What is feminist phenomenology?

Thinking birth philosophically

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In one curious and exceptional fragment from 1933 Husserl discusses sexuality phenomenologically. Even if his taciturnity and his heterosexual prejudices concerning sexuality hardly make him a very original thinker on the topic, this fragment is interesting in relation to the question of the phenomenological importance of women’s experiences. Starting from himself as a man, Husserl has serious problems accounting for procreation and ultimately for the birth of a child:

I start from myself as a man and from my human monad which contains implicitly my immediate surrounding human world. The question arises concerning the intentionality of copulation. In the fulfillment of the drive, immediately viewed, there is nothing concerning the child which is created, nothing concerning what will have the well known consequences in the other subject: the fact that the mother will give birth to the child.¹

Husserl ends the fragment, however, confident that a phenomenological investigation into the structure of his own experience would nevertheless clarify the phenomenon of pregnancy reflected in it:

in the explication from the side of my being in the world as a man, I experience what in the world reveals itself through further inductions, I experience what concerns the physiology of pregnancy. Teleology encompasses all of the monads. What occurs in the motherly domain is not limited to it, but is reflected throughout. But I arrive at this only as an ego that recognizes itself as a scientific man in mundane life and questions my and our monadic being and from there goes systematically further.²

Husserl’s problematic comments on pregnancy and birth form a background against which it is possible to recognize the ground-breaking importance of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. Sara Heinämaa has recently argued that in presenting a philosophical description of women’s experiences and the world as experienced by women Beauvoir’s book was a response to Husserl and his followers (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Heidegger) and their shared implicit assumption that sexual difference is irrelevant to our descriptions of experience.³ In contrast, Beauvoir shows that the neglect of women’s descriptions of their own bodies has serious consequences for philosophical reflection. The problem is not only that explanations of women’s behaviour and sexual relations are thereby biased. What is worse, from a philosophical point of view, is that the neglect limits our understanding of human experience, its scope and its structures. It has led us to present and accept as universal and essential features that belong only to a subclass of all experience – the experiences of men.⁴

However, if Husserl has problems accounting for pregnancy and birth, Beauvoir is notorious for her negative descriptions of them. She describes the fetus, for example, as a ‘parasite’ that feeds on a woman’s body and as ‘a growth arising from her flesh but foreign to it’.⁵

She and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life. Ensnares by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children who are proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life’s passive instrument.⁶

More recent phenomenological descriptions of pregnancy and birth have compensated for these descriptions by emphasizing the positive aspects of motherhood. The aim of these descriptions is still, for the most part, the same as Beauvoir’s: to include women’s experiences in the phenomenological inquiry. Carol Bigwood, for example, argues that descriptions
of pregnancy and birth are important in challenging the various ways in which male modes of embodiment are privileged in our thought and practices. Feminist phenomenology has an important role in reminding us that there is a whole region of experience that philosophers have failed to think.

But, despite the importance of these phenomenological descriptions of women’s experiences, this development is in danger of making feminist phenomenology a study concerned with regional sub-themes in phenomenology more generally, understanding it as only complementing and deepening phenomenological accounts of lived embodiment with accounts of female embodiment. From this perspective, feminist accounts of pregnancy and birth, for example, can add some missing descriptions of embodiment to the phenomenological project, but they do not change the core of it in any essential way.

The aim of this article is to question this perspective and to suggest that the challenges facing feminist phenomenology are more fundamental. Does the study of experiences, such as being pregnant or giving birth, which are traditionally understood as feminist issues and relegated to the margins of phenomenology, not change the phenomenological project in any fundamental way? Do they simply deepen or complement it while leaving intact that which has previously been discovered? This article attempts to show that an analysis of these experiences does not simply point to the need to complement phenomenology with vivid descriptions of labour pains, for example, but suggests a need to rethink radically such fundamental phenomenological questions as the possibility of a purely eidetic phenomenology and the limits of egological sense-constitution. I argue that a careful study of these questions reveals a different understanding of feminist phenomenology, no longer a faithful assistant to the phenomenological project concerned with marginal or regional sub-themes in it, nor a complementary practice adding gender-specific analyses of experience to it. Rather, feminist phenomenology should be understood as a critical current running through the whole body of phenomenological thinking and reaching all the way down to its most fundamental tenets.

In the first two parts of this article I will discuss two critical developments in, or modifications of, the phenomenological project: the phenomenology of the event and generative phenomenology, arguing that these can be viewed as responses to a critical focus on previously neglected experiences such as pregnancy and birth. The third part discusses the consequences of these developments for feminist phenomenology.

The event of birth

If Husserl has problems accounting for the experiences of pregnancy and the birth of a child, his account of the sexual encounter does not fare much better. F.A. Elliston summarizes Husserl’s topology of human sexuality into three theses: sex is a social act; sex seeks copulation; sex is heterosexual. He notes ironically that to disengage oneself from cultural presuppositions in order to examine them critically is indeed an infinite task. Even if Husserl’s views on sexuality could prove to be more nuanced than Elliston claims, it is safe to say that his phenomenological analysis of it does not in any way challenge the findings of his previous phenomenological studies. Yet, as I suggested earlier, his fragment on sexuality is interesting because of the tensions and underlying problems that it reveals concerning intersubjectivity and intentionality, and also the phenomenological understanding of subjectivity as reflecting consciousness.

Husserl depicts consciousness in this fragment as a system of drives seeking fulfillment, one of the most fundamental drives being sexuality. Dan Zahavi argues that in Husserl’s philosophy the intentional activity of the subject is founded upon and conditioned by an obscure and blind passivity, by drives and associations. He notes that Husserl famously declares, in Analysen zur passiven Synthesis, that his investigation of the problem of passivity could well carry the title ‘a phenomenology of the unconscious’. For Husserl, the reflecting consciousness can thus never be totally transparent to itself. There are constitutive processes of an anonymous and involuntary nature taking place in the underground or depth dimension of subjectivity which can only be uncovered through an elaborate archaeological effort. However, viewed intersubjectively sexuality becomes a universal teleology. Elliston claims that in Husserl’s thought sexuality functions as the social bond uniting otherwise isolated monads into a community. Sexuality is essential not just to the meaning of social life but to its very existence: the other is the telos of the sexual drive, and the means by which future generations are born. Sexuality is thus not essentially characterized by obscure and blind passivity, but by a universal teleology always in the process of fulfilling itself. Rather than introducing a fundamental break or contradiction into the horizon of expectations, sexuality correlates with a universal intentionality. Furthermore, the archaeological effort of uncovering this universal intentionality still means for Husserl a reflective investigation of the essential structures of consciousness. Despite its elusive and anonymous nature, sexual experience is characterized
by a first-personal givenness that makes it my experience. This means that it is possible to thematize it, at least to a certain extent, through self-reflection. Sexuality and procreation are thus not understood to decentre subjectivity in any significant way.

According to Iris Marion Young, however, the experience of pregnancy questions the unity of the phenomenological subject. Her description of this experience relies on phenomenological accounts of embodiment, but she also partially criticizes them for their implicit assumption of the subject as a unity. She argues that pregnant embodiment challenges the idea of a unified subject as a condition of possibility of experience because pregnancy is often experienced as an ordeal of the splitting of the subject, a separation and a coexistence of the self and another. It reveals a bodily subjectivity that is decentred: myself in the mode of not being myself.

The first movements of the fetus produce this sense of the splitting of the subject; the fetus’s movements are wholly mine, completely within me, conditioning my experience and my space. Only I have access to these movements from their origin, as it were.... I have a privileged relation to this other life, not unlike that which I have to my dreams and thoughts, which I can tell someone but which cannot be an object for both of us in the same way.... Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body.13

In pregnancy there is thus, according to Marion Young, a discordance in the constitutive unity of bodily subjectivity, although not a discordance due to illness or some other abnormal disturbance. Phenomenological literature is rich in descriptions of the distorted body images of individuals with multiple personality disorders, or individuals with severe neurological disturbances or schizophrenia. But the experience of a split subject in pregnancy cannot similarly be accounted for as a pathological phenomenon. Pregnancy is not only normal, but is essential for human existence. It is a nonpsychotic experience which nevertheless contains alterity and heterogeneity. The integrity of the subject is fractured, but not completely lost.

The decentring of the subject in pregnancy can be viewed as a gradual and fluctuating process culminating in the event of birth. Phenomenologically birth would seem to be, simultaneously, an experience for the mother giving birth and an experience for the child being born. Neither one of these is, however, an ‘experience’ in the strict phenomenological sense. It is my contention that birth is better understood in terms of the phenomenological category of an ‘event’ than of an experience. Françoise Dastur defines an event phenomenologically as that which was not expected,
what comes to us by surprise. The event is always ‘upsetting’, in a certain sense because it does not integrate itself as a specific moment in the flow of time, but drastically alters the whole style of existence. It does not happen in a world; on the contrary, it is as if a new world opens up through its happening. The event constitutes a critical moment of temporality, but a critical moment which nevertheless allows for the continuity of time. It appears as something that dislocates time, giving it a new form; something that puts the flow of time out of joint. The event, in its internal contradiction, is thus the impossible which happens, in spite of everything, in a terrifying or marvelous manner. We can speak about the event only in the third voice and in a past time, in the mode of ‘it happened to me’. We never ‘experience’ the great events of our life contemporaneously.14

First-person descriptions of giving birth often depict birth as an event in this sense, as an upheaval akin to being caught in a violent storm. In both there is a cessation of time, of intention and activity, or there is an alien intention, an intention of life. The boundaries of the body as well as the self are in flux with an extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer. The subject is wrenched from itself. Instead of a constituting subject, in birth there is an upsurge of life beyond control or comprehension, flesh turned inside out.15

If giving birth can be understood as an event that happens to us, being born is certainly an event in this sense, indeed the first great event of our lives:

We did not ask for our birth, and this is testimony to the fact that we are not the origin of our own existence. To be born means that we are conditioned by a past that was never present to us. It can only be appropriated by us later, by assuming these determinations of our existence that we have not chosen. There is therefore a surprise in us in relation to our birth. It is the permanent surprise of being born which is constitutive of our being. It is testimony to the uncontrollable character of this proto-event. In each new event there is a repetition of the proto-event of birth. It is as if we re-experience, in a new event, this radical novelty of what happens for the ‘first time’, as well as the impossibility of coinciding with the event itself, which in its sudden apparition disconnects the past from the future.16

For Dastur, the difficult task for phenomenology is to think this excess to expectation that is the event. The thinking of the event requires that phenomenology cannot be content to remain an ‘eidetic’ phenomenology – the thinking of what remains invariable in experience. It must also be a thinking of what may be and of contingency. The capacity to undergo events implies an active opening to a field of receptivity. To lack this capacity to open oneself to what happens, to welcome no longer the unexpected, would be a mark of psychosis, not of normal experience.17

Arguing that phenomenology and the thinking of the event should not be opposed, Dastur tries to connect them: openness to phenomena must be phenomenologically identified with openness to unpredictability. Phenomenology can think the event because one is not completely passive in relation to it, even if its meaning must remain obscure. Dastur notes that both Husserl and Heidegger saw a passivity within our intentional activity which can only be assumed and not chosen. Like Zahavi, she argues that Husserl’s theory of passive synthesis is an important recognition of this. She also notes that there is a foundation for a phenomenology of expectation in Husserl’s analysis of intentionality because there is always an addition to what is experienced which can never be completely correlated with the intention. Indeed, this addition could even be considered to be at the origin of the intentional movement itself, in the sense that a total fulfilment of intentionality would destroy the structure of experience.18 While relying on the analyses of Husserl and Heidegger, Dastur nevertheless emphasizes through her analysis of birth a different aspect or dimension of the phenomenological subject. The subject is not primarily a self-aware, constituting consciousness, but radically defined by its capacity to undergo events the meaning of which it is not the constitutive source, but which must remain forever obscure.

The generativity of birth

Dastur’s analysis of birth points to a phenomenology of the event in which there is unpredictability to experience capable of shattering the unity of the subject’s horizon of expectations. But a careful analysis of birth also questions the privileged status of the phenomenological subject in another sense, highlighting the limits of egological accounts of sense constitution. In Husserl’s fragment on sexuality, he acknowledges that generative matters such as the birth of a new human being make visible the limits of self-temporalization. The intersubjective act of reproduction motivates new processes in the life of the other that are different from self-temporalization.19 The problems faced by phenomenology in accounting for birth from an egological perspective can be understood to lead to the modifications, in part implicit and in part developed in Husserl’s late writings, that are sometimes referred to as generative phenomenology.
Anthony Steinbock argues that generative phenomenology should be understood as a style of phenomenology, instigated by Husserl in the 1930s, that is concerned with the geo-historical, social, normatively significant becoming or generation of meaning. This development in or modification of static and genetic phenomenology stemmed precisely from the acknowledgement of the problems with egological accounts of sense constitution and the importance of generative matters such as the constitutive role of birth, death and historicity. Generative phenomenology questions the traditional phenomenological assumption that sense-constitution begins with an individual subject rather than extending beyond him or her and stemming from tradition, culture, language and history. Generative phenomena are never given to the individual subject in experience, nor can they ever concern only one person, yet they are constitutive features in world constitution. Steinbock’s account of generative phenomenology is thus not so much an explication as a radical modification of phenomenology. He does not see generative developments as only deepening the phenomenological method, leaving what had previously been discovered intact. Generative matters and methods surpass and even ruin the findings of previous static and genetic analyses. By extrapolating a generative phenomenology, Steinbock is in fact developing a non-foundational, transcendental account of the social world. He argues against the view that phenomenology reduces social structures of meaning to individual consciousness, defining his non-foundational phenomenology as a phenomenology that describes and participates in geologically and historically developing structures of existence and coexistence, as well as their respective modes of constitution, without reducing those modes of constitution or structures to consciousness or to an egological subjectivity.

Steinbock also discusses the constitutive mutations that the questions of birth and death must undergo in generative phenomenology. During the period in which Husserl had only distinguished between a static and genetic phenomenology, he was committed to the idea that the transcendental ego has never been born and will never die. Genetic phenomenology examines the continual process of becoming in time, but the constitution of sense and self-temporalization are studied only within the life of an individual consciousness. This means that life and death form the necessary limits of this analysis but cannot become questions for it because genetic analysis remains within the structures of internal time-consciousness, internal to the becoming of the individual. According to Husserl sleep is a constitutional discordance that can be integrated into individual sense constitution, but birth and death present a profound hiatus in genetic phenomenology that egological constitution cannot overcome. They are precisely the limits of subjective sense constitution.

From the perspective of genetic phenomenology, it is thus impossible to clarify how birth and death belong essentially to world constitution. Birth and death as constitutive problems necessarily escape the parameters of a genetic transcendental phenomenology. Steinbock argues, however, that in considering the possibility of a generative framework for phenomenology, Husserl was obliged to adopt a transcendental perspective in relation to birth and death. From a generative perspective birth and death must be understood as transcendental and not merely mundane events that are involved in the constitution of sense understood as stemming from an intergenerational homeworld. Generative world constitution extends before and after the individual subject in a community of generations. The processes of being born and dying are involved in the generative transmission of sense through traditions and rituals, for example. Birth and death must thus be understood as essential occurrences for the constitution of the world, not merely empirical events within the world.

Christine Schües has also argued that the analysis of natality serves to ground a generative phenomenology with the potential to transform phenomenology into an investigative and critical enterprise, claiming that ‘all of the phenomena in generative phenomenology concern borders, thresholds, and transitions that are most fundamental for the understanding not only of birth, death, and beginning, but also language, personal relations, gender relations, and history’. She distinguishes her account of generative phenomenology from Steinbock’s by arguing that the perspective of natality is fundamental even in comparison with other important generative problems. According to Schües, birth is the fundamental condition of possibility of intentionality. It is only by way of being born into the world – that is, through an original differentiating from prenatal existence – that humans can act and constitute sense. She is concerned with human birth not in the sense of a biological event, but in the sense of a fundamental leap from one mode of being to another, the essential trait of the latter being intentionality. Birth is this leap from the undifferentiated into a confrontational conflict with the differentiated world of objects towards which the senses are directed. According to Schües, birth is thus not the beginning of life, but rather the fundamental leap of coming into the world in a new
mode of existence, through which the already living organism is given a new being.  

**Feminist futures for phenomenology**

If the analysis of birth poses some fundamental problems for some of the central tenets of traditional phenomenology, it also points to the possibilities of a generative phenomenology: to the need to study the intersubjective conditions of possibility of the subject’s experience in birth, death, community, history and language. Dastur’s analysis suggests that it also points to a phenomenology of the event, questioning the traditional conception of the transcendental subject as a unified, constitutive source of meaning. But whether these modifications of phenomenology—generative phenomenology and phenomenology of the event—should be understood as adequate responses to the concerns of its feminist phenomenology must remain an open question. It is clear, at least, that feminist phenomenology cannot be understood only as a merely complementary project. Further, if it is a critical current questioning even the central methodological tenets of phenomenology, this does not mean that its only task is to point out the failures and limitations of phenomenology in relation to women’s experiences. If phenomenology is understood as an ongoing, creative and co-participatory project, sensitive to other critiques and responses, feminist phenomenology must play an important part in contributing to its development. As Linda Martín Alcoff has said, if the phenomenological tradition is to continue in any useful way, and avoid becoming a mere artefact in the museum of philosophical history, it needs feminist theory to acknowledge and explore the ways in which it has been affected by masculine assumptions. This also entails that ‘traditional’ feminist phenomenologists acknowledge the consequences of generative phenomenology and the phenomenology of the event for their own accounts. Are the methods and starting points of feminist phenomenology themselves adequate? What do ‘feminine experience’ and ‘female embodiment’ mean? Can the meaning of sexual difference be phenomenologically understood through egological accounts? It is my contention that generative phenomenology studies the ways in which intersubjective structures such as language form the condition of possibility for singular subjectivity and how experience is structured in accordance with intersubjectively handed down forms of apperception. A generative analysis of birth also makes evident, however, that sexual difference cannot be reduced to a mere linguistic effect. It forms a necessary condition of possibility for procreation and therefore also for the intergenerational constitution of meanings. Feminist phenomenology must seek to understand how sexual difference as an intersubjective structure is constituted and how it is further interlocked with embodiment and singular experiences.

Trying to account philosophically for the recurring miracle of birth means having to come to terms with the groping and unfinished nature of all our theories and philosophical frameworks. I maintain that the greatest challenge feminist phenomenology faces lies not in consolidating but in destabilizing phenomenological thinking, even if it means losing the firm ground on which we stand.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 73.
15. Ibid., pp. 183, 187.
17. Ibid., pp. 184–5, 186.
19. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL., 1995. Husserl seems to have been aware of the necessity for generative investigation even when he does not explicitly develop it. His *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), for example, puts forward an egological account of sense constitution, but he also claims there that the investigation implies the need for further study to deal with the problems of birth and death which have not yet been touched upon. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1988, p. 142. Steinbock argues that we do not find fixed, clear-cut stages in Husserl’s work, but that there are strains of thought or methodological motivations running throughout, often becoming interwoven with other strains or motivations. When developed systematically and consistently, however, these strains have distinct and irreducible implications. See Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, p. 4.
20. Ibid., p. 4. See also pp. 264–5.
21. Ibid., p. 189.
22. Ibid., pp. 190–91.