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[Johanna Oksala: Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations \[Review\]](#).

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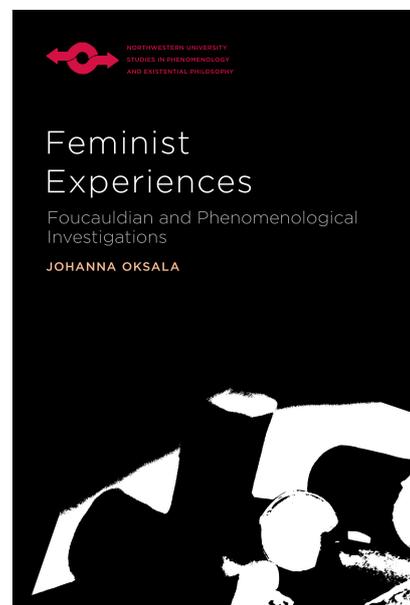
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Johanna Oksala: Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations

Title: Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations
Series: Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy
Author: Johanna Oksala
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Reviewed by: Tina Sikka (Simon Fraser University)



Johanna Oksala's book, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations*, is a perceptive, engaging and weighty text that makes a substantial contribution to the field of feminist philosophy. Oksala draws on phenomenology as critique, Foucault's later work on governmentality, a grounded interpretation of

personal experience, and a flexible understanding of language and meaning to strengthen contemporary feminist philosophy. Her objective is to build a model of feminist critique that pulls on the past as inheritance and the present to revive feminist theorizing and action. She argues this is vital “if feminist philosophy is to withstand and face up to the political challenges of our rapidly changing world” (17).

Some of the most interesting parts of the book can be found in the passages where Oksala actually fleshes out and develops her interpretation of experience, neoliberal governmentality and phenomenology. A prime example of this is her account of Foucault’s theory of experience as shaped by both knowledge and power yet also self-related. She makes this clear in a skillful passage which explains how the subjective and objective parts of experience and identity should be conceived of as an inter-related “series of foldings: the subject must fold back on itself to create a private interiority while being in constant contact with its constitutive outside. The external determinants or historical background structures of experience and the internal, private sensations fold into and continuously keep modifying each other” (57). This framework allows Oksala to show how both structure and subjectivity can exist in a non-binarized form.

With respect to phenomenology, Oksala suggests a postphenomenological framework which resists the reductive subjectivity that often results from bracketing. Instead, she posits that a partial bracketing, coupled with a focus on naturalized and notable ‘foreign’ assumptions, can be used to reach the ontological schemas that shape our lives – while remaining attendant to the fact that these schema are “tied to cultural normativity – to language, history, and culture” (107). It is precisely because these schema are normative, Oksala argues, that they are subject to challenge and reformation.

A third strand of Oksala’s revived feminist philosophy is her theory of language whose role in constructing experience and meaning is understood neither as a poststructural swirl of discourses or as prediscursive in origin. Rather, she claims that phenomenology itself can provide a “resource for thinking about the constitution of linguistic meaning, as well as the fundamental entwinement of language and experience” (73), that is, not reducible to either discourse or the prediscursive.

Taken together, Oksala shows how all three modes of analysis can be knit together to explain precisely how the contemporary feminine subject has been constituted. This mode of subjectivity is made concrete through a process of imposed and internalized neoliberal governmentality where women come to act as willing participants in a system that is inherently oppressive. This system sets up a structure of sanctions, habits and self-surveillance in order to discipline women with respect to expectations about the body, beauty, labor, roles, and general comportment. The

internalizing of these norms produces a kind of feminine subjectivity that is simultaneously exteriorized and economic. Self-interest, “personal freedom, economic independence and professional success in all areas of employment” (121), creates the illusion of free choice when in fact one’s options are tightly circumscribed by power relations that “make women more, not less, vulnerable to sexism” (126).

This brings me to one area of the book that could have benefited from a more nuanced analysis. Specifically, I contend that the author’s brief discussion of sex work/prostitution as ‘work’ that traps women through a deceptive discourse of choice and empowerment is somewhat reductive. Oksala warns against seeing prostitution as sex work, a position advocated by supporters of sex worker’s rights, since, in doing so, there is a real danger of reconfirming neoliberal governmentality. This is because by focusing less on the “moral limits of markets,” and more on attempts to “ameliorate the destructive effects” (143), this approach fails to address the fundamental problem posed by governmentality.

While this argument is sound, it also relies too much on a reading of decriminalization and legalization (of prostitution) as espoused by libertarians like Camille Paglia whose embrace of capitalism, which she claims produces the modern independent woman, mixes with empowerment discourse to frame sex workers as flourishing under fetishized neoliberal governmentality. Oksala states that, “in neoliberal governmentality, they [sex workers] must be treated solely as economic issues concerned with adequate working conditions, toughening markets, and forms of entrepreneurial conduct” (142-3). This misses some interesting scholarship on sex work as challenging patriarchal sexuality, acting as a subversive strategy, and as challenging moral norms and traditional institutions (like that of monogamy and marriage). It also leaves out the application of postmodern frameworks to sex work which focuses on individual experience, activism, the complex situatedness of women, and the breaking down of binaries (good girl/bad girl, agent/victim) as discussed by Shannon Bell. To be fair, Oksala does acknowledge the importance of a feminist stance that respects the fluidity of women’s subjectivities, but concludes that neoliberalism governmentality represents a unique challenge that requires more attention.

Overall, emerging from this dense theoretical framework is a theory of the feminist subject that is simultaneously reflexive, critical, agential and socially and discursively formed. Mobilizing collective responsibility and solidarity based on a theory of inheritance, for Oksala, is the best way to push for transformative and feminist social change. Rather than Nietzschean resentment, the works of Derrida and Benjamin are drawn on to argue for an approach to history grounded in remembrance and disrupted linearity. Oksala concludes that for this to occur, feminist politics needs to become comfortable with eschewing definitive readings of

history and begin “to choose differing, often incompatible, interpretations of history which acknowledging the limits and the fallibility of that choice” (157). Rounding out the book is a thought experiment where the reader is asked to imagine a utopian world of totally equality and emancipation. Oksala asks whether, were this to take place, past injustices, sexism, and misogyny would be forgotten. The answer, not to put too fine a point on it, is a clear no. Rather, Oksala challenges the reader to find a way towards action that acknowledges “the weak which messianic power with which we are endowed” and use it “for redemption” (158).

Oksala’s writing is both demanding and detailed. Moreover, her complex use and close reading of primary sources requires some background in feminist and continental philosophy. As such, the book itself is definitely not light reading. It is, however, absolutely essential for anyone wanting to learn about the contribution a feminist philosophy comprised by an innovative interpretation of neoliberal governmentality, a reflexive conception of language, and a historically grounded theory of phenomenology can make to fostering tangible social change.

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