

SEXUALITY AND EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

SEXUALIDADE E MÉTODO EXISTENCIAL-FENOMENOLÓGICO

Kristin Rodier*

RESUMO

Neste artigo eu exploro a fenomenologia intercorporal de Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty e Simone de Beauvoir refletindo sobre suas perspectivas acerca do ser-com-os-outros e sexualidade. Para Sartre nosso ser para o outro é sempre revelado para nós por meio de conflitos, tais como vergonha, e nós somos levados a pensar no outro tanto como liberdade quanto como corpo. Merleau-Ponty, por sua vez, oferece-nos a noção de sexualidade como uma atmosfera de sentidos que nós podemos apreender gerando efeitos em nosso inteiro ser vivente (corpo-sujeito). Beauvoir revela-nos um encontro erótico por meio de uma relação de gênero e assim um novo caminho para as experiências fenomenológicas de nós mesmos e de outros corpos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: liberdade; encontro erótico; fenomenologia intercorpóreo; sexualidade

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the intercorporeal phenomenologies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir by thinking through their views on being-with-others and sexuality. For Sartre our being-for-others is always revealed to us in conflict as shame and we are stuck thinking of the other as either a freedom or a body. Merleau-Ponty, however, offers us the notion of sexuality as an atmosphere of meaning we can undertake that affects our entire lived being (body-subject). Beauvoir reveals to us the gendering of the erotic encounter and thus a new way of phenomenologically experiencing ourselves and others as bodies.

KEYWORD: freedom; erotic encounter; intercorporeal phenomenologies; sexuality

* Kristin Rodier is a doctoral candidate in the department of philosophy at the University of Alberta, Canada. Her main of research is the connection between freedom and embodiment, concentrating on habit—how to change habits, how habits are changed over time, specifically as it relates to puzzles in feminist philosophy. She has published reviews in *Dialogue*, *Symposium*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. She recently published a comprehensive teaching syllabus entitled *Feminist Philosophy* in the journal *Syllabus* (2012). She also has a forthcoming article on Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* in *Janus Head's* special edition on feminist phenomenology.

Introduction

Existential-phenomenological accounts of embodiment often include an exposition of sexual experience and its various incarnations. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty includes a chapter on sexuality and Jean-Paul Sartre also devotes attention to the ontological-phenomenological dimensions of sexuality in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), particularly in his chapter “Concrete Relations With Others.” Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenological study of sexuality is unlike Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in that she does not have a large phenomenological-ontological work, of which sexuality is one theme, but rather, she makes the question of sexual embodiment the main theme of inquiry in *The Second Sex* (1949). The question Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are interested in is how we can reveal our fundamental relationship with the world. From this question their account of sexual encounters is extrapolated, but, for Beauvoir gender and sexuality are the prism of investigation of embodied experience. She asks; how is the world illuminated through the gendered structuring of relations with others? In this paper I propose to ask what threads of connection can be made between the three authors’ pictures of the relations between our sexual selves and our being-with-others.

I.¹

In Sartre’s phenomenological ontology he engages the problem of solipsism, a problem that he inherits both from Descartes and Husserl. If there are only two kinds of things in the world — mind and matter — then how does my mind (which is not in contact with other minds) facilitate knowledge of the existence of other minds? If my most experiences are of the “outside” of others, then how can I be sure that others have minds? Or, if I must infer that they do have minds, what if my inference is mistaken (or corrupted by an evil genius)? Sartre’s repositioning of phenomenology is not to describe abstract

¹ For whatever the capitalization accomplishes for her view, I speculate that it signifies a certain established position of power that remains historically contingent and able to be unmade. I don’t take this to be a new ontological dimension.

inferences of the existence of others — I see that you are similar to me and I make a probabilistic inference that you *must* have a mind like I do — but rather, it is to say that the relation between myself and others is not epistemic, but ontological

The first ontological dimension of the body is that it exists for me, as the seat of the for-itself; the second is that my body exists as an object of knowledge and instrumentalization of others. In encountering the other I am made aware of a third ontological dimension of my body, which is that I exist my body as *it is known by the other*. (Sartre, p.460) We have direct and immediate experience of the third ontological dimension of our body in the experience of shame: “It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame or pride which makes me *live not know* the situation of being looked at” (p.350). The other turns us into an object by seeing us, thus we have direct experience of another ego. But, this is not a mutually recognized Being-With-Others; it is a binary relationship, for when we feel shame we feel it in recognizing that the other is looking at and judging us. Sartre concludes that we have this permanent possibility of being seen by the other, which leads us to a battle: we can reverse the situation by making the other an object for our consciousness, and so on indefinitely.

For Sartre, the world is primordially presented as a practical world of potential instrumentalizations. Objects are presented to us not as indifferent material, but rather, as “instrument-things” (p.404). Objects become a “this” both when a consciousness apprehends it, and when it makes a non-thetic differentiation between itself and the object (p.405). Consciousness apprehends the structure of the significance of the world as instrumental, that is, presenting objects that have a means-end significance. He writes:

The instrumental –things indicate other instruments or objective ways of making use of them: the nail is ‘to be pounded in’ this way or that, the hammer is ‘to be held by the handle,’ the cup is ‘to be picked up by its handle,’ *etc.* All these properties of things are immediately revealed (SARTRE,1966, p.425).

Objects in the world are imbued with instrumental significance. This relationship is primary to the self-world connection.

Along a similar vein, Sara Heinämaa, in her work, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference* (2003), argues that Sartre is committed to not only an instrumental self-

world relationship, but also an instrumental consciousness-body relationship. Further, that this account is pivotal in evaluating the success of his account of sexual desire because it is the only element of embodiment where the instrumental connection breaks down and the body is presented to consciousness as mere flesh (p.62)

Heinämaa acknowledges that Sartre reasons that the body is not originally perceived as an instrument. (p.62) Indeed, the self-body relation is one that is quite different than any other, Sartre writes: “It would be best to say, using ‘exist’ as a transitive verb – that consciousness *exists* its body.” (p.434) Subsequently, Heinämaa draws the focus away from the notion of “exist” as a transitive verb, with the following remark:

Still Sartre asserts that the body’s instrumentality is indicated by the way things appear to us. According to him, the world is originally given to us as a practical world, composed of materials, tools, and utensils. It is a world structured by ends and means. The body is the user of these instruments, the primary ‘tool’ that allows the self to have access to them. (HEINÄMAA, 2003, p.62)

Heinämaa concludes that for Sartre, instrumentality is “almost all encompassing” (p.64).

Sartre’s intent was not to have his interpretation of how objects are presented to us lead to an inference about how the body is related to consciousness. We can see this in his argument against analogizing my body with the body of the other. He writes:

If I interpret the role of *my* body in relation to *my* action, in the light of knowledge I have gained of the Other’s body, I shall then consider myself as disposing of a certain instrument which I can dispose of at my whim. (SARTRE, 1966, p. 422)

But this, he argues is impossible:

In fact if I start with the Other’s body, I apprehend it as an instrument and in so far as I myself make use of it as an instrument. In order to utilize the Other’s body to my best interests I need an instrument which is my own body just as in order to perceive the Other’s sense organs I need other sense organs which are my own. Therefore if I conceive of my body in the image of the Other’s body, it is an instrument in the world which I must handle delicately and which is like a key to the handing of other tools. But my relations with this privileged instrument can themselves be only technical, and I need an instrument in order to handle this instrument – which refers us to infinity...then we must of necessity admit that paradox of a physical instrument *handled* by a soul, which, as we know, causes us to fall into inextricable aporias. (SARTRE, 1966, p.423)

His regress argument shows that the relationship between consciousness and body cannot be primarily instrumental. Further, that the relationship between a body and the world is an objective relationship, whereas the relationship between consciousness and body is existential (p434). Sartre does argue, however, that parts of our bodies can vanish into instrumental systems (p.426).

An instrumental system comes into existence when a part of our body becomes lost in the instrumentalization of a tool. Action creates a new synthetic combination between a subject and the world. Sartre explains: “What I perceive when I want to lift this glass to my mouth is not my effort but the *heaviness of the glass* – that is, its resistance to entering into an instrumental complex which I have made appear in the world” (p.427). On this account the body is lived-toward an action in which the particular movements of the hand and arm are not immediately given; the heaviness of the glass is, that is to say, the intentional or hodological content of the action itself.

The relationship between a phenomenological account of embodiment and sexual desire is a problem for Sartre as is pointed out by Heinämaa and other critics. She writes that:

Sartre states that in desire the body is stripped of all its actions and meanings; it appears as pure facticity, as mere flesh. Its passivity is not the simple inertia of natural things. Rather, it resembles broken instruments and utensils. The desiring body belongs to a consciousness that has *lost* its capacity for nihilation and *fallen* into the in-itself. It is a transformed body, a body suddenly lacking the instrumental ties that normally connect it to the consciousness. (HEINÄMAA, 2003, p.64-5)

Heinämaa argues that Sartre has enclosed himself into a picture of sexuality that is made from a male point of view. She employs Beauvoir’s criticisms of Sartre:

[Beauvoir] claims that the conceptual framework of instruments is inadequate as a whole in the description and analysis of feminine experience...The world as revealed through the feminine body is not a practical world ready to hand. Instead, it is ‘dominated by fatality and traversed by mysterious caprices’ (p.70).

These caprices, Heinämaa contrasts, are internally divided into different bodily stages and vitalities. The simple means-end structure of either an instrumental connection or a broken instrumental connection, does not adequately describe the feminine experience of the

menstruating, pregnant, or lactating body. Although we can affirm with de Beauvoir that instrumental accounts do not capture certain aspects of feminine experience, it is unclear both that for Sartre the body is essentially an instrument, as I have argued, and that the desiring body is experienced as mere flesh.

In fact, desiring for Sartre is not quite as oppositional as Heinämaa conceives. According to Sartre, desire is a type of consciousness.

Every consciousness, as we have seen, supports a certain relation with its own facticity. But this relation can vary from one mode of consciousness to another...The man who *exists* his body in a particular mode and thereby places himself on a particular level of existence...The desiring consciousness is *troubled*. (SARTRE, 1966, p. 503)

The trouble is a state of the body, through which the for-itself is stirred toward action; the satisfaction of the desire. Further, his phenomenology of desire is typically Sartrean; “one slides toward a *passive* consent to the desire,” yet, he also states that; “*desire is consent to desire*” (p.504). Is sexual desire a pure in-itself, or is there choice involved? Perhaps both assertions can be held for Sartre; if consciousness *exists* its body, and the body is facticity, and one must consent to have desire, it seems as though my non-instrumental interpretation is correct. Consent to desire is more akin to allowing bodily possibilities to present themselves to consciousness, rather than the description of the desiring body-consciousness relation as instrumentality-broken.

II.^{II}

Beauvoir agrees with Sartre that the other lives her objecthood for my consciousness and vice versa in our most basic of encounters. She argues, however, that this can become

^{II} I ask this question because Beauvoir’s main theme of analysis is the question of women’s lived experience. She does include a chapter on lesbian sexuality, in which she concludes that in sex between women they can become a “mirror” for each other where neither is Absolute: “Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality” (Beauvoir, 416). This may seem odd at first, but she does talk about how lesbians can recreate the Absolute Subject and Inessential Other dichotomy as well. This is just one way for lesbians to encounter each other.

sedimented in favour of one member of the dyad – one can move from being a mere other to being an Other by submitting to the positioning of the One:

No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of woman? (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p.xxiv)

But, now we have ventured away from the third ontological dimension of the body and we have moved to a historical positioning of one group over another. Moira Gatens argues that this is when one positions himself as an Absolute Subject over an Inessential Other.¹ Absolute Subjects:

Deprive women of the opportunity to become authentic, ethical subjects. Such deprivation functions through the forcible confinement of woman to the negative pole of man's positive self-conception and by symbolically and actually denying them access to the (supposedly neutral) conception of what it is to be a free human subject. (GATENS, 2003, p.277)

Can we become a free and ethical subject when we are living our being-for-others in shame?

What gives us some context of the gendered roots of the development of the One/Other dichotomy is given to us in her chapter on biology. Beauvoir argues that over time, by emphasizing women's "animality" men were able to symbolically and socially align her more closely with her biology than her subjectivity and then arguments from nature are allowed to flourish: Women's oppression is natural because their embodiment is especially subjectivity-limiting. But, women have become Other by a contingent historical progression. Women have stood for all that men have wanted to dominate. She writes:

As I have already said, man never thinks of himself without thinking of the Other; he views the world under the sign of duality, which is not in the first place sexual in character. But being different from man, who sets himself up as the same, it is naturally to the category of the Other that woman is consigned; the Other includes woman. (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p. 69)

“Woman,” then, came to represent the alterity incarnated in nature and because she did not protest she took over the role of the Inessential Other in relation to man’s Absolute Subject. Beauvoir locates this symbolic attachment in the association of women’s prominent role in reproduction with Nature *as such*. But, what implications does this have for sexual relations between men and women?ⁱⁱ

In her chapter “Sexual Initiation” Beauvoir writes about many ways that women and men incarnate the Absolute Subject and Absolute Other dichotomy in sexual relations. This is less interesting than her description of how, in erotic encounters, we can choose not to reproduce the dichotomy. She writes:

The dissimilarity that exists between the eroticism of the male and that of the female creates insoluble problems as long as there is a ‘battle of the sexes’; they can easily be solved when woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after her flesh while recognizing her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains unimpaired the while she makes herself object; she remains free in the submission to which she consents. (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p.401)

We can, then, in overcoming the “battle” find in each other a mutual recognition that was unavailable to us in Sartre’s view. This does not afford us true mutual recognition, but rather, it gives us a “privileged experience of conflict and revelation and as a dramatic relationship between two people” (Bergoffen, p. 186). This reformulated conflict no longer has the hostile implications it once had.

Beauvoir then describes sexual experiences where woman feel the masculine sex organ to be “theirs” during intercourse. Also, for some men, they feel that they “become” the women that they penetrate. Beauvoir understands the inexact nature of these reports, but yet she uses them to argue that:

[A]lterity has no longer a hostile implication, and indeed this sense of the union of really separate bodies is what give its emotional character to the sexual act; and it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together in passion deny and assert their boundaries are similar and yet unlike. (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p.401)

Many commentators argue that this is the location of Beauvoir’s greatest invention: The erotic as a philosophical category. Taking phenomenological description down to its most intimate details reveals that:

In identifying the erotic body as crucial to the dialectic of risk, recognition, and subjectivity, Beauvoir challenges phenomenology's vision of the subject. As embedded in an erotic perceiving body, consciousness must now be scrutinized for the ways in which its erotic desires situate it in the world. (BERGOFFEN, 1997, p.30)

The necessity of risk and the possibility of meeting the other in the erotic encounter as equals are essential to Beauvoir's being-with-others.

III.^{III}

In his chapter "The Body in Its Sexual Being," Merleau-Ponty is continuing his dialectical critique of, what he has named, intellectualism and empiricism.ⁱⁱⁱ In order to understand his view of sexuality we must pause to understand his project as a whole. "Intellectualism" has many incarnations throughout his analysis, but it is mainly attributed to Immanuel Kant and René Descartes (although Sartre and Edmund Husserl are often included under this heading). Merleau-Ponty gives us a definition of intellectualism:

Intellectualism accepts as completely valid the idea of truth and the idea of being in which the formative work of consciousness culminates and is embodied, and its alleged reflection consists in positing as powers of the subject all that is required to arrive at these ideas. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p. 45)

Empiricism is not just that of David Hume, George Berkeley, and John Locke, but also includes the empirical sciences. If that doesn't cast a large enough net, he asks that we think of the two as actually sharing a common foundation. In the move from empiricism to intellectualism we find that:

We pass from absolute objectivity to absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is not better than the first and is upheld only against it, which means by it. The affinity between intellectualism and empiricism is thus much less obvious and

ⁱⁱⁱ These two names he uses as poles of thought, but not the only ones used to give shape to his inquiry. He writes: "We must seek an understanding from all these angles simultaneously, everything has meaning, and we shall find this same structure of being underlying all relationships. All these views are true provided that they are not isolated, that we delve deeply into history and reach the unique core of existential meaning which emerges in each perspective" (Merleau-Ponty, xxi).

much more deeply rooted than is commonly thought. It arises not only from the anthropological definition of sensation used equally by both, but from the fact that both persist in the natural or dogmatic attitude, and the survival of sensation in intellectualism is merely a sign of this dogmatism. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p. 45)

We must then proceed to describe both the errors and insights of intellectualism and empiricism within a phenomenological framework, which for Merleau-Ponty is a different inflection than the traditional Husserlian project. Instead of reducing consciousness (*epoché*) to transcendental subjectivity in order to describe our intentional connection to the world, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is less hopeful that there will be presuppositionless essences which will come to light (although he does effect his own sort of *epoché*). He writes:

The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination. Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p.xi)

Even the most diligent of phenomenological descriptions, then, are made possible by, and presuppose, our living perception of the world. The task of *Phenomenology of Perception* is then to shed light on the ambiguous nature of reality and how it escapes both the empiricist and intellectualist worldviews. Commentator George Marshall explains:

Lived experience reveals that [human reality] is neither and yet somehow both. Thus the task of *Phenomenology of Perception* is a re-awakening of these ideas through an analysis of the distortions and oddities these ideas present in everyday life, science, social science, and philosophy. (MARSHAL, 2008, p.27-8)

It is important to highlight the main tenor of *Phenomenology of Perception* in this manner because if I am to present Merleau-Ponty's notion of sexuality, then it must be situated in terms of his larger project.

According to Merleau-Ponty's adversaries — intellectualism and empiricism— sexuality is either the having of a sexual representation (in the mind), or an autonomous reflex of the body (genital systems). Merleau-Ponty argues that sexual behaviour cannot be captured in either of these views. Using a case study of a war veteran who was brain-

injured by a piece of shrapnel — the patient Schneider — Merleau-Ponty argues that sexuality is a way of experiencing possibilities, it is an atmosphere. Schneider is unable to differentiate between differently sexed bodies and he does not have any autonomous sexual desire, yet when he is sexually stimulated he can be aroused. Once the stimulation stops, he is no longer interested in genital stimulation.^{iv} Schneider is used as an example of someone who neither lacks a “representation” of sexuality, to which the intellectualist’s theory is beholden, nor does he lack the motor function to become sexually stimulated as the empiricist’s would claim. For Schneider:

Perception has lost its erotic structure, both spatially and temporally. What has disappeared from the patient is his power of projecting before himself a sexual world, of putting himself in erotic situation, or, once a situation is stumbled upon, of maintaining it or following it through to complete satisfaction. (SCHNEIDER, p. 181)

For Merleau-Ponty sexuality is a way of being in the world that is a basic mode of intentionality — it is not derived from a more basic kind of experience. We are conscious of situations, people, and actions as part of a structure of erotic meaning and expression. As “normal” subjects, we put ourselves into a sexual situation or we put sexual possibilities in the world. He continues:

[S]exuality without being the object of any intended act of consciousness, can underlie and guide specified forms of my experience. Taken in this way, as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is co-extensive with life. In other words, ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p. 196)

Taking aim at Sartre, Merleau-Ponty reveals the limited dualism of the third ontological dimension of the body:

If [the dialectic of the plurality of consciousness] cannot accept the presence of a third party as witness, if it feels that too natural an attitude or over-casual remarks, on the part of the desired person, are signs of hostility, this is because it seeks to fascinate, and because the observing third party or the person desired, if he is too free in manner, escapes this fascination. What we try to possess, then, is not just a body, but a body brought to life by consciousness... The dialectic is not a relationship between contradictory and inseparable thoughts; it is the tending of an existence towards another existence which denies it, and yet without which it is not sustained. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002,193-4)

Sartre's account misses the ambiguity involved in the erotic encounter — we don't just want to possess a body or a consciousness, but we want to fascinate a body “brought to life” by consciousness. We cannot focus on only one aspect of perception (visual consciousness) as basic or fundamental because we experience the other as “an expressive whole from which no organ or function can be removed without damaging the whole” (Heinamaa, p.87). Our being-with-others, then cannot just be the abstract ontological categories (Sartre), or even the concrete social inflections of power dynamics (Beauvoir), but rather it is based in the living whole of our perception (comportment, behaviour, *existence*).

An important example for Merleau-Ponty is the case of a baby that watches her hand go into her caregiver's mouth. The baby will open her mouth even though her mouth and teeth are nothing like its caregiver's. This proves that ‘biting’ has an immediately intersubjective significance: “[The baby] perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body.” (410) We must deny the extreme separateness of consciousnesses and meet the other as living bodies. Merleau-Ponty explains:

In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p.411)

Unlike Sartre and Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty blurs the boundary between self and other and argues for ambiguous intercorporeality.

IV.^{IV}

The parallel that can be found between Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir is that they both hold that sexuality is a complete and unique way of experiencing others and ourselves. For Merleau-Ponty we assume a sexual attitude in order to find and experience sexual meaning in the world. For Beauvoir, we are able to overcome the hostility incarnated in the other through the erotic encounter. There is one main way in which these two views differ that is yet to be highlighted. The sexual attitude that Merleau-Ponty is at pains to describe is one among many: the abstract, the concrete, the phenomenological, and so on, but according to Beauvoir he does not fully understand the ways in which sexual differentiation and sexuality are deeply embedded in our experience of persons in a way that our awareness of other differences is not. Sara Heinämaa explains this tension:

Beauvoir agrees that embodiment and sexuality are necessary aspects of human existence, but she thinks that [Merleau-Ponty's] parallel of genitals and hands is misleading. All normal human bodies have hands but not a similar or analogous 'sexual apparatus.' *Sex organ* and *genital* are abstract terms that cover a number of concrete organs: the penis, the clitoris, the vagina, the breasts. None of these organs is necessary for a human being in the same sense as hands are, for the simple reason that there are two bodily norms for human embodiment: the masculine and feminine body. (HEINÄMAA, 2003, p.87)

Merleau-Ponty fails to read the sexual difference that is alive in each of our bodies. Beauvoir shows how sexual difference influences the way that bodies co-exist and intermingle.

Merleau-Ponty's abstract lived body may perhaps be necessary to accommodate more forms of sexuality than the male/female erotic experience that Beauvoir describes. Defining sexuality as an atmosphere of meaning that we incarnate and inhabit allows room

^{IV} Sexuality is not the only area of life that no longer speaks to him. Merleau-Ponty writes: "Faces are for him neither attractive nor repulsive, and people appear to him in one light or another only in so far as he has direct dealings with them, and according to the attitude they adopt towards him, and the attention and solicitude which they bestow upon him. He would like to be able to think about politics and religion, but he does not even try, knowing that these realms are closed to him, and we have seen that generally speaking he never performs an act of authentic thought" (Merleau-Ponty, p.182).

for understanding more aspects of sexuality if we do not define sex as between normatively female or male bodies:

Taken in this way, as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is co-extensive with life. In other words, ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live has always several meanings. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p.196)

In Beauvoir's erotic encounter we risk our self by becoming flesh for the other, but in Merleau-Ponty's work we are always flesh at the same time as we are consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, the transformation that Beauvoir describes would be redundant and it relies on the constant risk of self that owes its roots to Sartrean conflict (even if it is "privileged" conflict as Bergoffen argues) in our being-with-others.

REFERENCES

BEAUVOIR, SIMONE DE. **The Second Sex**. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Random House, 1989 [1949, 1951].

BERGOFFEN, Deborah. **The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities**. New York: New York UP, 1997.

GATENS, Moira. Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look (1999) In: CARD, Claudia. **The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir**. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.

HEINAMAA, Sara. **Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir**. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

HUSSERL, Edmund. Ideas: General Introduction to Phenomenology. In: WITTIN, Don **The Essential Husserl**. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1999.

MARSHALL, George J. **A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception***. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 2008.

MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. **Phenomenology of Perception**. Trans. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge, 2002 [1945]

SARTRE, Jean-Paul. **Being and Nothingness**. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966 [1943].

SUTTON MORRIS, Phyllis. Sartre on Objectification: A Feminist Perspective. In: MURPHY, Julien. **Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre**. Pittsburgh, PA: Penn State Press, 1999,.
