

EXISTENTIAL/PHENOMENOLOGY: A PHILOSOPHY
ARTICULATING THE FEMININE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Utopian writings by women (Bryant, Gearhart, Gilmore, Lessing) are taken as presenting an articulation of the world as experienced by womEn. Concepts central to such Utopias (interrelatedness through empathy, cooperative and egalitarian decision-making, sensing of nature, animals, and human energies through the body, an emphasis upon the felt and the intuited) are compared with concepts basic to the existential philosophy of Sartre, Buber, Heidegger, Gendlin, and Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological methodology of Husserl.

The argument is made that the latter concepts are more congruent with the world as experienced by woman¹ than the philosophical constructs of logical positivism and its behavioral and quantitative methodologies. A specific phenomenological methodology, explication of felt meaning, derived from Gendlin's theory of the experiencing, is presented as a necessary step in the development of humanly meaningful variables for psychology. The point is made that experiencing, when articulated, will always include a relationship between the human being and situations, events, or symbols, rather than being purely intrapsychic.

¹ As of 2006, the author sees the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) distinction between Thinking and Feeling as a cleaner measure of this perceived gender difference. 60% of men score as Thinkers, 60% of women as Feelers, with plenty of overlap between the categories.

The World As Experienced by Women

This paper aims at a legitimization of the "feminine" way of being. It is a paper in praise of the "concrete": Woman's subjectivity; her Self bound to a world of feeling, intuition, and relationship. Marya Mannes, woman writer, says: "Women are accused of taking things personally. I cannot see any other honest way of taking them."

At least one subject matter for psychology must be a study of the world as experienced by women², a world of feeling, intuition, relationship, empathy, and, as Gilligan (1977) has described, a non-violent morality grounded, not in an abstract definition of the good, but in a felt unity with all people, a felt sense of the equality of all people. The task of feminist social science at this point must be the avoidance of war and the quest for equality and dignity for all people as well as the equality of women in work and pay.

There is an urgent need for psychologists to articulate and become able to teach the "feminine" (in the Jungian sense) qualities of empathy, cooperation, nurturance, and egalitarian morality. These values are found as central in utopias created by women writers, worlds imagined out of a feminine way of being, such as Gilmore's *Herland* (1979), Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1971), Gearheart's *The Wanderground* (1979), and Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980).

It is a task of psychologists to bring these concepts out of the realm of our literature and into the realm of our science. A question for psychology then becomes: what is the nature of the human being such that her or his defining characteristics include myth, ritual, empathy, cooperation, an experience of the God within, energy, body, the psychic? What are the factors operating when human beings behave other than in these ways?

Existential/phenomenology vs. Logical positivism

This paper addresses the argument between logical positivist and existential/phenomenological frames for looking at human being. Many philosophers of science have argued the issues cogently (Kuhn, 1962; May, 1961;van Kaam,1966;Wann,1964). The task of the present paper is to identify the struggle as a feminist one, to argue that, as presently construed, logical positivist psychology excludes the study of women's experience in at least two ways:

- (1) it excludes inner experiencing as a subject matter for study;

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(2) it excludes phenomenological exploration as a method of inquiry.

Concepts from existentialism and phenomenology validate the experience of women as it appears in Utopian literature. These concepts provide words or frames for the articulation of experiences which are excluded within a logical positivist frame, particularly:

- a) the primacy of feeling and intuition as ways of knowing the world,
- b) the human body as inherently relational and interactional,
- c) human experiencing as preverbal, preconceptual, and bodily.

These concepts can be contrasted with those arising from the logical positivist philosophy underlying most of our science today --concepts which describe the human being as sensation, cognition, affect, behavior, drives, needs, perception, instinct. The world as experienced by woman is not found in these terms.

Gendlin's Theory of Experiencing

The work of Eugene T. Gendlin, existential philosopher and psychologist at the University of Chicago (Gendlin, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1965/66), comes close to providing a theoretical frame which encompasses the world as experienced by woman. Gendlin's theory is experiential, in the same sense that the best of women's literature is experiential. The theory has been developed as an articulation of Gendlin's own felt experiencing rather than out of logical deduction or behavioral observation.

The theory makes concepts for felt experiencing. It describes the person, not as personality contents, but as process, continuously going from form to experiential flux; it provides concepts for understanding change, rather than stasis (1964). Out of this theory has been developed the Experiencing Scale (Klein, Matheiu, Gendlin & Kiesler 1969). The Experiencing Scale is a step toward measuring the degree to which a human being's experiencing process is structure-bound, e.g., caught and rigidified in abstractions vs. experiential, e.g., a flexible back and forth between felt experiencing and the words, images, and behaviors used to embody it. Flexibility in moving between experiencing and symbols has been shown, tentatively, to be related to female gender (Kiesler, 1969)³, and to be related to creativity (Gendlin, Beebe, Cassens, Klein, and Oberlander, 1968) and the ability to profit from psychotherapy (Rogers, 1967). Gendlin's theory of experiencing

³ This study shows a nonsignificant trend toward a positive relationship between flexible experiencing and female gender. There is also concern that the Experiencing Scale, although one of the best known clinical predictors of success in psychotherapy, is not totally true to Gendlin's conception of experiencing. Because of the scale's reliance upon verbal content, it may not be an accurate measure of the higher levels of experiencing, where flexibility in the process of moving between symbols and felt experiencing is the distinguishing factor.

and the research growing out of it, provide tools for the definition and measurement of intuitiveness and subjectivity as observable and manipulable variables.

Existential/Phenomenology and “Feminine” Experience

The following pages go through some of the basic characteristics of the “feminine”⁴ as described in Utopian literature and show how concepts from existential/phenomenology confirm these ways of being as basic for human beings. The emphasis is on human beings, both male and female. It can be hypothesized that, if many people are not functioning in these ways, it is, at least in part, because our cultural conditioning in the arenas of physical violence, aggression, and competition has necessitated becoming cut off from the body as a source of feeling and intuition. Since, as will be demonstrated below, these bodily experiences are also the source of one's feeling of relationship to the world, such persons have thereby also become cut off from their feeling of empathy for, and a sense of moral responsibility for, other people.

The Reality of “Feeling”

In the principles below, there is an attempt to demonstrate the reality of feeling and its legitimacy as the ground for a phenomenological methodology. "Feeling" as used here does not refer to the affect or emotion of logical positivism, but to the ongoing background of felt meaning (Gendlin, 1962) that is basic to human existence.

Principle One: Feeling and intuition are basic existents.

Woman experiences herself as at one with the world, a process, not static roles or units. She trusts her intuitive sensing of others and relates through empathy (Bryant, 1971; Gearhart, 1979; Lessing, 1980)

The first thing existential philosophy did was simply to point to the existence of feeling and intuition as a sub-stratum of human being, a source of knowing. Sartre, rebelling against the philosophy of his time, cried, "Existence precedes essence." He was saying, basically: Philosophers talk about concepts, go from one concept, one abstraction to another, play logical games with concepts and even begin to think that the concepts, the ideas, the abstractions they have created are the real thing, are the way that reality is given for human beings. This is not so. Underneath and before any of these concepts, and implicit in the nature of this concept-making animal, is a more

⁴ The Jungian description of “masculine” and “feminine” as aspects present within all human beings (similar to “yin” and “yang,” for instance) again captures more than a gender difference.

basic and preceding reality: the human being's experience of being a continuous self, the knowledge of one's existence simply through experiencing one's own ongoingness.

As one function of this ongoingness, the human being makes concepts, ideas, abstractions, and observations about reality, but before all of these concepts, and more real, more basic, is the "maker" of the concepts, the human being as a process of existing. At this level, there is no subject-object split, no mind-body split, but a preverbal, preconceptual, bodily stream of feeling and intuition.

Sartre calls this "existence." Gendlin calls it "experiencing," and "felt meaning", defined as "the (directly referred to) 'feel' of some situation, concept, object, personal relationship, content, or the like" (1962, p. 244, fn. 9). The existence of feeling can be proven through direct reference to felt experiencing. If you were to pause for a moment now, and turn your attention inward to your sense of your self as existing, you could verify the existence of felt meaning through this direct reference.

Principle Two: The body is a source of knowledge about the world.

Woman experiences herself as located in her body, and through it, as co-extensive with nature, with the human community. She trusts in her "feelings" to guide decisions (Gearhart, 1979, Bryant, 1971, Lessing, 1980).

Existentialists, particularly Merleau-Ponty (1963), say that the human being experiences existence through the body, that the substratum of existence is the same as body. Gendlin (1962) argues that the "unconscious" is not a psychological entity, a compartment of mind, but is simply the body, the organism's way of carrying knowledge before it is made into concepts. If one is out of touch with body, one will lose touch with the meaningfulness of symbols.

Principle Three: The body is inherently relational.

Woman experiences herself as a part of other people. She lives in a world of empathy, concern with relational climate (Bryant, 1971; Gearhart, 1979; Gilmore, 1979; Lessing, 1980).

The body, "existence" as ongoingness, the substratum of feeling and intuition, is also shown, particularly in the work of Heidegger (1962) and Buber (1958), to be inherently interactional and interrelational. The "body" as experienced is no envelope of skin separating the person from the world. Heidegger says there is no "human being" as a separate or separable entity; there is only "being-in-the-world," the human being as implicitly and by nature an interaction.

Martin Buber describes this lack of boundary between inside and outside, using the example of a fish. At the gills, the fish **is** the water, the exchange of molecules of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

There is no fish as existent without the water. Water is part of its definition as a living organism. Likewise, while there may be a physical body, there is no human being without an interactional and interpersonal world.

Here is a verification of woman's experience of being inextricably bound to the world through empathy. Here is a ground for woman's tendency to be situation-bound, concrete, personal, subjective. As Gilligan (1977) has begun to show, it is just this situation-boundness, this tie to the rest of the world through feeling, which grounds woman's morality in feelings for herself and for others, in concerns for non-violence and equality for all.

Principle Four: Experiencing is a Source of Knowledge

Woman turns her thinking toward her inner experiencing, and she finds there feelings and intuitions, not as intrapsychic, subjective contents, but as a nexus of interaction between herself and world. This substratum of feeling and intuition, which Gendlin (1962) calls "felt meaning," is a valid source of knowledge, not only about herself, but about the world, about situations, about other people, with whom it is coterminous.

Existential/phenomenology provides a philosophical basis for woman's experience of being primordially interested in interpersonal relationships, rather than (or, more appropriately, in addition to) abstract ideas and things. Because her attention is turned inward toward her bodily experiencing, the interrelational nature of experiencing is continuously available to her as a ground for the making of concepts. The awareness of feeling is tantamount to the awareness of relationships or relational events, because feelings **are** relationships. Feelings are always at, or toward, or in relationship to other people and other things (Heidegger, 1962).

Some of woman's ways of being-in-the-world are synonymous with a phenomenological methodology, as drawn from Husserl and explicated by Gendlin (1962), particularly:

- (a) the acceptance of inner experiencing as real;
- (b) the acceptance of direct reference to felt experiencing as a ground for determining truth or falsity;
- (c) the demand that concepts be grounded in concrete experiencing, rather than abstraction.

Principle Five: Explication of Experiencing Integrates with Empirical Research

It is not necessary, as some phenomenologists and humanists have claimed, to throw out all of science as it is presently practiced: for a new methodology or for no science at all, as the case may be. It is at the level of the development of variables and the measures for studying them, that

phenomenological exploration is essential. As has been articulated by Gendlin (1962), once humanly meaningful variables have been explicated from felt meaning, and once measures have been created which are true reflections of the processes underlying these phenomena, then these variables and measures can enter into the theoretical hypotheses and empirical experiments of logical positivist science.

The methodology proposed here is also different from some phenomenological attempts to read off inner events as pure intrapsychic experience. The felt sense, the bodily feel of a situation, is seen as the key for the unfolding of the relationship between the human being and outer, observable situations.

To be meaningful for psychology, variables must be developed out of and refer back to felt experiencing. As has been described above, felt experiencing is not simply intrapsychic, but is the location of the interaction between the human being and situations. Variables developed out of abstract theory or out of observation of human behavior will be lacking in this context of human meaningfulness.

Explication of a “Felt Sense” Is A Phenomenological Methodology

The starting point of any exploration of human being should be the psychologist's felt sense of a phenomenon. Every human being who is living with direct reference to felt experiencing is a wealth of such rich phenomenological distinctions. The first step for the psychologist is simply to turn his/her attention toward felt experiencing, toward the inner sensing of a phenomenon that grips him or her strongly, in a feeling way, and to begin to try to articulate the felt sense, to make words for it in such a way that it can be verified, as a specific phenomenological distinction, in the inner experiencing of other people.

This is the phenomenological methodology of Husserl: the articulation of a phenomenon, a human distinction, such that another person can verify the existence of this phenomenon by finding it in his or her own felt experiencing. Gendlin (1962) calls it direct reference to felt experiencing, a third method of inquiry, equal in its importance to the pursuit of truth through logic or through experiment. It should be fruitfully used at the point of the development of variables and their measures. It can be hypothesized that women may be especially suited to make contributions at this level, if they do in fact live in more intimate contact with their ongoing experiencing, as it appears in the feminist visions and as the possibility is confirmed by existential theory.

This is the import of Gilligan's "In A Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and Morality" (1977) --not simply the pointing out of another possible gender difference, but the creation of this distinction, not out of theory or experiment, but from direct reference to her own felt experiencing. Gilligan shows that Kohlberg's (1976) categories of moral development do not fit the development of morality in women.

Kohlberg's categories do not fit morality as experienced by women. The problem is not in the logical consistency of the theory nor in the reliability and validity of the empirical studies which grew out of it, but in terms of the third method of inquiry, Husserl's phenomenological test for truth, the ability of the other person to find the concept in her or his own felt experiencing. It is to Gilligan's credit that she held on to and pursued the articulation of this distinction in inner experiencing, in moral decision-making as experienced, at least by women. In doing so, she is on her way toward developing a variable, and eventually a measure, which will be tied to a phenomenon as humanly meaningful.

Principle Six: The Felt Sense Ties Human Research to Situations

It is interesting to note that, per the methodology proposed here, Gilligan's phenomenological exploration immediately led to the realization that morality must be studied in actual decision-making **situations**.⁵ In explicating an experiential sense, she immediately became aware of the interaction between experiencing and situations.

Moral decision making, as Gilligan (1977) has described it, is an experiencing of self and others, an experiencing of human being in a situation, not an intrapsychic phenomenon. Because of the interrelational nature of felt experiencing, as has been described above, such experienced phenomena, when explicated or symbolized in words, will not be about sheer intrapsychic events, but will be a mirror of the relationship between human and world. There will be feelings about situations, other people, events.

Presumed intrasubjectivity has been the greatest argument against the validity of felt experiencing as a source of knowledge for science. The following is an example of how a felt sense, when explicated, describes a relationship between human being and situation that can be observed through the methods of empirical science.

⁵ It is conceivable that a phenomenological exploration of moral decision-making by men, in actual life situations, may find it to be more similar to Gilligan's findings than to the structure imposed by Kohlberg's categories upon the experience.

Research by Boukydis (a.k.a. McGuire, K., 1975) was initiated as an attempt to explicate a feeling which the experimenter experienced in some decision-making groups and not in others. In some groups, she felt unable to speak, her body was tense, she felt crushed down. In other groups, she felt able to speak, her body was at ease. In exploring this felt sense, by making words for the experience, by trying to identify what was happening interactionally in groups when she felt crushed down vs. free to speak, and by comparing the theory and research of others with her felt sense of the phenomenon, she eventually came up with a testable hypothesis about an inverse relationship between aggressive, competitive turn-taking behavior, and the ability of group members to contribute from intuitive, preverbal experiencing.

Since the creation of new meanings must come from the preverbal rather than the already known (Gendlin, 1962) and since creativity has been shown to be related to the capacity to focus upon presently felt experiencing (Gendlin et al, 1968), it could be further theorized that an increase in the opportunity to contribute from preverbal experiencing would lead to an increase in the discovery of creative, alternative solutions by the group.

The functional relationship between interruptions, an operational definition of competition, and pauses during speaking turns, an operational definition of direct reference to felt experiencing, was measured. As interruptions decreased, pauses increased. The study used a multiple baseline design from behavior analysis. Yet the phenomenon being studied had initially been arrived at, not through deduction from a theory or through empirical observation, but through exploration of a feeling (a felt sense).

Principle Seven: Explication of Felt Meaning Insures Construct Validity

It can be argued that this is the first step in much research, but, because it is seen as a prescientific, intuitive activity, the support needed to develop this method, which can be called "explication of felt meaning," into a legitimate method of inquiry, and to arrive at the humanly-tied variables and measures it could generate, are not granted. Yet, research which does not start out grounded in a human being's felt experiencing is at great risk of being irrelevant to the understanding of human beings, since, as the existentialists point out, human being exists only at the point of this intersection between felt experiencing and situations.

Theory, as a schema for understanding reality, can function to call up felt experiencing, but, at this point, the phenomenological explication of felt meaning must be used for the development of research variables. The theory must be set aside and the uncovered phenomenon articulated as a

distinction in felt experiencing, an interaction between felt experiencing and symbols, situations, or events. The following serves as an example:

Many feminists are presently finding that object relations theory is in some way resonating with their felt experiencing. Yet there is a conflict around accepting a psychoanalytically-based explanation for feminine experience. The task here is, not to get caught in the theoretical abstractions of object relations theory, but to articulate the felt experiencing which has been brought to light, or called up more clearly, by this theoretical schema.

The step for the research of human phenomena is to stop and say, "What is it in my own experiencing that is touched or articulated by this theory?" and to focus into, or to sense into, that feeling and then carefully to make words for it. When this felt referent is articulated, a variable will emerge which is drawn, not from theoretical deduction or empirical observation, but from the explication of a very specific interaction between outer events and human experiencing.

The measures developed can have a high construct validity because they can be tested by their ability to refer back to the felt sense of the phenomenon. They will be measures of an actual human experience, rather than measures of contents which are hypothesized to exist in the human being because of the logic of someone's theoretical construction of reality. The research which emerges will be personally and humanly meaningful. It will call forth more clearly some aspect of human experiencing, rather than further obscuring human being by defining and narrowing it according to predetermined categories.

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