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Queering Moments in Phenomenology

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This paper discusses the relation of contemporary phenomenology to queer theory. It argues that traditional phenomenology's exclusion of social or libidinal structures constitutes both a "straight failure" and a "failure to become queer." Drawing on Levinas, Derrida, and Halberstam, the paper reinterprets phenomenological passivity and opacity as sites of resistance to normative, heteronormative subjectivity. It suggests that these conceptual failures open the possibility for a queer phenomenology – one that embraces indeterminacy, vulnerability, and the political dimensions of desire. By reconceiving desire as constitutive of perception and subjectivity, the study calls for a critical, queer phenomenology that rethinks the foundations of ethical and political experience.

Keywords: queerness – phenomenology – Levinas – Halberstam – Derrida – critical phenomenology

Introduction: Social and Political Aspects in Contemporary Phenomenology

Contemporary phenomenologists claim that it is important to account for the social and political phenomena and think about phenomena such as race, maternity, and femininity from a phenomenological point of view (see Al Saji 2017; Fielding 2006; Alcoff 2006; Bartky 1990; Gordon 1995; Heinämaa 2003; Weiss 1990; Yancy 2008; and Young 2005). These perspectives remain crucial for contemporary phenomenology. However, what remains underdiscussed is the relationship of contemporary phenomenology to *queerness.* We need to find new reasons why it is vital to think of *queerness* as something that cannot be separated from the study or analysis of perception and consciousness as such. As Al-Saji claims, "sociality and historicity are not merely added onto meaning-making relations as an extra layer of sense" (2017, 148), and we suggest that the

same goes for *queerness*. Queerness is an inevitable part of this sociality and historicity, as much as race.

But one might ask: Does everything need to become socially and politically motivated? And what does even *queerness* have to do with phenomenology anyway? Isn't it possible to simply think about the perception of things as a uniform process that is not already formed by the political beliefs or genders we have? These questions are studied by some authors who try to find out what the overlap between phenomenology and *queer theory* might be (see Fryer 2015; Käll 2015; Rubin 1998; Salamon 2009). Rodemeyer states there was a chiasm between phenomenology and queer theory. However, she claims the future is to combine the two approaches because phenomenology fails to take into account the political, historical, and social aspects of individual experience and of desire. On the other hand, she claims queer theory tends to neglect embodiment and individual living experience and focus more on power relations. Rodemeyer believes that these two approaches should be combined, underlining that Rubin used a phenomenological account to better account for transcorporeality since performative theory was not able to do so in the '90s, and this remains true until today.

> I am calling for the rehabilitation of a phenomenological methodology that substitutes a version of identity that is always unfolding and embodied for these more naive and unexamined notions of identity. As all bodies change over the life course and transsexual bodies change over the course of transition, "identity" is necessarily neither reifiable nor internally stable. Phenomenology joined with genealogy can historicize autobiographical accounts of identity without undermining the relevance of identity for the subjects inhabiting subject positions (Rubin 1998, 279).

Rubin's call for new accounts on subjectivity and identity that could be used in trans or queer studies remains valid until today, even if their account originates in the '90s. The contemporary phenomenology could propose an intersectional and conceptual definition of subjectivity that could be subsequently used in queer theory, but it seems the work is only being done in the field of critical phenomenology in reaction to feminist theory, critical race theory, or disability studies, but not queer theory. Rodemeyer expresses fear that queer studies are being made invisible under the umbrella term Critical Phenomenology, and we subscribe to this worry. In fact, the project of "queer phenomenology" has received very little attention, including Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology*. However, feminist critical theories and their work in the

phenomenological field might not be sufficient for thinking about subjectivity and identity that we need to work with in e.g., in trans studies. We need a specific analysis of subjectivity, affectivity, and their relation to the specific environments and specific politics for queer theory and trans studies. On the other hand, contemporary phenomenology could gain some insights into the notion of subjectivity and its essential features that would correspond to a more diverse range of experiences. Because, unfortunately, even until today, it works with heteronormative assumptions for the most part, even if there are a lot of "queering" moments as suggested by both Ahmed and Rodemeyer (Ahmed 2006, 4). But as we will show, phenomenology fails to see its own queering devices.

First, we will clarify the meaning of the word queer. It is important not to forget that the word "queer" used to have negative connotations in English, meaning twisted, perverted, strange (Sedgwick 1994, viii). But its meaning was rewritten by queer community to mean something positive and worthy of pride. As Cleto says (1999, 15), it is a gem, and it used to denote the high class of gay people, the so-called gay aristocracy (obviously mostly gay men). In the Slovak language, the word *teplý* [warm], which is used to denote "too much" femininity in a homosexual man, is pejorative, and was connected with being "prisladký [too sweet]" (Pisárčiková 2004, online), but it could also refer to "being hot," especially nowadays. Being *queer* or *teplý* in Slovakia today can mean being hot, not estranged anymore, especially if we consider the lived reality of younger generations. But, as Cleto claims, "Besides, no gem can be detached from the social contract that values it, and as such both camp and diamonds imply their *sine qua non* of potential neglect" (Cleto 1999, 2 – 3). Additionally, much of the existing phenomenological analysis not only does not take into account the social and political structures that normalize and naturalize heterosexuality, but these analyses are often also complicit in this naturalization and normalization. In order to think *queerness*, we have to rethink the foundations of our political and social structures, and to do that phenomenologically. These are connected to our ways of being. Therefore, a postcolonial political and socially engaged phenomenology, such as critical phenomenology, should also think about queerness and its subjectivities.

I. Failures of Traditional Phenomenology

We could say that traditional phenomenology failed to account for the social conditions connected to the rise of normative sexuality. Therefore, phenomenology has historically been a failure insofar as it did not manage to consider the

structures of consciousness in their totality. We will inquire into how exactly this phenomenological failure proceeds. In this paper, we will identify two failures of so-called "traditional" phenomenology. It might seem paradoxical at first, but in the following, we will claim that phenomenology has failed to be straight *and,* at the same time, it has also failed to become queer. Therefore, phenomenology includes a *straight failure,* and also a *failure to become queer.*

As to *the straight failure* of traditional phenomenology, we can say it failed to be straight, and its project failed to fit into its own norms (to understand structures of consciousness independent of one's social status, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), which were prescribed by it. More precisely, it is a failure to account for social relations and political reality by traditional phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Husserl. With the arrival of French phenomenology, more precisely with Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas' perspectives on phenomenology, it becomes rather more personal, auto-biographical, and focused on singular experiences (cf. Janicaud 1998; Sebbah 2014). We can claim that phenomenology fails to be straight, and unlike Janicaud, we suggest that this is a good thing because this impossibility to achieve ideal structures of consciousness independent of one's social status, race, gender, or sexual orientation opens a possibility for feminist and decolonial perspectives on phenomenology and also for *queer* phenomenology. These perspectives acknowledge the possibility of multiple individual experiences and the differences between them without needing to universalize them. Ahmed describes this *straight failure* in her work at length, even if she does not explore the queer moments in Levinas, Derrida, or other authors, only in Merleau-Ponty, as Rodemeyer claims (2017, 325 – 326). Rodemeyer claims her account is more critical towards phenomenology instead of developing a new queer phenomenology, as it does not offer a dialogue between queer theory and phenomenology (2017, 329).

The *straight failure* consists in the lack of an account on sociability and libidinal desire, or emotions in more general terms, in traditional phenomenology. Levinas' account is a strong response to this lack, as we will show in the next paragraphs. However, in Husserl's *Ideas,* there is an erasure of desire; it is bracketed, and it does not constitute any essential trait of consciousness as such, meaning that desire is not formative for the basic structures of intentionality of consciousness. It is rather understood by Husserl as one type of content of a consciousness among others, a volition (Husserl 2012, 240). Husserl therefore analyzes emotions as volitional acts in *Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins II* (Husserl 2020) as examined by Vendrell (2024). Byrne (2023)

undertakes a project of making a different interpretation of Husserl's analysis of emotions that was overlooked for a long time (because these manuscripts mentioned above were published for the first time only in 2020), more particularly, of the concept of approval as connected to value and truth. Byrne claims that "in the end, in both his primary and secondary studies of feelings, Husserl correctly separates value and truth" (Byrne 2023, 288). This means that emotions connected to value are separate from truth and are interpreted through objectifying lenses again: "In sum then, a primary feeling is justifiably approved when it possesses a characteristic that is objectively valuable, such as being moral, good, or noble" (Byrne 2023, 289). Therefore, in Husserl, the emotions are only a secondary part of our consciousness, and our singular experience of emotions is wiped out from a primary phenomenological analysis because emotions in general are judged by Husserl as "objectively valuable, such as being moral, good, or noble," or not (Byrne 2023, 289). What is the consequence of this? The consequence is that it is impossible to account for emotions as a defining trait of consciousness and of subjectivity in phenomenology, and as a consequence, even desire is made invisible, as Levinas points out in *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger* (1998, 20).

II. *Queer Failure*, Failure *to Become Queer,* and Phenomenology

The *straight failure* has resulted in the *queering* of phenomenology, which can be found, as Ahmed suggests, in Merleau-Ponty. But also in Levinas and Derrida, who interpret phenomena as obscure, with the accent on the subjectivity being passive rather than active. These two authors fail phenomenology in the sense that they do not manage to maintain the former objective of traditional phenomenology, which strived for the objectivity of their analysis, meaning that they wanted to achieve an analysis of structures of consciousness, not taking into account desire or the social and political context of the formation of the subjectivity. Levinas also fails ethics since he does not propose any normative framework, as we will show. Derrida fails both ethics and phenomenology because he refuses the very idea of forming any conceptual and theoretical framework. Phenomena in both Levinas and Derrida are only spectral; therefore, these are not φαίνεσθαι as something that can appear; they are rather defined by their obscurity. Both actually refuse the idea of phenomenology as the analysis of the apparent, so their phenomenology (if we can even talk about it as such) is a phenomenology of the ungraspable. It is a phenomenology that fails to focus on φαίνεσθαι.

The concept of failure we use here corresponds to Halberstam's concept of *queer failure* (Halberstam – Halberstam 2011, 97). He refers to Daphne Brooks and her book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), and he claims that there is a particular "textual darkness" as a specific reading and writing practice. In Brooks, darkness becomes an interpretive tool. Halberstam states, "It is this understanding of 'textual darkness,' or the darkness of a particular reading practice from a particular subject position, that we believe resonates with the queer aesthetics we trace here as a catalogue of resistance through failure" (Halberstam – Halberstam 2011, 97). In the works of Levinas and Derrida, we witness an inclination towards this category of darkness and unclarity that becomes a tool used to tackle the old demand of universalism.

In the following paragraphs, we will link Levinas' and Derrida's theories to Halberstam's theory of negative reality and of anti-social theory based on the "unbecoming" of subjectivity through the category of passivity understood as resistance of the subject (Halberstam – Halberstam, 2011, 126, 133). Halberstam claims that

> The queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, and to unintelligibility, and instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition, he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we anyway structurally represent. Edelman's polemic about futurity ascribes to queerness the function of the limit… (Halberstam – Halberstam 2011, 106).

Similarly, subjectivity in general in Levinas and Derrida is defined only in negative terms, as radical passivity and vulnerability, as uncomprehensible, as something that radically resists grasping, focusing on the concept of limit. In their theory, any subject is something that is never there, never fully present *ex definitione*. Derrida and Levinas refuse any kind of essentialization of subjectivity, or its ontologization à la Heidegger, and they claim there is always something radically elusive in this subjectivity. Subjective experience is an experience of its limits. The essentialization of human subjectivity was, in their view, done throughout the history of phenomenology, and they claim this constitutes the violence of light.

Violence of light is linked to violence of conceptualization. This specific violence stems from the desire to clarify concepts and identities and put them in binary oppositions. In *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida claims, "Now, according to Levinas, all violence is a violence of the concept… 'existence is irreducible to the light of the self-evident' and 'the drama of existence' is

played out 'before light'" (2001, 109). He claims the metaphysics of clarification and of light generate violence, and we must exercise the unlearning of the essentialization of binary thinking. Even if this project of unlearning is metaphysically impossible (and in this he disagrees with Levinas), striving for it is a condition of any ethics and politics. This translates into Derrida's theory of *politics à venir* [to come], which implies that ethics and politics are an eternally unfinished project that can only be something always necessarily situated in the future. Similarly, Jose Esteban Muñoz refers to Ernst Bloch's theory to define queer futurity, or queer time, as something "not-quite there" and "not-quite-conscious" (2019, 21).

Halberstam refers to the concept of weak resistance "that looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant" (2011, 88). He underlines the power of what he calls shadow feminisms grounded in negation, passivity, refusal, absence, and silence. Rather than operating in modes of knowing, weak resistance recurs to modes of unknowing and unbecoming a woman, or, to put it shortly, unbecoming an essentialized identity. Halberstam claims the main tropes of shadow feminisms are

> self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power (Halberstam 2019, 124).

He asks if feminism can operate in terms of negation and in refusal to perform, e.g., the essentialized version of femininity, and what happens to political resistance if refusal to perform essences equals a failure. He claims that this failure to become an essentialized subjectivity can result in refusal of coherence and prescribed forms of agency, referring to anarchism. Shadow feminisms renounce productive power for something, power to become a subject, and instead, it has power to not be, to un-become. This unbecoming (or failure) leads to the desire for the destruction of self and the other, and this constitutes the core of its resistance by weakness, in a refusal to perform essentialization.

Derrida and Levinas understand any subjectivity to be a resistance to grasping, to essentialization; therefore, this unbecoming is, in their view, not only proper to a queer or racialized subjectivity but to any subjectivity. Derrida goes even further, and he claims that this applies to any binary opposition, not only to a concept of subjectivity or identity. Levinas' concept of subjectivity operates with similar Halberstam tropes mentioned above. In Levinas, one can

find an analysis of despair, shadows, night being, nonsense, chaos, insomnia, anxiety, and being at home.[1] Firstly, Levinas, in his early works, refuses even to use the concept of subjectivity and prefers terms such as "ipseity" or "passivity" in order to refuse the traditional phenomenological accounts of self. We will use these terms here for the purpose of clarity, but without subscribing to their problematic genealogy. His theory implies a strong critique of the phenomenological account of the autonomous, powerful, and self-conscious self, defined by agency. He rather assumes that the self is not a simple identity, but rather it surges as an interiority only after encountering the otherness (of the other person or of the world). Ipseity, therefore, is not defined by the performance of its identity but by its inability to perform anything, to act, and by its weakness and vulnerability. The I is always changing, and it never understands itself fully, he adds. It rather forgets itself. It has to remain other to itself, "alien to itself" as someone who "*marche devant soi* [is walking a step ahead of itself]" (Levinas 1969, 33). If the self were to understand itself, it would have an absolutely perfect rational representation of itself, and that would lead to the erasure of its own capacity to feel (sensibility), and it could lead to the end of ethics. The opacity of subjectivity remains opaque even to the I itself, and it remains opaque to others, to everyone. The fundamental trait of I is its opacity and distance from its own identity.

Levinas imagines the constitution of subjectivity as something that begins not in acting, but rather in a refusal to act; it begins unintentionality. He associates it with phenomena such as insomnia, laziness, depression-like apathy, and fatigue. These phenomena are the beginning of an agency in subjectivity, as they are precisely a non-action and passivity. Subjectivity is created by a refusal to exist, in nonsense, in sleep that he interprets as a refusal to possess itself (the self is already tired of the future), and this creates distance that makes it possible for the self to emerge as ipseity. Therefore, subjectivity starts as a dispossession and non-consciousness, contradicting the Heideggerian theory of being that fully understands itself and possesses its identity, defined by acting and thinking. Subjectivity is here rather defined by its exposure to the world and others. It is only thanks to this passive vulnerability that it can be formed as an identity, which, however, remains a non-identity. This vulnerability is not defined by a reciprocal dialogue but by the silent gaze of the other that is equally ungraspable and opaque. But the

[1] A lot of these effects are analyzed in queer theory as part of an "archive of feelings" (Cvetkovich 2003, 241 – 243).

other commands me, and his gaze is an ethical imperative that defines my entire existence and establishes all meaning (sensible, corporeal, or conceptual).

The commandment of the other, however, does not make me perform my identity, but it forces me to undo my identity as passivity in ethics, where I have no other choice than to be vulnerable and respect the other. Therefore, to be means not to be, not to perform, not even in ethics. Because of this, many claimed that his ethics are too negative since it doesn't believe in ethical norms or imperatives. He refuses normativity completely. Instead, only the vulnerability is a foundation of ethics in Levinas, and ethics is a desire rooted in the commandment of the other. This desire is, however, dark and incomprehensible and could never be grasped by words, gestures, or concepts. Many elements could be developed to show how Levinas' account of subjectivity could be beneficial to queer theory, but because of the limited space in this paper, we only introduce some parts of it. For example, there are some sadomasochistic elements in his ethical and phenomenological definition of subjectivity.

III. Failure *to Become Queer*

The above-mentioned is one of the potentially *queering moments* in phenomenology. However, there is a failure of Levinas' and Derrida's phenomenology *to become queer*. It refers to a failure to account for libidinal desire in subjectivity and its ideological formation by political and social realities, as we will elaborate in this section. But, as Fryer points out, Levinas leaves too little room for thinking libidinal desire, and he puts too much emphasis on the superego, the moral (2010, 68). Therefore, Levinas thinks the moralizing aspects of desire, but not the political and libidinal aspects of it.

For example, he describes the space of a home as defined by the feminine figure of a welcome. The interiority of the home, according to him, is characterized by a gentleness of feminine face (Levinas 1969, 150). The feminine face is characterized as absolute passivity and welcome, as absolute hospitality. This clearly puts the figure of the feminine into a passive role. But the subject in general is characterized by passivity in Levinas, instead of activity, as is the case in Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, or even Merleau-Ponty. However, Derrida criticizes him for considering femininity an absolute otherness without voice, silent, and as the one who is caressed. Derrida points out that in Levinas, there is a distinction between a person who is caressed and a person who is caressing. The feminine is the one who passively receives caressing, and here the connection between femininity and passivity proves to

be very problematic. The feminine face offers herself to the masculine caress as some kind of passive object that only installs the warmth at home (Derrida 2000, 107). Derrida himself undertakes an ethical and political analysis of phenomenology in his work (Derrida 1992, 2000, 2005, 2012), but he fails to account for the complex phenomenon of desire and sexual orientation as such (see Kuchtová 2024b, 249 – 267). This is visible in his work on the sexuality of animals in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), where he thinks the sexuality of animals and, therefore, questions the anthropocentric analysis of desire. However, he fails to account for animal desire that would go beyond the heterosexual framing of desire. For example, the cat of Derrida is a female who is facing his male erection from a passive position, sitting on the ground. He fails to grasp the non-heteronormative aspects of libidinal sexuality in broader terms. However, feminist reception of Levinas is not merely negative, but some feminists also see a lot of potential in the redefinition of subjectivity as passive (cf. Chanter 2010).

Yet there remains a long way for phenomenology to go to embrace its failure to be straight and to overcome its failure to become queer. The former is the precondition of the latter, insofar as recognizing the failure to be straight is rooted in a crucial queer insight into the nature of desire itself.

IV. Conclusion: Queer Phenomenology

We can conclude by saying that Levinas' phenomenological social theory and Derrida's political theory could become anti-social in Halberstam's sense (Halberstam – Halberstam 2011, 129 – 130) because they are based on the category of the textual darkness, contradiction, passivity, and non-activity while refusing the sovereign mastery of the subject. Derrida and Levinas refused binary thinking. Thinking *queer* implies the overcoming of binarism (cf. Cleto 1999, 13) as something that structures experience. Therefore, these thinkers *queer* the model of "straightness" or of "whiteness"; in short, they *queer* the transparency of the inner life experience. But they fail to account for non-heteronormative aspects of libidinal desire and its sociopolitical dimensions, and in the end, their phenomenology is a failure *to become queer.*

Following Sara Ahmed, we understand *queerness* as a category that pervades everything; it is not one concrete phenomenon, separated from other phenomena of the world that are experienced. And since phenomenology is an examination of the experience, it must examine queerness. We cannot analyze the experience or desire independently of our gender, personal life, sexuality, and libidinal desire. We would go even further, further than Ahmed, and claim

that we need to rethink the concept of desire as such, because it is a foundation of intellectual and bodily grasping of the world, and it was conceived of as a heteronormative movement in the history of thought (see Kuchtová 2024a, 238 – 275). A desire to grasp denotes how we relate to the other (the world, other people, animals, concepts, plants, minerals, landscapes, etc., in short, to everything). This desire is ideologically constructed, and in the context of Occidental philosophy, it is linked with Greek philosophical tradition. More concretely, the concept of desire is linked with the concepts of *agape*, *philia*, *éros*, *stasis*, *fraternity, and enmity*. These concepts created the foundation of political cohesion structures and, as a result, our ways of relating to the world. They are foundations of our thinking about political, symbolic, legal, and social structures (cf. Derrida 2005, 65). Therefore, they lie at the heart of our phenomenological experience, formed by the sensory experience and normative experience at the same time.

We have to rethink the concept of desire as the foundation of the very social, political, and legal structures formed by a concept such as *philia,* which is problematic since it is originally based on the concept of fraternal love and friendship between men, for example. Derrida shows how this concept is problematic in *The Politics of Friendship* because it is based on the phallocentric concept of friendship. It is the reciprocal alliance between men that allows the possibility of peace, war, and politics in Carl Schmitt's theory, or even in Kant. The concept of *philia* implies the presupposition of transparency, reciprocity, autonomy in subjectivity, and even the presupposition about what is proper to subjectivity. This is connected to the definition of subjectivity, defined as active. As a result, we should renounce these categories or rethink them because they are connected to the concept of phallocentrism, as Derrida's work shows. The work has to be done also in phenomenology, the task of which is to conceptualize the individual experience of libidinal desire and its relation to the world.

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