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THE ROOT OF FEMININITY: A MERLEAU-PONTIAN APPROACH TO IRIS MARION YOUNG

abstract

In On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays, Iris Marion Young examines the feminine modalities representing women in contemporary industrial and commercial society. She reveals the "root" of these modalities, which she refers to as the state of "self-reference." The main task of the present paper is to extend Young's understanding of femininity by arguing that this state of "self-reference" is rooted in the state of "reversibility." Such rootedness is essential to Young's concept of femininity, as it explains the constitution of the objectified state that represents feminine experience. It also justifies the three aspects of her definition of femininity: the non-essentiality of femininity, the structural conditions that constitute women's situations in a certain society, and women's lived experiences according to these situations. This paper is mainly inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential and phenomenological approach, as represented in his Phenomenology of Perception and The Visible and the Invisible. It is also inspired by Edmund Husserl's concept of "double senses" as presented in his Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907. An exploration of Young's definition of "femininity" in relation to arguments related to essentialism is followed by a discussion of her argument that the modality of self-reference is the root of the other feminine modalities. The rest of the paper looks at how her understanding of femininity can be extended by presenting the concept of reversibility as the root of the formation of the state of self-reference and the other feminine modalities.

keywords

embodied mind, existential phenomenology, femininity, reversibility, self-reference, intentionality

In her 2005 essay, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” Iris Marion Young examines the feminine modalities representing women in contemporary industrial and commercial society. She argues that the “root” (p. 38) of these modalities is the modality which she refers to as the state of “self-reference.” The main task of the present paper is to extend Young’s understanding of femininity by arguing that this state of “self-reference” is rooted in the state of “reversibility.” Such rootedness is essential to Young’s concept of femininity, as it explains the constitution of the objectified state that represents feminine experience. It also justifies the three aspects of her definition of femininity: the non-essentiality of femininity, the structural framework that constitutes woman’s situation, and women’s lived experiences according to this situation.

This paper is mainly inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existential and phenomenological approach, as represented in his *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is also inspired by Edmund Husserl’s concept of “double senses,” as presented in his *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*. An exploration of Young’s definition of “femininity” in relation to essentialism is followed by a discussion of her argument that the modality of self-reference is the root of the other feminine modalities. In the rest of the paper, her understanding of femininity is extended by presenting the concept of reversibility as the root of the formation of the state of self-reference and other feminine modalities.

1. Defining the Concept of “Femininity”

At the beginning of her article, Young reviews aspects of a study by the psychologist Erwin Straus (1952), particularly those concerning his conclusion that there are “remarkable differences in the manner of throwing” (p. 552) between girls and boys, which led him to believe that there is a unique style that distinguishes girls’ behavior (see also Chessick, 1999). Despite Young’s (2005) agreement with Straus regarding the existence of such a style, which she calls “feminine existence” or “femininity” (p. 31), she criticizes Straus’s view that this phenomenon is related to a “deep-seated restraint and inclination” (p. 553). Young (2005) argues that this implies the existence of a “mysterious feminine essence” (p. 29), which forces a deterministic understanding of women’s behavior. Her rejection of such determinacy follows many feminist theorists, most notably Simone de Beauvoir (particularly in *The Second Sex*).

In her understanding of feminine existence, Young (2005) defines “femininity” not as “a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female ... [but as] a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women

themselves” (p. 31). Young’s definition of femininity encompasses three aspects of femininity. First, following many other feminists in rejecting biological determinism, Young’s definition specifies that femininity is not an essence. Second, her definition calls for a structural understanding of “femininity” in terms of the practices of social institutions and power relations.¹ Third, Young’s definition is linked to women’s lived experiences of femininity. At this point in the paper, a discussion of some of the early and developed feminist theories is necessary to understand this concept of femininity.

The most general point on which feminists agree is the need to defy the essentialism represented by “biological determinism,” a view that goes back to the end of the nineteenth century. Such determinacy is based on the “two-sex model,” which specifies that there is an essential difference between males and females on account of the fundamental differences between their “reproductive systems.” The two-sex model is described as “pervasive”—that is, as affecting all systems and organs in bodies of both sexes—as it views the ovaries and testicles as affecting each cell of the bodies to which they are related (Moi, 1999, p. 11). This pervasive female sex not only affects the female’s related body but also everything she touches, including childcare and housework. In this sense, heterosexuality and all its related activities are justified as natural and predetermined. Accordingly, any man or woman deviating from these two sexes and their related activities would be considered unnatural or unreal.

In her rejection of biological determinism, Young presents her lived body approach, which she defines as “a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context” (2005, p. 16). It is a situated body that is the product of both “facticity” and “freedom.” The body’s facticity reflects both its material and social capacities. The material capacities are related to a woman’s bodily features, such as the organs, size, skin color, health, and feelings. The social capacities are related to the social context in which a woman’s body exists. Both kinds of bodily capacities influence a woman’s performance in her environment. Young (2005) suggests that woman “has an ontological freedom to construct herself in relation to this facticity” (p. 16). According to a woman’s free will, she can set her projects in life, work toward achieving them, and express her way of living. However, achieving these projects depends upon how woman can function with respect to her freedom regarding material and social facticities.

In addition to the importance of the lived body approach to defining a woman, Young suggests that a structural approach to femininity is also needed to reveal the oppressive conditions that affect a woman’s life and cause the injustice of her situation. Young (2005) defines oppressive structures as the “institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilization of resources and physical structures, which constitute the historical givens in relation to which individuals act and which are relatively stable over time” (p. 20). Oppressive structures position women and men within frameworks of division of labor, normative heterosexuality, and gendered power hierarchies. Young (2005) considers the concept of gender an essential tool for theorizing oppressive structures related to women. She defines gender as “a particular form of the social positioning of lived bodies in relation to one another within historically and socially specific institutions and processes that have material effects on the environment in which people act and reproduce relations of power and privilege among them” (p. 22).

Young (1994) considers gender a “social series.” She borrows this concept from the late philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and his definition of a series as “*a mode of being for individuals*

1 In *Justice and the Politics of Differences* (1990), Young presents five forms of oppression related to oppressed groups, including women, and describes oppression as a social structure (p. 43). Furthermore, in *Inclusion and Democracy*, she discusses the inequality between women and men in relation to structural differences (92).

both in relation to one another and in relation to their common being ... [that] transforms all their structures" (Sartre, 1967, p. 266). Young understands Sartre's series as a form of social collective in which related individuals are affected by certain social objects named the "practico-inert" (p. 724). In that sense, members of a series experience themselves participating in similar daily routines and habits without acknowledging any kind of unity among themselves. However, they become a social group if they identify themselves in relation to some shared situation. Accordingly, Young defines "women" as a series that is not identified by common attributes shared by individuals but rather by certain "structural constraints" (1994, p. 728) that define individuals' actions. Over the course of human history, these structures have been enforced by heterosexuality.

Young (1994) presents her concept of "series" in response to the dilemma raised by attempts to understand women as a single group. On the one hand, women cannot raise any political claims without being referred to as a collective group. On the other hand, determining any attributes that all women have in relation to their bodies, behaviors, or experiences will lead to some kind of essentialism in understanding women. In that sense, any attempt to fit all women into a single group would "empt[y] the category women of social meaning by reducing it to the attributes of biological female" (733). Accordingly, Young considers the possibility that an understanding of women as a series could provide a way out of such a dilemma, as it provides the unity required to conceptualize women without the need to identify certain attributes shared by all women. Such unity, however, is passive in the sense that it is related to women being socially positioned by the social structures described above and through their activities in relation to practico-inert objects.

Alison Stone (2004), however, criticizes Young's concept of women as a "series" on the grounds that such a concept "tacitly" sustains the descriptive essentialism that is defined as a universal claim about all women sharing social positions and experiences which Young seeks to reject (Stone, 2004, p. 145). Although Young rejects the proposition that all women share similar experiences, she considers their lives to be affected by cross-culturally variable "expectations" of social structures of heterosexuality and sexual division of labor. Stone describes Young's claims regarding these expectations as being "ambiguous," as they "cannot be said to unify the structures by which women are serially positioned" (Stone, 2004, p. 145). Young needs to rely on the unity of these expectations to maintain "a coherent feminine gender" (p. 145). Accordingly, she needs to maintain that both normative heterosexuality and the division of labor have universal cross-cultural meanings. Such a claim, however, makes Young fall into descriptive essentialism.

To avoid such essentialism, Stone considers the concept of woman as having a "genealogy" in the sense that "women always acquire femininity by appropriating and reworking existing cultural interpretations of femininity, so that all women become situated within a history of overlapping chains of interpretation" (Stone, 2004, p. 135). In her view, a genealogy can be achieved by reflecting on feminine concepts and through interactive experiences of femininity (p. 149). According to such an interpretation, women do not share any attributes that can be considered to apply to all women, yet "they become feminine by reworking pre-established interpretations of femininity with reference to their specific situations" (p. 150). According to such a reworking, each woman belongs to a historic chain of women involved in this process.

Stone's account, however, misses the role of Young's sexual division of labor in achieving the structural unity needed to constitute women as a series without falling into descriptive essentialism. Young describes this role as follows:

What usually structures the gendered relation of these practico-inert objects is a sexual division of labor. Though their content varies with each social system, a division of at

least some tasks and activities by sex appears as a felt necessity. The division between caring for babies and bodies, and not doing so, is the most common sexual division of labor, over which many other labor divisions are layered in socially specific ways ... The context of the sexual division of labor varies enormously across history, culture, and institutions. (Young, 1994, p. 730).

From the above, it is clear that the sexual division of labor organizes practio-inert objects, including bodies, in relation to one another. Young specifies such a relation with the division of who takes care of babies and bodies, which she considers a relationship of a “caretaker” (Young, 1990, p. 51) type. In her view, this represents a form of “gender exploitation in which ... [women’s] energies and power are expended, often unnoticed and unacknowledged” (p. 51). The “caretaker” form of exploitation, however, becomes the basis for constituting other forms of sexual division of labor over time, culture, and institutions, as shown in the above passage. Accordingly, despite the fact that these forms of exploitation vary across time, cultures, and institutions, they imply the “caretaker” type of relationship, which unites them all. This indicates that the unity of Young’s women series remains intact without falling into descriptive essentialism.

Furthermore, the above understanding of Young’s concept of women as a series implies Stone’s genealogy. As discussed earlier, Young considers feminine lived experience to reflect the interaction between “facticity” and “freedom.” With respect to facticity, she considers that feminine structures “are historically given and condition the action and consciousness of individual persons” (Young, 2005, p. 25). However, such facticity is enacted by women with respect to their freedom by “forming their own habits as verities of those possibilities” (Young, 2005, p. 25). Due to the historic aspect of feminine structures, women’s interpretations of these structures will also be historically overlapped. Such an understanding of women’s lived experiences implies Stone’s genealogy, which understands women as a result of “reworking pre-established interpretations of femininity with reference to their specific situations” (Stone, 2004, p. 150). Not only is it plausible to detect a genealogy in Young’s concept of a series, it is also plausible to detect a genealogy in her feminine modalities of women’s lived experiences, as she considers that some of the feminine bodily modalities, such as the modality of “inhibited intentionality” and the modality of “discontinuous unity,” are rooted in the modality of “self-reference” (Young, 2005, p. 38). This kind of genealogy will be explored in the following section.

1.1 The root of femininity

The above analysis shows that Young’s (2005) theorizing of femininity is based on the lived body and structural approaches. On the one hand, gender structures create the facticity constituting a gendered-constrained environment. On the other hand, gender structures are lived by individuals as a “personal experiential response” (p. 26). These two approaches justify the aspects observed in Young’s definition of femininity, described earlier in this paper. Despite the importance of these two approaches in defining the concept of femininity, how they are related is not clear at this point of the analysis. Furthermore, it is not clear how these two approaches are related to the state of femininity in which oppressed women live.

Young (2005) seems to be aware of the importance of the lived body in showing the relationship between the two approaches. She refers to such a concept as “offer[ing] a way of articulating how persons live out their positioning in social structures, along with the opportunities and constraints they produce” (p. 25). She focuses on theorizing the lived body based on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but with an emphasis on how the body lives its “position” in social structures. Furthermore, the importance of the concept of the lived body

is articulated in her *Throwing Like a Girl* through her attempt to explore the “modalities of feminine bodily existence” that manifest themselves on the level of the lived body.

Young (2005) considers the modality of “bodily self-reference of feminine comportment” to be the “root” (p. 35) of the other modalities:

[T]he modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing—a fragile thing which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists *as looked at and acted upon*. To be sure, any lived body exists as a material thing as well as a transcendental subject. For feminine bodily existence, however, the body is often lived as a thing that is other than it, a thing like things in the world. To the extent that a woman lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world’s possibilities. (2005, p. 39).

She considers the “self-reference” modality to only reveal the feminine body as a “thing” and not as a “capacity” (Young, 2005, p. 35). Being the root means that such a modality becomes the cause of and the existential condition for the emergence of other existential feminine modalities.

Following Young’s stream of thought, the present paper intends to show that the modality of “self-reference” is rooted in the experience of “reversibility,”² whereby one can experience sensing and being sensed in relation to oneself, the world, and the Other. Such a phenomenon is related to the phenomenology of the body, which explores the lived body. Despite the fact that the concept of reversibility is discussed by several existential and phenomenological philosophers—such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre—the focus in this paper will be on Merleau-Ponty’s conception of this phenomenon.

Showing that the experience of reversibility is the root of Young’s feminine modalities provides support for her thesis on femininity, as it justifies the feminine lived body as a thing and not as a capacity. Furthermore, the experience of reversibility justifies the intersubjective experiences that women have with the world, which Young needs to justify her structural understanding of femininity. Overall, the shifting between the subjectivating and objectivating functions, which constitute the phenomenon of reversibility, provides support to Young’s theory, as well as to other feminist theories, against feminine determinacy.

2. The Root of Feminine Comportment

2.1. *Inhibited Intentionality*

In her attempt to reveal “feminine existence,” Young describes a woman’s motor intentions as inhibited—they are released in a state of “I can’t” (p. 36). The state of “I can’t” is not a mental state—it is, instead, a bodily state that lacks the proper skills to cope successfully with the situations with which it is faced. Young interprets the modality of feminine inhibited intentionality as a discontinuity between perception and intentional movement that does not stimulate the constitution of a structural relationship between them. Young argues that “Feminine motion often severs this mutually conditioning relation between aim and enactment” (p. 36). Aim as a perceived situation loses its capacity to guide the body to conduct the appropriate intentional movement, and, in return, the body loses its capacity to direct perception to reshape the appropriate situation for the subsequent intentional movement. The woman’s body expresses the inhibited intentionality caused by her immobility, loss of flexibility, confusion, and hardship while dealing with the situation.

2 This concept will be explored in detail later in the paper.

Young explains that the discontinuity between a woman's intentional movement and her perception is based on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) opinion that our bodies "inhabit space" (p. 161). Such space is not the objective space formed from a group of converging points, nor is it the space composed of the relationships formed by a reflective mind as an idea in the mind. Instead, it is a lived space that includes the body's motor intentionality that enacts a relationship between "here" and "yonder"—"here" as the present potential and "yonder" as the goal to reach. Accordingly, the limitations that inhibit a woman's bodily movement "here" threaten its continuity to reach "yonder," and, therefore, a woman's space is characterized by its division into two separate spaces, "here" and "yonder." Young (2005) suggests that "the space of "yonder" is a space in which feminine existence projects possibilities in the sense of understanding that "someone" could move within it, but not I" (p. 41).

Young justifies the discontinuity between "here" and "yonder" by the social constraints and limitations imposed on a woman's space, which restrict her movement compared to that of a man. A woman finds the movement available to her in a limited space, and what is beyond that space is not available to her. In this sense, there is a discontinuity between a woman's motility and the space where she exercises her motility.

In an extension of Young's view, it can be said that the distribution of social roles between men and women in masculine-biased societies plays a role in drawing the boundaries for women's movement and behavior. When women exercise their daily skills within the permitted social domains, their practices are as efficient as those of men. However, when women go beyond their regular domains and assignments, their acts become less efficient and inhibited because they are not used to them. In these cases, their bodies do not possess the skills related to the new tasks they intend to perform. Accordingly, their movement becomes inhibited in situations to which they are not accustomed.

2.2. Discontinuous Body Unity

In Young's view, femininity is characterized by inhibited intentionality and a discontinuous unity of the body with its surroundings. She bases this conception on Merleau-Ponty's views on the existential unity of the body. He describes bodily "spatial relations" as being "interrelated in a particular way" instead of being "spread out side by side" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 114). Such inter-relations are related to the tasks required from the body in a particular situation. At the level of lived experience, all body parts support the part achieving the required task (see Dillon, 1988).

The body unites its organs in facing a situation in the world and endeavors to unite itself with the world to face such a situation and achieve the task. Thus, considering this orientation to the world, the body perceives itself and the things in the world in relation to this task. Its movement also begins to connect body parts with things in its perceptual domain as an extension of its being. For example, the blind man's stick is no longer perceived by him as an object but rather as an extension of his body, so when he holds it, its other point becomes an extension of his hand, extending the scope and active radius of touch (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 165).

Young believes that the existential state of a woman's body denotes a state of "discontinuous unity" at the level of the body and in its relationship with the world. This is evident in the movement of a woman's body when completing a task, as the transcending part of the body becomes isolated from the remaining parts, which stay immobile. A good example is how girls throw balls compared to boys, as described in the study by Straus mentioned above: when girls throw balls, their bodies do not support their throwing hands. Boys' bodies, however, support their throwing hands better. Young (2005) attributes this lack of unity to

a woman's inhibited motor intentions, which "sever[...] the connection between aim and enactment, between possibility in the world and the capacity in the body" (p. 38).

According to Young's modality of discontinuous unity of the body, it is possible to say that such a modality results from women's lack of accumulated experiences related to specific social roles, such as masculine roles, which they are not used to. The lack of these experiences contributes to not acquiring the proper daily skills to manage these roles and situations.

2.3. *Self-Reference*

Young believes that the two modalities of feminine bodily existence, represented by inhibited intentionality and discontinuous body unity, are rooted in an existential phenomenon called "self-reference," which refers to a woman's bodily existence in a state of oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity when it engages and interacts with the world. She observes that "feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world because it is referred onto *itself* as well as onto possibilities in the world" (Young, 2005, p. 38). Accordingly, this oscillation of focus between the body and the world influences the orientation of the feminine body's motor intentions toward the world in the form of inhibited intentionality. It also affects the discontinuous unity of the body in its confrontation with the world. Young provides examples of some cases of *self-reference*, as follows:

- 1) Woman's experience of her body represents the first case as the object of motion rather than its creator. Young (2005) comments in this regard that "feminine bodily existence is self-reference in that the woman takes herself to be the *object* of the motion rather than its originator" (p. 39). For example, this type of self-reference appears when she participates in a ball game. In such a case, she does not seek to catch the ball as much as she waits for it to come at her. In addition, while playing, she tends to fear being injured or harmed. These two situations indicate that a woman's intentional motion is self-referred rather than directed toward the world.
- 2) The second case of the self-reference phenomenon is represented by a woman's uncertainty about her body's capacities when she performs intentional acts, as she is not aware of the limitations of her body's capacity, nor does she feel that its motions are entirely under her control while performing tasks. Young (2005) relates this condition to a woman's dispersed focus between achieving an aim and her attempts to coordinate her body parts to achieve this aim (p. 39). In addition to Young's explanation, we can relate such a condition to the woman's treatment of her body not as a subject but as a tool to which she is unaccustomed and the potential of which is unfamiliar.
- 3) The third case of the self-reference phenomenon is represented by a woman's feeling that she is the object of the gaze and actions of the Other. A woman experiences the gaze of the Other in diverse situations, especially in the scope of public space, as she feels that someone is observing her and measuring her manners; accordingly, she becomes the object of this gaze. Young presents some examples that reflect a woman's experience of herself as an object, such as her interest in her conduct, social manners, her interest in her body, her frequent staring at the mirror, and her fear of rape. Young believes that woman's adoption of this objectifying view of herself leads to the alienation of herself from her body, as she views her body as an object, not as a subject, which explains the immobility of her body in situations that require her to function as an embodied subject (2005, p. 39).

Indeed, the phenomenon of self-reference explains the passivity of a woman's lived body. This is done by showing her reliance on the surrounding circumstances rather than her intentional moves to succeed in her tasks. It can also be said that the self-reference phenomenon

expresses a woman's accumulated experience of being an object of the intentionality of the Other.

The self-reference phenomenon reveals how the feminine body is objectified at the level of lived experience. Given the importance of this phenomenon, the discussion below extends Young's analysis of femininity by linking the concept of "self-reference" to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "reversibility." The phenomenon of reversibility is a condition for self-reference and, accordingly, is the root of all feminine modalities following the phenomenon of self-reference.

This section shows how Young's modality of self-reference is rooted in the phenomenon of reversibility. It relies on Merleau-Ponty's concept of reversibility and Husserl's concept of "double sensation." In his *Thing and Space* lectures, Husserl presents the phenomenon of "double sensation" in discussing touch sensations:

If with my left hand I touch my right, then along with the touch-sensations and the kinaesthetic sensations there is constituted, reciprocally, the appearance of the left and right hands, the one moving over the other in such and such a manner. At the same time, however, i.e., with a reversal of the apprehension, the self-moving appears in an other sense, which applies only to the Body, and in general the same groups of sensations which have an Objectivating function are apprehended, through a reversal of the attention and the apprehension, as subjectivating and specifically as something which member of the Body, those that appear in the Objectivating function, "have" as localized within themselves. (1997, p. 137)

The double sensation shows the body's capability to be in a state of sensing and being sensed. As for the sensation of touching, if one hand touches the other, each hand can possess a state of sense that can be reversed to a state of being sensed. Accordingly, the body can occupy both "subjectivating" and "objectivating" functions. The objectivating function represents the objectified state that defines feminine existence.

The concept of "double sensation"³ is represented as "reversibility" by Merleau-Ponty. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explains the body's capacity to be in "subjectivating" and "objectivating" functions in its intentional acts toward itself, the world, and the Other. He cites certain tactile experiences as revealing the concept of reversibility, saying, "When one of my hands touches the other, the world of each opens upon that of the other because the operation is reversible at will" (p. 141). When our right hand touches our left hand, the right hand becomes in a state of subjectivating function, while the left hand retracts to become in a state of objectivating function. The roles between the two hands can also be reversed (p. 133).

According to the discussion above, the experience of reversibility is the root and condition for a woman's experience of self-reference. Since the phenomenon of self-reference, as described earlier, expresses a bodily existence not being a pure presence to the world but one that refers to itself as well as to the possibilities in the world, such a phenomenon requires in advance the ability of a woman to experience the subjectivating and objectivating functions alternately. Such an ability is embedded in the experience of reversibility. Accordingly, reversibility is considered a prerequisite for all of the cases related to self-reference described

3. Reversibility As the Root of Femininity

3 The concept of "double sensation" is also presented in Merleau-Ponty's earlier book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 106, p. 109.

above, as well as for the modalities of inhibited motor intentions and discontinuous body unity.

Furthermore, not only is the experience of reversibility the root of the experience of self-reference but it also paves the way for a woman's intersubjective relation to the world. This is because the phenomenon of self-reference requires such openness to the world, as shown earlier in the case of throwing and receiving a ball. Merleau-Ponty introduces reversibility in relation to the world presented in tactile experience, whereby the hand can exchange roles with things in the world. At one time, the hand takes on the role of touching things, and at another time, the roles are reversed between the hand and the worldly thing, and the hand becomes touched by things. The phenomenon of reversibility can also be manifested in shaking hands with the Other. Merleau-Ponty (1968) cites handshaking as an example: "[t]he handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching" (p. 142). Thus, tactile experiences reveal the ability of the embodied subject to be a subject or an object with things and others. Merleau-Ponty refers to the ability of the embodied subject to feel the Other in their participation in an element called "*flesh*" (p. 146).⁴

Accordingly, it can be said that reversibility in relation to the world is the existential root of feminine passive movements and of the fear of harm, which represent two modalities of self-reference. As described earlier, woman's comportment seems passive because she does not initiate movement in her relationship to the world. Examples of these movements are not seeking to catch the ball, taking precautions, and relying more on surrounding circumstances to achieve goals. The common factor among these kinds of feminine existence is that they all assume the capability of the lived body to be open to the world. They also assume the capability of the lived body to take the objectivating function concerning its relationship to the world. Such bodily existence requires bodily reversibility to the world in advance.

Furthermore, vision reversibility is a condition for the constitution of the gaze state. Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes vision reversibility thus: "As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision (...) be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision; myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot" (p. 134). When we look at things in the world, we can reverse our vision so that these things seem to be looking at us from without. This reversibility also applies when we look at another person looking at us and find that our vision of her/him can be reversed, so that we feel the Other is looking at us. Vision reversibility may extend to situations in which we are not looking directly at the other. According to Merleau-Ponty (1968), we possess vision reversibility because we and others belong to the same component that makes our bodies, as "[o]ne feels oneself looked at (...) because to feel one's body is also to feel its aspect for the other" (p. 245).

Accordingly, reversed vision can be considered the root of the state of self-reference in which a woman feels that she is an object of the gaze of the Other. Such a condition applies to a situation described earlier in which a woman experiences her body as an object of the Other's observation during her social behavior in the domains of family and work, her obsession with her appearance, and when she feels the threat of being raped. A woman cannot experience this self-reference unless she can reverse her experience of vision so that she becomes capable of evaluating her own body as an object for the gaze of the Other. In this

4 Merleau-Ponty describes flesh thus: "We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictories—but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (1968, p. 146). For more on this topic, see Barbaras (2004).

sense, vision reversibility becomes the root of the self-reference modality characterized by the gaze of the Other.

Thus far, the present paper has located the roots of Young's feminine modalities in the state of reversibility. However, it is not clear how a woman's experience, which is mostly locked within the objectivating function, is related to such modalities. Since these modalities function on the level of the lived body, it is appropriate to use Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the lived body where those experiences are located. He locates the lived body in the life world, which is not an objective world but a human and a phenomenal world. He describes such a phenomenal world thus: "Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air, and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each object is moulded to the human action it serves" (1962, p. 405). In his view, human consciousness of the phenomenal world precedes consciousness of the objects related to the material world (1983, p. 166).

Perception plays a prominent role in opening consciousness to a phenomenal world.⁵ Through perception, things appear to consciousness as poles that attract human behavior, not as objective qualities available for sensory monitoring. Objects in the perceptual domain always seem to trigger action, such as an apple that looks "edible," a spoon that looks "usable," or a ball that looks "playable." Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes things in experience: "Through their combined values they delimit a certain situation, an open situation moreover, which calls for a certain mode of resolution, a certain kind of work" (p. 122). Thus, perception constitutes a situation of a specific value that requires a specific successful behavior to contain this situation. Perception contributes to constituting situations without requiring any representative mental processes.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) explains the formation of the human phenomenal domain by examining the first stages of a child's life, in which perception begins to form its own values. For example, the light of a candle appears to a child at first as an attraction to the senses, but when she/he experiences its painful effect after burning her/his finger, the candle later appears to her/him as repulsive to the behavior of approaching and touching (p. 60). In more advanced stages of life, for example, in the context of engaging in ball sports, the lines drawn in the playground, and the movement of the players in it appear to the player as poles that attract or repulse her/his movement.

Accordingly, the body never opens to its phenomenal world as an objective body, but rather as a "phenomenal body" ready to act in certain situations. Merleau-Ponty (1962) says in this regard, "It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them" (p. 121). The body forms its awareness through motor intentions directed toward the world, trying to understand and achieve its potential and goals. Accordingly, the intentional potentialities of the body depend on the motor capacities of the body in seeking, grasping, and organizing its surroundings in interaction with the meanings that things symbolize in the perceptual domain.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) considers motor intentions as motor skills acquired by the body through interacting with existing beings. Motor skills express the body's capacity to distinguish specific potentials in its perceptual domain suitable for performing those skills daily. All the habits a person practices, such as the ability to dress, drive a car, and type, are considered motor skills. Acquiring a motor skill means that the body is grasping a motor significance, which is considered to be an embodied understanding of the world (p. 166).

5 See Merleau-Ponty (1964) for further discussion of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception .

Merleau-Ponty (1962) defines embodied understanding as “to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance” (p. 167). By harmony, he means a structural relationship that links intentional movement with perception, as each is guided by the other without representing the world as an object of thought. For example, when acquiring the skill of typing, the embodied consciousness does not represent the keyboard, as the body already knows how to practice these skills via the perception that presents the keyboard as a situation that requires containment. Accordingly, motor intentions are not the product of mental representational knowledge, but rather of “knowledge in the hands” (p. 165).

With reference to the above analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s lived body, it is possible to explain how a woman’s lived experience gets locked within the objectivating function, the state of self-reference, and other relevant feminine states. Due to the structural relation that connects a woman’s perception to her bodily motor intentions, which operate on the level of everyday skills, a woman’s perception of herself, the world, and others is influenced by the social skills she practices daily. From an early age, objects in a woman’s perceptual field appear as meaningful poles of attraction, constituting valuable situations for her bodily motor intentions. In this sense, a woman’s perceptual domain is formed according to her social context. Accordingly, the objectivating function a woman takes in these modalities is influenced by certain skills, habits, and roles—such as caretaking—that are imposed on her by the heterosexual and division of labor systems. These social skills and habits lock her perception into the objectivating function.

If we go back to Young’s explanation of Straus’s study, girls are still taught to behave themselves and to play within an enclosed inner space, which prevents their freedom. Also, their physical activities are usually suppressed, as they are taught to be careful in their movements not to get hurt or to keep their clothes clean while playing. Girls are habitually directed to focus on themselves, especially their bodies. Accordingly, girls’ perceptual field is driven toward their bodies instead of the world, which causes them to be in a state of objectivating function. The influence of the heterosexual system on a woman’s lived experiences, and specifically on shaping her perception, underscores the importance of the structural understanding of femininity. Not only does such understanding show the oppressive conditions that cause unjust situations for a woman but it also shows the condition that sets her to be in a state of objectivating function. This answers the earlier question about the relationship between the lived body approach and the structural approach, which Young adopts in her definition of femininity.

Conclusion In conclusion, reversibility can be considered the root of the self-reference modality, and thus it may be suggested that this study has contributed to our understanding of Young’s discussion of femininity in several respects. First, by accepting Young’s analysis, the study has taken a further step to uncover the root of feminine experience, particularly concerning the state of the objectivating function that represents this kind of experience. Second, the function of reversibility, which illustrates the capacity of woman’s perceptual experience to be in both subjectivating and objectivating functions, offers support to Young’s stance against feminine determinacy and to Straus’s views in this regard. Third, as reversibility functions at the level of the lived body, this allows for an existential and phenomenological analysis of woman’s lived body and its relation to the world and others. Such an analysis would justify the relation between the lived body and structural approaches that constitute the two aspects of Young’s definition of femininity, in addition to the aspect related to the rejection of biological determinacy.

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