

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE  
**FEMINIST EXPERIENCES:  
FOUCAULDIAN AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INVESTIGATIONS**  
*By Johanna Oksala*

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Johanna Oksala's 2016 book is, broadly speaking, a sustained defense of feminist philosophy defined as a form of social critique, that is, as pursuit of better forms of knowledge as well as better forms of society (3). Feminist philosophy is therefore not a simple aggregate of philosophy and feminism construed respectively as a pure contemplative and critical inquiry and a socially engaged and politically motivated ideology. Oksala seeks to preserve the methodological rigor and the transcendental aspirations of feminist *philosophy*, and she therefore defends a feminist metaphysics grounded in conceptual schemas as thematized by Kant, but she historicizes the transcendental project by situating it in the historical moment of the present time; she thus exposes the relative stability as well as the radical contingency of current normative and conceptual configurations. The historicity of conceptual schemas serves as an opening to critical reflection, resistance, and revolt against socially oppressive power arrangements, and it addresses the concern with social critique and social change of a *feminist* philosophy as Oksala defines it. The author selects classical phenomenology and Foucauldian genealogy as the two philosophical traditions that in various ways assume the historically produced hence revisable conceptual schemas both at the level of theory and practice. While her sympathies seem to lie with Foucault, she concedes that the phenomenological reduction is an invaluable resource for critical reflection insofar as it breaks with naturalism and suspends everyday attitudes. Surprisingly perhaps, Oksala thus opts to mine texts that do not expressly grapple with questions of gender and sexual difference as major resources for a feminist *philosophy*; she tends to not read texts from *feminist* philosophy, notably feminist phenomenology, with comparable care and does not foreground them as potentially rich theoretical resources for thinking conceptual schemas in their historical specificity. In my review, I will therefore raise the following guiding questions to *Feminist Experiences*:

1. Does Oksala construct her philosophical library of references in a way that prominently features a classical corpus of texts, and places others on a lower shelf, where they are catalogued as a failure to think complex philosophical issues? Do the already canonized founders of philosophical traditions (phenomenology, genealogy) dominate the author list, at the expense of those who still need to make a case for philosophical legitimacy insofar as they are feminists?

2. Are there omissions of references from the feminist philosophical library that are significant insofar as they may affect Oksala's argument, especially her assessment of phenomenology as a tradition in need of radical revision if it is to be of merit to an emancipatory project? Is phenomenology construed too narrowly because of the choice of readings, and would it emerge as a more politically productive approach (and closer to Foucault's genealogy) if the library of references included key texts from feminist phenomenology?

In what follows, I will make the case that both sets of questions can be reasonably answered in the affirmative, and that, as a result, Oksala's laudable goal of rehabilitating feminist philosophy as a form of social critique would benefit from including feminist phenomenological works in its philosophical library, and from bringing phenomenology and genealogy into a greater rapprochement than her current argument allows. Thematically, I will focus especially on the interrelation between experience and language, the recovery of experience as a site of social contestation of oppressive norms, and the interrelation between genealogical and phenomenological methods. I will therefore read part I ("Feminist Metaphysics") and II ("Feminist Phenomenology") relatively closely, and only offer a brief glimpse into the concluding part III ("Feminist Politics"). Overall, I approach *Feminist Experiences* as a sympathetic reader who may be more optimistic regarding the emancipatory potential of feminist phenomenology than the author.

In her plea to recover experience for feminist purposes, Oksala revisits Joan Scott's 1991 influential dismissal of first person accounts of experience ("The Evidence of Experience"), and drawing chiefly on McDowell (1994) develops the idea that experiences are conceptually structured and thus not altogether removed from language. The conceptuality or discursivity of experience provides a powerful rejoinder to Scott's critique: if women may feel a sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction with the dominant cultural norms, this gap between experience and cultural representation "can generate critique as well as create new discourses capable of contesting and contradicting the old ones" (45). It is the conceptualizable and communicable dimension of experience that provides therefore a rich site of feminist contestation and critique. Oksala does not provide specific examples but one can think in this context of the experience of injustice and violation women would have felt before the term *sexual harassment*, *date rape*, or *marriage rape* became coined, socially conventionalized, and legally enshrined. I would have found some philosophical analysis featuring concrete instances of women's experience whose conceptual edge and communicative potential provides an opportunity for critical reflection and social and political reform useful in this regard. Such an analysis would have made Oksala's argument directly relevant to feminist emancipation, as well as more concrete. Instead the reader is offered a reassessment of Linda Alcoff's influential critique of Foucault's account of sexuality that reevaluates Foucault's position on experience as a theoretically fruitful resource for feminist thought – despite the male and adult pattern of epistemic ignorance in *The History of Sexuality* documented by Alcoff (chapter 3). Oksala offers a refined reading of Foucault's surprising (if one accepts a poststructuralist categorization of his work, and the opposition between poststructuralism on the one hand and the "philosophies of experience," that is, existentialism and phenomenology, on the other hand) focus on lived experience. She compellingly argues that, for Foucault, experience should not be construed traditionally as a subjective self-relation but rather as a paradoxical notion, irreducible to either its subjective or objective dimensions. "It is constituted by practices of knowledge and power – as we know from Foucault's influential studies of madness, delinquency, and sexuality—but it also important-

ly contains a self-reflexive and meaning-constitutive dimension, the modes of self-awareness” (57). Not a philosophy of the subject, Foucault’s study is therefore situated within the *field of experience* that subjects and objects form and transform (58). While subjective experiences are effects of games of truth and power, crucially they can modify these practices in turn (59). If Foucault is interested in the transformative potential of limit-experiences like sexuality and madness, it is because he locates a potential for transformation and resistance in ordinary everyday experience as well. Oksala demonstrates how Foucault deploys first person narratives of experience (by Alexina Barbin in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*; of Pierre Rivière in *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, Sister, and Brother*) in a productive juxtaposition with the expert third person medical and psychiatric discourses. Foucault’s critique of dominant discourse from the point of view of subjugated knowledges of “abnormal subjects” thus rests on the assumption that subjective experience is at odds with objective knowledges and norms. Oksala concludes that “the constituted experience and its critical transformation must not be assumed to be two categorically different things. Rather, they are both aspects of the historically heterogenous and self-reflexive nature of experience” (66). She suggests that feminist theorists adopt the Foucauldian conception of experience, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity and critical transformation, as an alternative to the phenomenological conception that is—according to Foucault at least—“foundational and epistemically self-sufficient” (67). This suggestion rests, however, on the hasty assumption that phenomenology defines experience exactly like Foucault says it does, and that the corpus of phenomenological works is devoid of studies of experience that are close to Foucault’s understanding. I will argue that Beauvoir’s phenomenology, read through Butler’s lens, challenges this assumption and provides a perspective on experience as being both constituted and critically transformative, hence broadly compatible with Foucault.

Oksala proceeds to consider the interrelation between experience and language in more depth in chapter 4. She opens with a critique of Sonia Kruks’ appeal to retrieve immediate lived experience (such as pain) as being overly naïve, and predicated on a problematic disjunction between linguistically articulated and prediscursive experience (72-75). The reader is then guided through the technicalities of a debate regarding the status of noematic *Sinn* in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*—is linguistic meaning identical with noematic *Sinn* and hence resistant to phenomenological reduction, as per Fink’s interpretation? Or are meanings immediate and fundamentally prediscursive, as per Frege? (81-82)—and then through the Heidegger–Natorp debate about the accessibility, if any, of immediate experience to reflection, and the risk of objectifying experience within phenomenological description (84). These somewhat formal considerations lead to the conclusion that

... feminist phenomenology should not identify itself too narrowly as a form of theorizing that examines experiences in terms of their prediscursive, grasped, or felt meaning. Rather, it should face up to the philosophical challenge posed by language and mine the rich heritage of phenomenological thought on language and linguistic meaning for its own objectives (87).

A feminist phenomenologist like myself has no qualms accepting the discursive dimension of lived experience, and is happy to rise to the challenge raised by language; I am, however, unconvinced that mining the Husserlian and Heideggerian legacy is sufficient to the task and wonder if it may detract from it considering that the reading exercise takes place at the expense

of mining relevant texts from the feminist philosophical tradition, such as Kristeva's or Irigaray's corpus, for insight regarding the interrelation between experience and discursivity. To be sure, in chapter five, the reader finds a comprehensive account of a "phenomenology of birth" that foregrounds a generative phenomenology and a phenomenology of the event, and carefully reads Christina Schuess' argument for a transcendental understanding of natality (1997) and Françoise Dastur's emphasis on the *event*-like (rather than *experience*) quality of being born (2000). However, ultimately Oksala advocates a move beyond phenomenology to a Foucauldian genealogy, arguing that "further modifications are necessary if we want to phenomenologically account for gender," and noting intriguingly that the challenge faced by feminist phenomenology lies in destabilizing rather than consolidating phenomenological thinking, possibly at the risk of losing a firm footing in the field (96). I will press both the assumed understanding and the need to transcend phenomenology in order to meaningfully address the complexities of gender.

Oksala explicitly takes up "phenomenology of gender" in chapter six, where she proposes four possible readings of phenomenology: the classical reading (incapable of addressing gender due to its transcendental omission of body and sex); the corporeal reading (grounded in the body but incapable of capturing the complexities of culturally constituted gender); the intersubjective reading (incapable of deciphering the constitutive importance of culture, language, and historicity), and the post-phenomenological reading. "Postphenomenology" consists in a partial bracketing of ordinary experience and remains mindful of complex ways through which experience is tied to cultural normativity via language, history, and culture. Postphenomenology would thus open a realm of transcendental investigation without seeking to attain transcendental purity; it would engage with psychological reports and ethnographic studies, and not be narrowly confined to first person experience of embodiment (108).

In my guiding questions to *Feminist Experiences*, I wondered how the author constructs her library of references, and whether any significant omissions affecting her argument result from this construction. My review above suggests a construction that tends to privilege a recovery of foundational texts in Foucauldian genealogy as well as Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, and a featuring of feminist works chiefly as objects of critique. While Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and *The Use of Pleasure*, Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, and Heidegger's "Die Idee der Philosophie," are carefully mined for conceptual resources for feminist theory, the corpus of feminist philosophy is deemed a "boomtown that was built rapidly with contagious energy and enthusiasm," and is currently in need of restructuring if it is to respond to contemporary political challenges, notably neoliberal capitalism (17). As a reading practice, this restructuring process leans heavily on the European canon, and it reads the works of Christine Battersby, Sonia Kruks, and Linda Alcoff as *essays* in need of conceptual tightening and refining (with the help of Foucault). Since Oksala seeks to restructure feminist philosophy, she is interested in the meta-level questions regarding the possibility and limits of philosophical inquiry understood as a transcendental investigation of historical and social arrangements, and she may therefore prefer "higher-order" discourses to the ones mired in the realities themselves. However, this reading practice risks reaffirming a general trend of devaluing feminist works and not recognizing them as being properly philosophical, as if they did not contain a transcendental dimension and a reflection on historically and socially contingent realities that may be brought out by a careful reading.

The undesirable if unintentional effect of such an approach may be a dismissal of *feminist* philosophy. One wonders if the restructuring process must take place *ab ovo*, and the boomtown replaced with foundational texts by non-feminist philosophers? Specifically, I am wondering about the omission of foundational texts from the feminist phenomenological tradition in a study concerned with feminist experiences. I submit that the all too brief mentions of Beau-

voir's *The Second Sex* (97), and the unexamined endorsement of Sara Heinämaa's reading of it (100), lead to a significant omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work that affects the overall argument in the book. In a nutshell, to use the distinction from my "Subject and Structure in Feminist Phenomenology" (in *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology*, 2018), I propose that Oksala assumes a conservative construal of phenomenology and glosses over a *transformative* understanding that is in fact close to her proposal for a "radically modified" phenomenology (13). In her assessment of the corporeal reading of phenomenology, Oksala references Heinämaa's appropriation of Beauvoir's thought as a phenomenology of sexual difference where the latter is a difference between two embodied styles of being (100). Insofar as the philosophical meaning of gender cannot be reduced to the phenomenological analysis of embodiment, Beauvoir's philosophy falls short of capturing gendered complexities. However, this point rests on the acceptance of Heinämaa's interpretation of Beauvoir *whom Oksala does not read*. Nor does she read *about* Beauvoir more broadly, to establish whether other readings may align with her own commitment to feminist philosophy as a philosophy of social change. I revisit my understanding of transformative phenomenology to remedy this potential oversight.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers detailed descriptions of the socially situated experience of women within patriarchy and constitutes an exemplar of a feminist phenomenological approach. Beauvoir herself clearly identified her project as a study in phenomenology, with a particular focus on the lived, experiential body understood as a situation, that is "our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (2011, 46). She also adopted a non-naturalist perspective on the body according to which the body is a "historical idea" (45). This perspective is, in agreement with Oksala, indispensable to a feminist study of gender since it introduces socially contingent, historicized norms and ideals into the analysis. However, its source can be located in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, notably his study of sexuality, and in Beauvoir's understanding of "woman" and any gender as a historical situation (Butler 1988, 520). A direct expression of Beauvoir's view that a gendered body should be understood as a historical situation rather than a fact of nature can be found in the famous motto that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2011, 283). As Butler explains, to be a woman is therefore to be continually engaged in the project of *becoming* one: "it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities" (Butler 1986, 36). Becoming a woman is not to be construed, however, as an unimpeded, voluntary undertaking by an individual subject. For Beauvoir, becoming one's gender mobilizes social pressures as well as subjective acts; importantly, "'becoming' a gender reconciles the internal ambiguity of gender as both 'project' and 'construct'"; therefore, it makes sense that gender is both received and invented (37).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes how dominant social norms and stereotypes tend to socially position women in a servile role in relation to men as the subordinate "second sex." She exemplifies such gendered stereotypes by the (formerly) widespread yet ultimately illusory notion that woman is a mystery, an undecipherable sphinx who by nature eludes rational grasp (2011, 270). She argues the mythical notion of an enigmatic woman is a product of masculine consciousness that sets up its own relative worldview as being absolute (269). This notion ultimately denotes woman's subjugated social and material position: a woman will no longer be perceived as mysterious if her material situation improves (271). Fixed gender norms should therefore be understood as a false objectivity, a mirage—an ideological projection indicative of power inequities in the social world, which men and women maintain through bad faith (271-72). To understand gendered identities from an existential point of view means then to demystify such seemingly objective notions and to highlight the actively undertaken (and reiterated

over and over) project of assuming one's gender.

For Beauvoir, the phenomenological description of the process of becoming-woman needs to be taken in the existential sense of a freely undertaken project but it must take into account her "total situation," including dominant social arrangements and power structures already in place. She notes: "For us a woman is defined as a human being in search of values within a world of values, a world where it is indispensable to understand the economic and social structure; we will study her from an existential point of view, taking into account her total situation" (2011, 61). Beauvoir's phenomenological description of gendered identity combines an account of the subjective acts (and their reiterations) *and* the structured systems within which these acts are situated (and which they shape in turn). Beauvoir integrates the phenomenological-existential emphasis on lived experience with a structural approach, notably a study of elementary kinship structures as developed by her contemporary Claude Lévi-Strauss. In agreement with Lévi-Strauss, she notes that the elementary kinship structure produces an asymmetrical relationship between the sexes, and situates women in a sexually, socially, and materially subordinate position within human society (81). Woman's *total situation* is shaped by a pre-existing distribution of power and prestige; woman's situation may be deciphered by a broad analysis of her economic role and social position within the dominant social institutions, such as the family.

As she integrates the complex category of "woman" into the field of phenomenological description, Beauvoir adapts her approach to accommodate the phenomenon itself. She does not simply expand the subject matter to include the feminine in addition to the already existing set of transcendental and existential categories, but enacts a methodological transformation of phenomenology itself. By approaching gendered identity on its own terms, Beauvoir tackles a phenomenon which depends to a degree on a subjective constitution of meaning (becoming a woman as a freely undertaken project in the existentialist sense) and which is informed by the "total situation" of social structures, power disparities, and dominant gender norms with their concomitant economic status. Therefore, the phenomenological conception of gendered identity calls for a complex category of a *situated subject* who undergoes as well as constitutes meanings, and whose freedom is enabled and constrained by a social-structural positioning in the world. For example, a woman may *feel* deeply passive in the interiority of her consciousness but the felt passivity is not a fixed trait of feminine consciousness and social equality will "bring about an inner metamorphosis" (2011, 764).

I previously argued that Beauvoir's emphasis on the socially situated, historically contingent and henceforth revisable quality of gendered identity calls for an appropriately transformed phenomenological method. "Becoming woman" acknowledges that a gendered subject is effected by as well as co-constituting a shared world of meanings. As Butler argued:

Though phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts." (1988, 519)

In Butler's reading of Beauvoir's phenomenology, the more radical notion of constitution is coupled with a more comprehensive understanding of experience. Contrary to Joan Scott's narrow conception of subjective experience as an end-product of an underlying social process

(1991), Butler proposes (drawing on Beauvoir) that the relation between subjectivity and social structure is dual and reciprocal, and should be understood as a “dialectical expansion of both of these categories” (1988, 523). The dialectical view does not simply oppose acculturation to modes of inventiveness, appropriation to agency, and social constraints to choice, but regards them as being interdependent and mutually constitutive. Specifically, Butler notes that in Beauvoir’s phenomenology “to become a gender means both to submit to a cultural situation and to create one, and [that] this view of gender as a dialectic of recovery and invention grants the possibility of autonomy within corporeal life” (1986, 48). Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology (as read by Butler) thus accommodates the possibility of social change, of a re-structuring of the existing distributions of power and privilege from within, by a series of unprecedented acts.

I believe that the radical notion of constitution entailed by situated subjectivity, a social agent who is both a subject and an object of constitutive acts, and the dialectical expansion of subjectivity and structure suggested by Butler in her reading of Beauvoir, closely resemble Foucault’s understanding of the field of experience as a paradoxical notion, irreducible to either its subjective or objective dimensions, that Oksala describes. While Foucault is interested in limit experiences of “abnormal subjects” such as madness, delinquency, and sexuality, and Beauvoir in women’s objectified subjectivity within patriarchy, they both rely on subjugated knowledges as sites of reflection and critique of dominant social norms. Neither is developing a philosophy of the subject in a classical phenomenological sense where experience is “foundational and epistemically self-sufficient”; for both, subjectivity is socially and historically effected *and* it effects and modifies social norms and ideals in turn. For both, ordinary everyday experience carries a capacity of transformation and resistance; if subjective experience jars with objective representations, the friction generates social malaise as well as provides an opportunity for reflection and revolt. I propose therefore that the constituted character and its critical transformation figure as aspects of the historically heterogenous and self-reflexive experience for Oksala’s Foucault and for Butler’s Beauvoir (66). On this reading, Foucault’s genealogy and Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology are broadly compatible, and the goal of social transformation grounded in feminist experiences can be realized by drawing on both traditions of inquiry. Furthermore, Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology engages empirical studies and reports of women (notably biology and psychoanalysis) as the author of *Feminist Experiences* projects post-phenomenology would, and it is therefore broadly congruent with Oksala’s proposed alternative.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, while I agree that phenomenology needs to be transformed to accommodate the complex phenomenon of gender, I propose that this transformation is already underway within key texts in feminist phenomenology, such as Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. What must be modified then is the operative understanding or *definition* of phenomenology itself, and I proposed to accomplish this task by pluralizing phenomenology into a *conservative* one that seeks to expand, deepen, and correct phenomenological accounts by supplementing them with analyses of gendered experience without modifying the phenomenological method—Oksala assumes this understanding when she follows Linda Fischer (2000, 88)—and the *transformative* one: a Beauvoirian/Butlerian alternative. The latter understanding is much closer to postphenomenology and to Foucauldian genealogy than *Feminist Experiences* suggests. If my point is well taken, then the good news is that Oksala’s project can be partially carried out on the grounds of feminist phenomenology itself. In fact, I regretted that Oksala apparently left the phenomenological grounds behind in the concluding part III devoted to feminist politics. While part III offers a provocative portrait of the “neoliberal subject of feminism” and concludes with a visionary “feminist politics of inheritance,” the neoliberal subject is framed as a site of constituted ex-

<sup>1</sup> For critiques of Butler’s reading of Beauvoir as unduly assuming a sex-gender distinction, and a response, see Stawarska 2018.

perience more than critical transformation of neoliberalism. Perhaps Oksala doubts that such transformations are possible, or believes that they would only reaffirm the neoliberal logic of entrepreneurial subjectivity already in place. The politics grounded in remembrance (a disruption of the received history of collective suffering, an altering of this history in our historical present) says little about wherein women can find a source of strength and solidarity today. I would have been curious to hear more about the following: if feminist experiences transcend the affective spectrum of *ressentiment*, suffering, and powerlessness, what other affects, attitudes, and actions can the feminists imagine and enact as we move into an uncertain future? Critical work in phenomenology can provide some clues about the links between suffering and struggle.

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