

Throwing Like a Spartan: The Limitations of a Socially Constructed Somatics

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As a first-person methodology to the exploration of consciousness, phenomenology can be rich with descriptive data. In what is now a classic (and oft-cited) example, Iris Marion Young illustrates in some suggestive detail the somatic basis underlying what it's like to "throw like a girl."¹ When I finally got a chance to read this paper, I was amazed at the insight I thought was being given into the essence of feminine ontology – though I should make clear here that "essence" is my choice of wording, a wording that Young flatly rejects:

Every human existence is defined by its *situation*; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation. We reduce women's condition simply to unintelligibility if we "explain" it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence. In denying such a feminine essence, however, we should not fall into that "nominalism" which denies the real differences in the behavior and experiences of men and women. Even though there is no eternal feminine essence, there is (de Beauvoir, 1974) "a common basis which underlies every individual female existence in the present state of education and custom" (1980, pp. 138-9, original emphasis).

Young is preparing the ground here to make the case that "throwing like a girl" can be most meaningfully described as a *socially constructed* phenomenon, rather than ascribing it to inherent physiological potentialities – *and*, she is very clear to note that she is limiting her account to the description of "the modalities of feminine bodily existence for women situated in contemporary advanced industrial, urban, and commercial society" (Ibid, pp. 139-140).

With this purpose and within this context Young encapsulates her position succinctly:

The three modalities of feminine motility are that feminine movement exhibits an *ambiguous transcendence*, an *inhibited intentionality*, and a *discontinuous unity* with its surroundings. A source of these contradictory modalities is the bodily self-reference of feminine comportment, which derives from the woman's experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity (Ibid, p. 145, original emphases).

¹ Young, Iris Marion (1980). Throwing like a girl: A phenomenology of feminine body comportment motility and spatiality. *Human Studies* 3, 137-156

This was the big insight for me into feminine existence within so called “contemporary advanced” society: that a woman can have a dualistic relationship with her body, as both a *thing* and a capacity. I am reminded of eco-feminist scholars such as Susan Griffin (1978) and Carolyn Merchant (1980) who deftly make the correlation between the objectification of Nature and the objectification of Womanhood, resulting inevitably in the continuous, ongoing degeneration and devitalization of “contemporary advanced” society. Phenomenologically, for the throwing girl, this objectification of feminine bodily existence is experienced as “self-referred in that the woman takes herself as the *object* of the motion rather than its originator” (Young, 1980, p. 148, original emphasis); also, “feminine bodily existence is self-referred to the extent that the feminine subject posits her motion as the motion that is *looked at*” (Ibid, original emphasis). Young seems to be claiming that “throwing like a girl” is not all that effective due to a debilitating self-consciousness, a socially constructed objectification of self where “the body is often lived as a thing which is other than it, a thing like other things in the world” (Ibid).

Iris Young has won my admiration, for through her incisive phenomenological descriptions she has helped me to understand the existential experience of many of my friends and colleagues – womyn in “contemporary advanced” society. Yet I think she goes too far when she says:

The modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality which I have described here are, I claim, common to the existence of women in contemporary society to one degree or another. They have their source, however, in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine “essence.” Rather, they have their source in the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society (1980, p. 152, original emphasis).

How could the bodily act of throwing – whether by a girl *or* a boy, a woman *or* a man, a child *or* a chimpanzee – *not* include considerations of anatomy and physiology? Relying so exclusively on socially constructed interpretations of reality necessarily runs into limitations; for, I would contend, the anatomy and physiology is fundamental, underlying, evolutionarily existing way before any chance for socially constructed interpretations is even possible.

By not forwarding a more balanced account, one that can include the influence of both Nature *and* Society, Iris Young unfortunately aligns herself with more shrill feminist-postmodernists who routinely attempt to reduce *everything* to social constructs within their perceived oppressive world. Take for example another somatically-oriented paper written for the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Authors Erica Reischer & Kathryn S. Koo (2004, p. 297) begin by explaining:

The prominence of the body in popular culture has prompted intense academic interest in recent decades. Seeking to overturn a naturalistic approach to the body as a

biological given, this broad literature redefines the body as a sociocultural and historical phenomenon. Within anthropology, two primary theoretical orientations toward the body have emerged: the body as “symbol” and the body as “agent.”

The body as a “sociocultural and historical phenomenon?” As “symbol” or “agent?” It sounds to me like these authors, in their zeal to “overturn a naturalistic approach,” are committing the very sort of objectification that Young decried as a symptom of “sexist oppression.”

And the objectification continues, in the vapid disembodied language that seems to be the preferred medium of the politically-correct academic. As an example, regard this statement from page 299: “In the merging of its symbolic and agentic capacities, then, the body beautiful may be read as a primary site for the social construction and performance of gender.” There is not even an attempt here to infuse the writing with the sort of phenomenological vitality with which Young was able to so vividly convey her experience – a very believable *lived* experience. Instead, body is analytically reduced to an impersonal, lifeless “site.” Can you imagine, in the interest of good health, going to a massage therapist and asking to tone up your “site.” Later (p. 302), in a discussion about compulsive overeating, the authors claim that a woman may do so as a purposeful act, “symbolic of her feminist rebellion against the dominant images of ideal womanhood that limit her ability to realize her own image.”

This is what I mean by “the limitations of a socially constructed somatics:” with each passing turn it seems to get further and further away from direct lived experience – the experience of anatomy and physiology, of health and well-being, of moving and breathing, of hormones and adrenalin, of excitement and inspiration and the evolution of the species – and more and more into innuendo and ideology. The Spartans wouldn’t have had this problem: there, the girls had an exercise regimen as intensive as the guys, and would often compete with them at Olympic-style games. The Spartan women enjoyed a level of independence and self-assertiveness unheard of in the ancient world. When it came time to meet the Persians at Thermopylae, however, by tradition, the women stayed home to tend the hearth.

A couple days ago, I went down to my favorite beach to read as the sun was setting. There, before my eyes, was being played out the most instructive example of the issues being discussed here. A young man and woman were at the shore. The man was explaining to the woman how to skip stones along the water. He would show her how to choose the right shape of stone, how to hold it in her hand just so, how to lean over so that the delivery could be side-armed with a snap, and when he let it go it would bounce a half-dozen times before seeming to settle on the water and then sink. And then she would try to emulate all the instructions but the stone would just go “kerplunk” and rapidly dive to the bottom. They were patient with each other going back and forth in this mating dance. I got the impression by her good-humored reaction each time the stone would go kerplunk that it really wasn’t that important to her to be an accomplished stone skipper; what she seemed to be enjoying the most was the chance to have a topic for interaction, for relating, for getting closer. There was no space for “patriarchy”

or “sexist oppressors” or “the social construction and performance of gender” in this innocent dance – indeed, this is a dance that has been going on for millions of years. The young man may someday need to go out and tag a duck with a stone to bring home the dinner. As such, the body maps (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2008) in his brain, as well as his entire anatomy and physiology, is oriented to such a possibility. The young woman, on the other hand, may someday get pregnant. It will be very important that she is able to form close relationships with her offspring and with the other young mothers in the clan. Who cares if she throws like a girl?

References

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