz provides a wonderful description of the anonymity of social existence, and reveals that this is
not a negative or deficient experience but indispensable for navigating the myriad interactions we sustain with other people throughout our lives. My own dissertation advisor, Maurice Natanson (a former student of Schutz) wrote a wonderful book on anonymity that further elaborated the anonymous aspects of both subjectivity and social life. So, I was exposed to the themes of ambiguity and anonymity fairly early in my own philosophical life and yet I feel like I have only just begun to plumb the insights they have to offer. The body seems to me to be the most exciting place to see how they play out and make possible different types of exchanges between different types of bodies.

In your book Body Images you write about an ‘embodied ethics’ which arises out of intercorporeal relations. How do you think a prescriptive ethics can arise from the body and its relations to other bodies?

Frankly, I don’t think a prescriptive ethics can arise anywhere else. Why would two disembodied minds have need of an ethics? It is precisely because ethical subjects are always embodied subjects and because unethical actions harm people’s bodies (e.g. murders are crimes against bodies and not crimes against minds!), that we cannot afford to neglect the central role played by what I call “bodily imperatives,” namely, the ethical demands that issue from one body to another whether these demands take negative forms such as “do not harm me” or more positive (but nonetheless related) demands such as “care for me.”

You have recently written about conjoined twins, a topic which Margrit Shildrick has also explored at length. What philosophical insights can be gained from considering the unusual case of conjoined twins?

Conjoined twins, I argue, reveal in the most visible way the intimate intercorporeal connections that sustain, as well as cause inevitable tensions within, human existence. What I find especially noteworthy is the way in which conjoined twins challenge the dominant logic of “one body one identity” that is so taken for granted in everyday life. The widespread acceptance of and praise for separation surgeries on conjoined twins even when the surgeries often lead to death or a severely compromised existence for one or both twins, reveals how strongly we are committed to this dominant logic. The fact that adult conjoined twins are not consulted as “expert witnesses” on the quality of a conjoined life shows that there is an “epistemology of ignorance” operating, that is, a refusal to avail ourselves
of knowledgeable resources, that has had deleterious effects not only on conjoined twins and their families but also on our society as a whole.

**Merleau-Ponty is championed as the philosopher of embodiment of the twentieth-century** (Richard Shusterman calls him the “patron saint of the body” in *Body Consciousness*), but Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has come under much criticism. Briefly, what do you think is the most important contribution Merleau-Ponty’s work has made to Western philosophy, and what do you think are the most important omissions in his phenomenological portrayal of the body?

These are certainly debatable issues but I would have to say that Merleau-Ponty’s most important contribution to Western philosophy is his ability to move beyond traditional ontological and metaphysical dualisms by offering us a phenomenologically compelling account of embodiment as always integrating mind and body, self and other, nature and culture, an account that continues to profoundly engage and influence a whole new generation of continental thinkers both within and outside of philosophy. Indeed, his work is still inspiring exciting new interdisciplinary research 100 years after his birth. The most important omissions in his work are, I believe, the ones that have been so ably identified by feminist and critical race theorists such as Judith Butler, Iris Young, and Frantz Fanon, namely, his failing to acknowledge, much less describe, the profound ways in which one’s bodily existence can be severely diminished in meaning and value when one is perceived as being of the “wrong” (inferior) sex, the “wrong” (inferior) gender, and/or the “wrong” (inferior) race. He is actually better on class and disability issues than on race, sex, or gender, however one of the positive results of this omission is that he has left the rest of us a lot of interesting work to do! I believe that doing it actually supports rather than works against Merleau-Ponty’s own project insofar as we end up with a better understanding of how our bodies and identities are intersubjectively constituted and never just ours alone.

**In the recent conference of the Society for European Philosophy which was held at University College Dublin, a panel was formed to address the question of the future of phenomenology. In your view what is the future for phenomenology and how do investigations of the body fit into that?**

I hope it is clear from my previous responses that I think phenomenology has a
very promising future. I am reminded of Merleau-Ponty’s famous lines from the end of his essay, “Eye and Mind” where he maintains that each painter starts at the beginning insofar as every painting, in resolving one problem such as the problem of perspective, creates new challenges that the painting sets out to resolve, and thus no painting will ever “complete” painting once and for all. I feel that this is an excellent description of phenomenology as a methodology. The best phenomenologists reveal the inexhaustibility of the lifeworld, pointing the way toward the phenomenologies yet to come. In Husserlian language, each new phenomenological account should open up new horizons to interrogate and/or old horizons to examine afresh. Since the body is implicated in all phenomenological descriptions insofar as we cannot help but participate as embodied agents in the world we are describing, it cannot function as an unquestioned presupposition but must remain perpetually in question. This means that we must never rest content with a fixed understanding of what bodies mean or which bodies matter (to borrow from Judith Butler), but must continually be cognizant of the remarkable diversity of bodies, and how much we have to learn from embodied experiences that differ radically from our own.

Questions by Luna Dolezal and Sheena Hyland