

Feminist view of the body

We do not just have bodies; we are bodies. Dutch researcher Silvia Stoller used this proposition from phenomenology as a basis for studying the theories of three influential feminist philosophies. Her study sheds new light on feminist philosophy and provides a basis for further research.

Phenomenology, that is the study of experience, assumes the world is as we encounter it. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) is known for his theory of the body and his criticism of the dualism of body and spirit that reduces the body to a physical entity with its own natural laws. Instead he envisioned an embodied spirit, a thought and observation process emanating from the body that is the source of our language and our entry point into the world. Merleau-Ponty refers to that body as the phenomenological or lived body.

Although recent feminist theories often neglect the starting point of the experience, feminist theories of the body in particular, can benefit from Merleau-Ponty's theory, according to Stoller. She explains this using the work of the French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), the French-Belgian philosopher and linguist Luce Irigaray (about 1930) and the American philosopher Judith Butler (1956). All three of them examined Merleau-Ponty's work.

Gender differences

According to Beauvoir women are mainly identified by their body and men by their spirit. Stoller uses Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body to further explain this analysis of how we experience gender in daily life. Irigaray proposes that there are a range of fundamental gender differences between men and women, which Merleau-Ponty failed to consider. Stoller shows that Irigaray still used many of Merleau-Ponty's theoretical insights and with this she clarifies many important aspects of Irigaray's theory of sexual difference.

Finally, the constructivist Judith Butler considers gender and sex as constructions and proposes that language consists of imposed rules and standards. Stoller demonstrates that constructivism and phenomenology have more in common than has been assumed and that they compliment and clarify each other.

Stoller's study is the first to initiate a dialogue between the work of Merleau-Ponty and Butler, Beauvoir and Irigaray. According to Stoller, phenomenology provides feminist philosophy with an indispensable methodology and Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body fills a gap in feminist philosophy and gender theory. Further knowledge about the phenomenological background of the three philosophers should lead to a better understanding of their work and greater insight into the feminist acceptance of phenomenology.

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