



## Introduction

What is gender and how do we define it? These are two questions that are coming up in our culture currently and have major implications for how we interact and view others.

As the number of individuals that identify as LGBTQA+ increases, it is necessary for practical applications such as counseling, psychoanalysis, and therapy to have an understanding of gender. There is a diverse set of ideas in philosophy about how gender is expressed and comes into being; however, the focus of this research is to investigate the main phenomenological approaches to gender expression as well as sexuality.

This research aims to explore the philosophical theory of Merleau-Ponty as well as his contemporaries. By unitarily analyzing one of the great founders of phenomenology, what will begin to blossom by using examples within poetry, literature, and art, is that this philosophical approach models our lived experience of gender. When psychological methods and phenomenological writings are brought together, they parallel a Jungian-like approach to gender, one that helps to explain the lived experience of all of us. In the end, this research can particularly aid in the understanding of the LGBTQA+ experience. This is critical research in an era when numerous misconceptions exist about gender and sexual orientation. For this research, it should be noted that gender embodiment does not always couple with sexual orientation; however, for the sake of simplicity, this research uses gender as a general term this presentation it includes both, but in general the two should be thought of as separate.

## Rationale for the Narrowness

Anne Schaefer in "Women's Reality" describes the White Male System that creates this narrowness, within our society. It is a system in which **"we all not only let it occur, but participate in its development"**. Like many of the LGBTQA+ individuals, those attempting to break out of this binary system **"are either exterminated outright or have to FIGHT EVERY STEP OF THE WAY"**. Inherent to this system is a dualistic attitude which permeates into medicine, art, and into the way we interact with nature; it is a **"closed system and a rigid approach to life"**.

As shown in Merleau-Ponty's "The Primacy of Perception" this dualistic way of living causes the **"subject's perception is [to be] altered by his [or her] personality"**. Thus the meaning of things perceived are inevitably altered for players that adopt this personality of **"psychological rigidity"**. Where does this come from? Merleau-Ponty states that, **"subjects have acquired this attitude from their initial relations with family...parents are the means by which they first communicate with the world"**. If this is true then teens, parents, and adults that overcome this attitude by developing an acceptance of ambiguity, as **"ambiguity is ambivalence that one dares to look at face to face"**, future generations may be more open to transformations, diversity, the imaginary, and the ambiguity of gender.

## Power in the Body and Gender

There is a power in having ambiguity and a diverse set of gender identities in the world, as it enables certain styles to be born. Take for instance the art of Francis Bacon, without his gender/sexual orientation, would he still have painted the same works of art?

In the "Phenomenology of Perception" Ponty states that, **"he is his body and his body is the power for a certain world"**, meaning that through our embodiment of our gender, we have our own unique world. In the same work he says that, **"there are several ways for a body to be a body, and several ways for consciousness to be consciousness"**. Whether it be the male, female, transgender, or any of type of body and correlative consciousness, there is no determinate way of being when it comes to gender.

Furthermore, Patricia Berry in "Echo's Subtle Body" shows that gender is something that can lead us into a transtemporal time, a time that can move our soul. This is due to the fact that **"gender is archetypal"**, and as such it thrusts us back to a cosmic primordial time, that we can interact with through exploring gender. As Edward Casey puts it in "Spirit and Soul: Essays in Philosophical Psychology" we are brought through the archetype to a **"timeless time"**, a **"Great Time"**, a **"time before measurable Chronic time"**.

## Who was Merleau-Ponty?

Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a French philosopher of the twentieth century whose primary focus was phenomenology. He was known for his integrative ideas drawing from the sciences, arts, and humanities. His writings were aimed towards getting back to experience itself, moving away from the dualistic philosophies set by empiricism and intellectualism. Many of the topics he focuses on such as embodiment, perception, and psychology relate to issues and conversations about gender.

For gender, rather than grasping for the ever evaporating determinate forms and definitions, we need an active participation; as gender is an archetype, Casey states that **"motion is the secret motor"** to getting towards this cosmic time. Gaston Bachelard in "On Poetic Imagination and Reverie" shows a similar image when describing the elements, which like gender, have a **"world of energy"** which **"reverberates"** in **"waves"** of a felt sense of rhythm and an indeterminate sense of movement. As we try to make gender into a binary formal system, **"everything evaporates in the realm of the formal image, nothing disappears in the realm of the material image"**.

## Transgenderism

The "Phenomenology of Perception" specifically has many examples and ideas that are correlative to the experience of transgender individuals, and is very much inline with how they experience their bodies. Merleau-Ponty states, **"the body is not a sum of juxtaposed organs, but a synergetic system of which all of the functions are taken up and tied together in the general movement of BEING IN THE WORD"**. Likewise, to be fully involved and taken up as a being-in-the-world there must exist a coupling of both the **"psychical determinant and the physiological conditions gear[ing] into each other"**. Within the coupling, it is not a 1:1 bringing together, but it is dynamic and ever fluctuating; as such **"the ambiguity of being in the world is expressed by the ambiguity of our body"**. This leads back to how every person has their own style of being-in-the-world, starting with developing into one's gender.

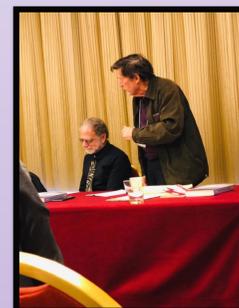
## Internalization and Responsibility

Internalization of a false gender identity can be detrimental to people finding and developing their sense of themselves. As Frantz Fanon shows in "Black Skin, White Masks", masking our authentic indeterminate self is **"tying him to an image, snaring him, and imprisoning him"**. In the "Phenomenology of Perception", Ponty showcases how the words we speak and write, **"have a physiognomy...a certain behavior that suddenly appears the moment they are given"**. Names, pronouns, and negative language all have the power to affect us, their meaning is alive and impactful. The power of language is that it can cause a **"reworking of the body schema"**, altering the way we feel about and sense our own body.

Lastly, in the final chapter of the "Phenomenology of Perception", Ponty says, **"man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man"**. Essentially this is one of the most impactful statements, as we are made up of our relations with the Others and the world, **"to which I entrust the care of keeping me alive"**. As such gender is a project of Others, the world, and myself- all interacting to form my way of being-in-the-world. With that, ethically, we are then responsible for others: *their gender is a project of all of us*. It is our duty and responsibility to support others as they grow as part of our community of man tied in that knot.

## SPEP 2020

As a part of this research I was able to attend the 2019 Conference for the Society of Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. At this program I was able to **engage and interact** with leading philosophical scholars from around the world. Many of the presentations focused on gender, feminism, and embodiment.



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