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## Lost Confidence and Human Capability: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology of the Gendered, yet Capable Subject

# ABSTRACT

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In this contribution to *Text Matters*, I would like to introduce gender into my feminist response to Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology of the capable subject. The aim is to make, phenomenologically speaking, "visible" the gendering of this subject in a hermeneutic problematic: that of a subject's loss of confidence in her own ability to understand herself. Ricoeurian hermeneutics enables us to elucidate the generally hidden dimensions in a phenomenology of lost self-confidence; Ricoeur describes capability as "originally given" to each lived body; but then, something has happened, gone wrong or been concealed in one's loss of confidence. Ricoeur himself does not ask how the gender or sex of one's own body affects this loss. So I draw on contemporary feminist debates about the phenomenology of the body, as well as Julia Kristeva's hermeneutics of the Antigone figure, in order to demonstrate how women might reconfigure the epistemic limits of human capability, revealing themselves as "a horizon" of the political order, for better or worse.

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**ABSTRACT**

“You are divided, torn—I would say *cleft*—between  
the logic of the political and that of your own blood,  
but only if it is the blood of  
an instigator of transgressions”  
(Kristeva 216)

## INTRODUCTION

This essay will focus on a subject’s loss of confidence in her own ability to understand herself. The aim is to make, phenomenologically speaking, visible the gendering of subjects in at least one strand of post-Kantian philosophy, that is, in Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology of the capable subject. In one sense, my focus here derives from Alan Montefiore’s “Introduction” to *Philosophy in France Today*, where Montefiore reflects on a philosophical culture in transition. That was philosophical culture thirty years ago. Yet today we still face that philosophical issue “bound up with the subject’s loss of self-confidence in its own ability to understand itself, and indeed, in its own intrinsic significance” (xi). In another sense, my focus derives from Ricoeur’s own chapter from thirty-one years ago, “On Interpretation,” also in *Philosophy in France Today*. At that time, Ricoeur interprets his self-identity as a philosopher by elucidating the path of his published texts to “hermeneutic phenomenology” (187). In 2014 we can see in retrospect, how in 1983 Ricoeur himself anticipated his later philosophical account of “the capable subject.”<sup>1</sup>

To the above philosophical thinking, I would like to introduce the generally hidden dimensions of gender in the loss of (philosophical) self-confidence presented by Montefiore and in the discovery of human capability made by Ricoeur. Inserting gender specific pronouns helps to indicate my present concern with “gendering.”<sup>2</sup> So, my focus includes gendering the “subject’s loss of confidence in her own ability to understand herself” (cf. Introduction xi). I will elucidate feminist understandings of the subject: those that emerge in the decades of transition, 1983–2014, in French and Anglo-American philosophy. My contention is that during these three decades women in philosophy have actively sought to restore a woman’s confidence in her own ability to understand herself, philosophically, personally and socially. The stress here is on “restore.” This

<sup>1</sup> On the capable subject, see Ricoeur, *The Just 2–7*; *The Course of Recognition* 89–149.

<sup>2</sup> Here “gendering” means the generally hidden process of determining the qualitative (as distinct from the numerical) identities of women and men.

restoration assumes that a woman is similar to a man insofar as she is, in strongly phenomenological terms, originally a capable subject. Human capability is, then, originally given to each lived body, what Ricoeur calls *le corps propre* (one's own body). To this phenomenological assumption is added a Ricoeurian hermeneutics that attempts to interpret what has happened, gone wrong, or has been concealed, in the loss of confidence in one's own capability.

Ricoeur himself gives an account of *l'homme capable* (the capable [hu]man): but this raises questions concerning the gender-inclusivity and/or gender-neutrality of the body of that capable subject for the contemporary feminist reader. Is human capability gender neutral? If so, how does one's own sexed/gendered body affect one's capability? Has the gender/sex of the phenomenological conception of one's own body been exclusively masculine and/or male? Here I will maintain that even if *l'homme* in the sense of the generic "man" is meant to be gender inclusive, the impact of this conception on Ricoeur's legacy is struggling to locate the role of gender in hermeneutic phenomenology. Admittedly, only an implicit and pernicious gender bias would ignore woman as a capable subject who, similar to any capable man, can have confidence in her own ability to understand herself philosophically. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to stress that the capable subject's self-understanding must consider its lived body as socially and materially located: and this includes its gendered locatedness (Anderson, *Re-visioning Gender* 205). I will contend that this is necessary, even if we would like to assume, perhaps with Ricoeur, that our bodies are equivalent to each other in the fundamental sense of each being originally capable.

In 1980 when I first began reading and talking to Ricoeur, I attempted to understand two necessarily interrelated aspects making up what I came to identify as Ricoeur's Kantian dual-aspect subject of action; these were the interrelated aspects of practical reason and natural inclination in human freedom (Anderson, "The Subject's Loss of Self-Confidence" 87–93). At the time, I argued that the two aspects of Kantian rationality and sensibility together constituted the two moments of Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology (*Ricoeur and Kant* 41–59). More than thirty years later, in this retrospective reading of Ricoeur's "On Interpretation," I have been surprised to find—I seemed to have forgotten—that in 1983 Ricoeur also mentioned the loss of self-unity which, in Montefiore's words, "all Kant's transcendental horses and king's men" would not exactly be able to put back together again (xii).

In 2014, when we consider philosophy in Britain, France and the rest of Europe, especially if we consider the female subject's ability to understand herself, it is clear that the philosophical subject continues to struggle with

various dimensions of dis-unity. However, I no longer see the Kantian tensions which Ricoeur identifies between freedom and nature as the most difficult challenge, if they ever were, to a philosopher's self-unity. The ongoing dis-unity of the self involves cultural, as well as cognitive, conative and affective factors. It is not just that the self's unity has been broken up, but that something highly significant has been lost. This is something that, as I am contending, we do not mourn. Instead we can and need to retrieve what has been lost from our social and interpersonal awareness. Contemporary feminist philosophers at least have come to recognize that women and men have materially and socially specific differences due to gender's intersectionality (cf. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality*). Yet the unique singularity of personal identity has been lost from our vision, or obscured by a preoccupation with the concrete differences of our lived bodily experiences. So, in the twenty-first century I have tried to demonstrate that gendering has become increasingly significant as a philosophical issue, not only for my feminist reading of Ricoeur's text, but for philosophy in the past three decades of social and cultural transition in Europe and the Anglo-American world.

We can discover gendering as the generally hidden process of determining the qualitative as distinct from the numerical identities of bodies in a culture: we discover these qualitative identities of bodies in terms of culturally recognized "sex." Here it must be stressed that this hidden process of gendering in the West at least has been highly problematic, especially insofar as philosophical texts construct gender in relation to a binary of sex. This process of gendering becomes the critical focus of the present hermeneutics of philosophical and literary texts. And this hermeneutics aims to extend what I began in *Re-visioning Gender in Philosophy of Religion: Reason, Love and Epistemic Locatedness*: that is, we should continue "to look back with open eyes" and "from a critical distance," in order to interpret the gendering of human identities by the moral and religious dimensions of philosophical and literary texts (ix, 1, 49, 89–94). Gender has very definitely, even if unwittingly, shaped the philosopher's self-understanding, especially her or his understanding of human emotion, reason and cognition.

#### GENDER IN PHILOSOPHY: A PROBLEM FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Although Montefiore's "Introduction" does not make this explicit, Ricoeur's "On Interpretation" is grouped with those other chapters in *Philosophy in France Today* that address the subject's loss of confidence in its own ability to understand itself. Montefiore adds that this is also a loss of self-confidence in "[the self's] own intrinsic significance" (xi) as

a subject of knowledge and action. In “On Interpretation” Ricoeur situates himself within a French tradition of “reflexive philosophy”: he explains that being reflexive means being subject-oriented in a movement of looking back on oneself (187–88). So the philosophical subject as an agent is literally reflexive in its act of turning back upon itself. Adding gender to this account, we discover that the philosophical subject also has the ability to reflect, socially and materially, upon the qualitative identity of herself and of her actions. Nevertheless, reflexivity does not necessarily ensure self-understanding in philosophy.

Basically, reflexive philosophers in France, but equally other philosophers both on and off the Continent, came to be preoccupied in the second half of the twentieth century with the subject’s own loss of self-understanding. For his part, Ricoeur would have assumed that this loss is related to a lack of what he nevertheless thought to be necessary: self-reflexivity. Most relevant for reflexive philosophy was the fact that the philosophical ideas and issues of the rational subject extended from a Cartesian to a neo-Kantian philosophical tradition of self-reflection. As an active part of this long rationalist tradition, Ricoeur in particular singles out the reflexivity by which the subject seeks to understand itself in relation to its own (internal) alterity. But it is worth noting that, unlike the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas or feminist psycholinguist Luce Irigaray, Ricoeur never takes the self’s alterity to include sexually specific female figures.

The closest Ricoeur comes to giving an account of a female figure of alterity is an interesting exception in *Oneself as Another*. This book contains Ricoeur’s Gifford Lectures, which he revised to include an “Interlude” where he discusses the tragic figure of Antigone (241–49, 256).<sup>3</sup> Previously I have placed Ricoeur’s configuration of Antigone alongside other configurations in texts written by G. W. F. Hegel, George Steiner, Martha Nussbaum and Irigaray. What is noteworthy about Ricoeur’s configuration is his reliance on Hegel’s remarkable reading of Antigone as “the eternal irony of the community” (Hegel 288).<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur singles out Antigone’s act from the role of her sister, Ismene, and from her own potential role as a wife and mother; this singularity suffices to mark Antigone out as an exception to her gender. So, for Ricoeur, she does not in any straightforward sense represent feminine alterity. Instead, Antigone is above all a tragic figure; her “one-sidedness” in the face of “the complexity of life” leads inevitably to her death (*Oneself as Another* 249).

<sup>3</sup> For an earlier discussion of Antigone in *Oneself as Another*, see Anderson, “Re-reading Myth in Philosophy” 51–68.

<sup>4</sup> For an earlier discussion of Hegel’s reading of Antigone and Ricoeur’s relation to it, see Anderson, “Re-reading Myth in Philosophy” 55–59.

My point here is that Ricoeur does not configure an essential femininity, or any other normative figure of female alterity, in *Oneself as Another*. His concern is neither gender nor sexual difference. In sharp contrast, Irigaray mimes Antigone as a sexually ambiguous figure who can be read to play either a masculine or a feminine role. In her disruptive mimesis, Irigaray deliberately configures Antigone, as if multiply gendered, in order to explore the sexual difference between two sexually specific subjects. It, then, seems that Ricoeur has not kept up with feminist texts insofar as he simply configures the philosophical subject, including Antigone, as gender-neutral. As a figure of fragility and death, Antigone serves as Ricoeur's tragic figure for familial and political life; and as such, Antigone does not represent a loss of self-confidence either in the ability to understand herself or in her own intrinsic significance. Yet I insist that even if configured as one-sided, Ricoeur's Antigone reveals her own capability and confidence. Nevertheless, his (re)configuring of Antigone as atypical—as torn between masculine and feminine roles—links Ricoeur with a long Hegelian tradition in finding her “an eternal irony of the community” (Hegel 288).

Today Julia Kristeva can help us to reread both Hegel and Ricoeur on Antigone for better understanding of how the subject is gendered. In Kristeva's dialogue with Catherine Clément, in *The Feminine and the Sacred*, she claims that it is

That sense of strangeness that confers on certain women the appearance of a disabused and benevolent maturity, a serene detachment that, it seems to me, is the true sense of [what] Hegel so enigmatically calls “the eternal irony of the community.” In fact, women do not remain on the near side of phallic power, but they accede to it only to better learn their way around its omnipotence. That *detachment* . . . stems from our immersion in Being and sensible timelessness. (60)

Is Kristeva proposing that this “immersion in Being” gives women the possibility for greater confidence (than men) in their own capability?

In a more recent collection, *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, Kristeva develops several new and highly nuanced points concerning this same figure who is “cleft” between the logic of the political and of her own blood. I propose that Kristeva makes points which are relevant for re-visioning gender. In her eighth (out of nine) interpretative point concerning Antigone, Kristeva suggests

Far from being a relic of the past, the universality of Antigone resonates in the psychic life of women today. . . . The emancipation of the “second sex,” and the intermingling of diverse religious and cultural traditions

(as Judith Butler discusses in *Antigone's Claim*)—the anthropologically universal dimension of *feminine solitude* confronted with the drive of de-binding (*déliasion*) still makes itself evident today in clinical observation, as well as in social behaviour. Solitude and de-binding (*déliasion*), neither necessarily reject motherhood, but rather demand and accompany it. . . . This cannot make us forget, however, the emerging strength of those women who have the opportunity and the capacity to generate a new understanding, skill, or even a way of life or survival out of it: a remarkable consequence of the emancipation of women that is still in process. (“Antigone: Limit and Horizon” 226)

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Now it is helpful to recognize that in *Oneself as Another* the philosophical subject which had reigned supreme within a certain French Cartesian tradition suffers a decisive blow from twentieth-century philosophy. That subject loses confidence in its own self-certainty. In Ricoeur's terms, the “shattered cogito” (*cogito brisé*) refers to a serious and, for some philosophers, decisive blow to the Cartesian confidence: the “I think” is no longer an *indubitable* of modern philosophy. In other words, late twentieth-century philosophical critiques of Cartesian certainty have left an indelible mark on the French philosophical legacy. In fact, thirty years ago, I myself was directly concerned with the upshot for a Kantian tradition in France of a renewed attack on the cogito's self-certainty; and one response to this attack was to assert the pre-reflexive cogito of French existentialism (cf. Howie 136–40, 162). Similarly, in 1980s Oxford, it was popular for Anglo-American philosophers to talk about the problem of the self. Gradually the philosophical problem of numerical and/or qualitative identity became a common concern of philosophers globally. The question of personal identity continues to have a universal remit.

Ricoeur's own contribution to this question is apparent in his salient distinction between numerical sameness over time (in Ricoeur's terms, *idem*) and qualitative identity (*ipseity*) (*Oneself as Another* 16–18). Today the problem of personal identity remains a popular topic of debate for philosophers on both sides of the English Channel. Yet a distinctive characteristic of selfhood in France continues to be *ipseity*. Crucially for Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, *ipseity*-identity rather than sameness-identity, enables a reflexive self-sameness; and this generates the possibility of self-understanding (*The Course of Recognition* 101–04).

I am not sure how common it would have been in the 1980s or how common it is in 2014 to respond to philosophical scepticism concerning gender by exposing loss of confidence in the subject's ability to understand herself. Nevertheless, if there is anything therapeutic in studying post-Kantian philosophy—that is, in the upshot of Kant's legacy as seen in the problems of the self—it is the possibility of responding to the



philosophical problem of selfhood with the tools of French hermeneutic phenomenology. This means that, if following the late Ricoeur, we *can* interpret the lived body as capable. So, a distinctive response of hermeneutic phenomenology *can* restore the self's capability in an ongoing critical process.

It is important to notice that Ricoeur's phenomenology begins by recognizing the Kantian limit to self-knowledge; next, Ricoeur responds to this Kantian limit by proposing an indirect route, by way of hermeneutics, to self-understanding. With this hermeneutic phenomenology, Ricoeur leads his readers indirectly to the self: he interprets the "signs, symbols and texts" which have been left as the remains of a philosophical culture.<sup>5</sup> For example, we already mentioned texts which configure Antigone as a self who is divided against herself. Now, we may also like to recall the ancient text of *Genesis*, part of which has been reconfigured using "signs" (e.g., the defilement) and "symbols" (e.g., the fall) to represent Eve's seduction of Adam. In fact, (re)configurations of a woman's qualitative identity by patriarchal cultures have shattered the female subject's self-understanding as originally innocent. Patriarchal configurations of Eve's sinful act—like those of Antigone—have the power to undermine *la femme capable*. In this way, the subject loses confidence in her own ability to understand herself.

This section has tried to demonstrate that significant changes in the culture and content of French philosophy have taken place since the moment when, in 1980s Oxford, Montefiore edited his collection of essays, including Ricoeur's "On Interpretation." Montefiore aimed to bridge the gap between the UK's island of philosophy and the land of understanding on the Continent.<sup>6</sup> I have dedicated myself to uncovering a process of gendering in modern philosophy on both sides of the English Channel. This recovery is itself an ongoing process. It remains rare to find attempts to expose the mechanisms of gender oppression in philosophical texts. Yet these texts offer evidence of confidence being lost in the ability to achieve self-understanding in contemporary philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, on and off the Continent modern philosophy is a part of a culture in transition. This is already evident in philosophical issues like those of the split Kantian subject; of Kantian autonomy and vulnerability; of epistemic injustice and ethical confidence, of gender identity and its intersectional relations to religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on. In other words, contemporary approaches to the modern philosopher's own self-definition reflect the significance of the recent history of, as relevant here, French and British philosophies.

<sup>6</sup> To see this change, we only need to consider the evidence that, since Ricoeur's own death in 2005, his legacy has already resulted in a new foundation being set up in Paris, *Fonds Ricoeur*, along with new societies in the USA and in the UK for the study of Ricoeur, generating an international series of new books, a new international, bilingual journal, and a significantly wide range of international conferences.



GENDER AND THE LIVED BODY: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CONFIDENCE

In 2010 I turned to phenomenology in order to elucidate loss of confidence as a social phenomenon and an ethical relation. As a social phenomenon, confidence has been undermined by the imposition of a fixed gender type. As an ethical relation, confidence between two gendered subjects has been damaged by epistemic injustice. In “The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence,” I elucidate the story of Eve as the first woman who suffers a loss of confidence in her own intrinsic significance. Eve is portrayed in texts of ancient culture and in ongoing religious traditions. We can read the texts of Western culture as they capture the philosophical imaginary in portraits of a woman (Eve) in the process of becoming aware of her body physically and cognitively. At the very same moment in the *Genesis* narrative, when this female figure glimpses her own capability<sup>7</sup> she becomes simultaneously conscious of losing confidence in her own body and in her cognitive ability.<sup>8</sup>

My own reconfiguring of the text, especially of the ancient myth in *Genesis*, which has been read to configure Eve’s desire as excessive and her act sinful, in order to support patriarchy, follows the narrative concerning the “first” woman phenomenologically. Unlike a historical configuration of a particular woman, a phenomenological reconfiguration of Eve—as a generic figure of women—can narrate her loss of confidence to capture the lived experience of women generally in their original relation to men. In reading the narrative phenomenologically we can find that Eve’s desire for knowledge of good and evil leads her not only to disobey a divine command, but to seduce the “first” man (Adam). In this narration, a clear difference appears between Eve and Adam. In other words,

<sup>7</sup> Note that my account of capability derives from a range of Ricoeur’s later writings. More work could still be done on exactly how to define this idea of capability. Is it personal in Merleau-Ponty’s sense? Capability might be both metaphysical and ethical in Ricoeur, especially since informed by Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and Spinoza’s *Ethics*; yet Ricoeur himself clearly appeals to “the phenomenological point of view” to describe the multiple expressions of the capacities of “the ‘I can’” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 75). Hermeneutic phenomenology enables Ricoeur to describe “selfhood” and the “I” through “the mode of different abilities”; this includes, “I can speak, can narrate, can act” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 76; cf. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 10–23, 298–317).

<sup>8</sup> These points are supported by the depiction of Eve about which Le Doeuff (*The Sex of Knowing* 67–68) and Hersch (“Eve ou la Naissance éternelle du Temps” 27) speak. This depiction comes from the twelfth-century sculptor Gislebert (also known as Gislebertus) whose depiction of the temptation of Eve appears a *linteau* constructed above the north door on the early twelfth-century cathedral at St-Lazare in Autun, France. However, this sculpted depiction of Eve is no longer part of the cathedral; it is in the Musée Rolin in Autun.

this reconfiguration of the *Genesis* text supports differentiation by gender. Gendering the lived body (of Eve) becomes a process which moves from pre-personal capability to personal awareness of moral values.

In addition, although traditionally the patriarchal gendering of the same text had portrayed man (Adam) passively as seduced by woman (Eve), a feminist phenomenological reconfiguration would seek to subvert the configuration of the female protagonist's action as setting in motion "the fall" from an original condition of innocent capability. Instead the feminist reconfiguration of Adam and Eve can demonstrate that the specifically gendered loss of confidence in the power to act and to know under patriarchy left woman doubly disadvantaged by human desire: not only was she wrong to follow her desire for her own moral knowledge by ignoring God's moral command, but she led man to follow her in turning away from the good. This gendering assigns a greater moral guilt to woman than man. And yet, the proposed feminist reconfiguration of this myth turns on the fact that both of these gendered subjects remain capable. Thus, assigning different degrees of evil to one or another of the heterosexually gendered pairs does not lessen human capability: capability remains a human possibility precisely because it is an original power of human action, however the subject is gendered.

Returning to my phenomenological reconfiguration, we can see how Eve becomes aware of, as in the phenomenological terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the embodied modalities of her existence" when she is thrown open into a "mortal situation of listening" (Merleau-Ponty 158–70).<sup>9</sup> Becoming attuned to her situation, the woman's self-discovery involves both surprise and terror. Crucially, in moving from pre-personal to personal awareness, Eve remains incarnate; that is, she retains her bodily awareness, movement and entanglement in intersubjective, fleshy existence. At the moment when the gendered subject emerges out of pre-personal existence, she is aware of her own lived through body (Anderson, "The Lived Body" 163–64, 178–79).

Contemporary feminist accounts of the subject and her body have criticized Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and, more generally, the phenomenologist's conception of "the lived body" as the medium of all perception. For example, Judith Butler contends that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* presupposes heterosexuality and traditional male-gender norms for the body ("Sexual Ideology" 85–100). According

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty does not state this about Eve. Instead I employ his phenomenological terms to describe the however implicit, dominant configuration of Eve as her story unfolds from an originally given account of human capability to the apparent "loss" of what was originally hers.

to Butler, the lived body tends to be confused with a “naturalized” body; and the latter is, in any case, always already an interpreted body. For another example of a feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty, Michèle Le Doeuff accuses the *Phenomenology of Perception* of objectifying the female body:

Merleau-Ponty says that for a normal subject, the body of another person is not perceived as an object. The perception that might have been objective is in fact inhabited by another, more secret, perception, which, he says, accentuates the erogenous zones of the visible body of the other according to a sexual schema peculiar to the perceiving subject so that this body will call forth “the gestures of the masculine body.” He was speaking of the visible body in general, perceived by a normal subject; however, it becomes clear that this visible body is a woman’s body, seen and redrawn by the gaze of a man, who before long will move unhesitatingly from gaze to gesture! Not only is the subject necessarily male, the visible body necessarily that of a woman, but also the gaze (of a man directed at a woman) can remake what it sees, to accentuate what he finds erogenous. A form of visual violence is normalized here in all its generality. On principle and as a general procedure, the (masculine) gaze re-creates the visible body of a (feminine) other precisely as it wishes. (*The Sex of Knowing* 79; cf. *Phenomenology of Perception* 180–81)

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler discusses Michel Foucault’s critique of “the trans-historical subject” in phenomenology (115–17). Can there be such a subject? Clearly for existential phenomenologists like Simone de Beauvoir the subject is always embodied and situated in a world, transcending history. And yet, at the time when Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur developed their respective phenomenological accounts of one’s own body (*le corps propre*) in Paris, even though they had read Beauvoir’s phenomenology in *The Second Sex*,<sup>10</sup> their descriptions seem to assume a male-neutral body as, quite possibly, a trans-historical subject. In particular, they attempted no explicitly gendered description of Eve and her gradual awakening to the pre-personal capability to which her body will in some sense cleave, but from which she will in another sense be separated by the critical process of gendering the male as “subject” and the female as “abject” (Anderson, “Abjection and Defilement”). The dual sense of the body both cleaving to and separating from pre-personal form creates an ambiguous condition for the lived body.

Today, if we like, we can read the dual sense of this ambiguous condition as it appears in Ricoeur’s later phenomenology of pre-given human

<sup>10</sup> For useful references to the influence Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty had on each other’s phenomenological writings, see Morris 129–34.

capability that nevertheless struggles with misunderstandings of self and of others. In his last text, Ricoeur admits that the course of “recognition” for the capable subject encounters existential difficulties of identity, alterity, differences, violence, inabilities undergone, failures of memory and endless conflict on the level of lived through experiences (*The Course of Recognition* 249–54). I see an opening in this text to take up the loss of confidence in the ability to understand oneself and be understood in terms of the gendered body.

Let us now return to the story of Eve who is configured as a figure of abjection. Appropriating Merleau-Ponty’s use of “flesh,” we can describe the pre-personal form of Eve’s incarnate capability constituting a “fleshy” intersubjective field of affection. Flesh connects bodies and world(s) intersubjectively. Moreover, at the same time as constituting an intersubjective field, this living body can be surprised by the upsurges of transcendence which “fly up like sparks from a fire” (Merleau-Ponty xv) setting off new, more personal discoveries in relation to the “lived through” world. Flesh constitutes a generality from which particularity emerges. Imagining how Merleau-Ponty would portray Eve, she would gradually emerge as the lived body and person (subject): but this is she who will be abjected. Describing her in Merleau-Ponty’s terms of “flesh” and “fleshy” is to a certain degree at least consistent with the biblical description of the first woman’s body. Yet the negative imagery of female flesh has been rejected by those philosophers and feminists who think we have—and should have—left mythical stories and images behind once we have been educated by history, biology, genetics, etc. Nevertheless, descriptions of flesh, especially including the female body’s association with the nascent subject who is abjected, remain part of the ethical, social and spiritual imaginary of Western cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably the term “fleshiness” captures how Western philosophers still imagine and connect sexed bodies. In the (feminist) terms of Merleau-Ponty’s contemporary and friend, Simone de Beauvoir, the female body becomes “the second sex” or even “the sex.” In the present context, our focus is the manner in which confidence (*la confiance*) and lost confidence, or mistrust (*méfiance*), of individually gendered bodies becomes a critical issue for contemporary feminist and non-feminist philosophers. For the sake of argument, confidence has been identified as a social phenomenon; and it is something that can be lost. It can also be elucidated, in phenomenological terms, at the point (in time) when the lived body intersects with the personal realm of that body-subject’s history and culture. In France, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir each offer highly significant descriptions of the

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Catherine Tomas for directing my attention to the concept of “enfleshment” as ideology inculcated in the body, as found in McLaren 66–70.

ambiguous condition of the lived body. They uncover the manner in which the pre-personal realm of (capable) flesh surges forth in sensual, spiritual and ethical life creating the possibility of intersubjective communication. In other words, this existential phenomenology makes manifest fleshiness as an original medium of communication enabling body-subjects to remain entangled in an intersubjective world.<sup>12</sup> Thus, body-subjects become aware of themselves as vulnerable selves in their relations within the world.

Feminism has a crucial role to play in a phenomenology of lost confidence and, in the present case, in the loss of a self's ability to understand herself. What makes loss a useful focus? First, a feminist critique of lost confidence in a woman's own capability challenges an uncritical and non-reflexive stance on the self; and, second, this critical focus elucidates a capacity for understanding gender in a time of philosophical transition. Claims to gender-neutrality in Western philosophy conceal highly significant issues of loss of confidence, loss of epistemic justice and loss of reflexive self-understanding. Loss not only damages subjects of knowledge and action, but this damage obscures that which was in phenomenological terms originally given: capability. Admittedly, there are problems with phenomenological philosophy. However, phenomenological terms enable us to explore given conditions, and then, following Ricoeur, we can add hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is interpretation; and, in this context, the hermeneuticist interprets the opaque, in order to make the capacities of the subject more transparent. So, hermeneutics can help women and men to make sense of themselves, to understand their own cognitive and conative abilities, and to achieve greater self-awareness. The present appropriation of Ricoeurian hermeneutic phenomenology aims to keep women and men critically open to the gendering of philosophy in cultural transition. All too roughly, philosophy as part of a changing European culture can help to articulate the material, social and cognitive dimensions of a subject's conditioning. In particular, hermeneutical philosophers can seek to understand those dimensions of a subject that phenomenologists would describe as "non-natural."

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<sup>12</sup> The critical question for a feminist philosopher is: in what sense does an individual body exist? It should be stressed that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* elucidates the general pre-personal (motor) intentionality of which an individual body is not its own cause and for which it is not responsible. At the same time what is called a pre-personal fleshiness remains inseparable from the body's personal life. It is as if this phenomenology employs a transcendental argument to deduce the necessity of pre-personal flesh for the possibility of any personal experience. It follows that the capable fleshy body exists as the necessary *a priori* form for all of the modes of incarnate life; in turn, these modes are both attuned to a field of sensations and located within a larger situation of historical change and cultural variations.

## GENDERING THE SUBJECT: LOSS AND CHANGE

44 Text matters for my Ricoeurian hermeneutic phenomenology of gendered confidence. In “The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence” I experiment with a phenomenological reading of a text about the awakening of a woman to her cognitive and non-cognitive capacities. As already suggested, the exploration of the philosophical imagery in the texts written by French phenomenologists—like the philosophical imagery found in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* or in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*—can help to elucidate the gendering of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty’s highly significant, even if contentious, conception of the lived body has been understood to be “a kind of” post-Kantian *a priori* insofar as its flesh knits human bodies together and to a world (“The Lived Body” 163, 168). As a synthetic form capable of creating unity out of multiple sensations, the lived body appears to be capable of generating differentiations in its relation to the world. Yet what Merleau-Ponty portrays as the openness and the relational ties of a “fleshy” existence creates a deeply ambiguous picture: the body is located in a world it did not create and over which it does not have ultimate control. Given this awareness of the lived body in such a world, we are not surprised that the subject loses confidence in her own capability.

Now, for a Ricoeurian phenomenological interpretation of the gendered, but capable body, it is necessary to recognize that gender becomes a factor in regulating the cognitive capacities of the body-subject as it emerges in a personal and social world of loss and discord. Such a loss is especially the case for the gendered subject who is inhibited by personally and socially debilitating configurations of her actions in (religious) myths. In turn, the doubt and loss which we have seen portrayed in the traditional patriarchal configurations of the myth about Eve bear a strong similarity to twentieth-century portraits of the young Beauvoir who desired philosophical knowledge, yet who in the end actually gives in to the philosophical superiority of “the philosopher,” Sartre (“The Lived Body” 176-77). In the past twenty years, feminist philosophers have been especially perplexed by the young Simone (as Beauvoir appears in her memoirs), who after a single disagreement with Sartre in the Luxembourg Gardens in 1929 Paris gives in to him from that moment forward. Why, when Beauvoir attempted to defend her own philosophical ideas for a pluralist morality, did she give up and accept defeat not only for those philosophical ideas on that day in 1929 (when she had just successfully passed her philosophy exams), but for the rest of her life? From that moment she never calls herself a philosopher (cf. Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice* 136).

Adding Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology of a capable subject to Beauvoir's existential phenomenology of "the second sex" enables us to interpret the bodily situation of a woman as originally capable, yet vulnerable to gender norms. Insofar as a woman recognizes herself already born capable, alive with a capacity to increase actively the power to exist, she has the capacity to overcome at least that vulnerability which results from a profound, yet unnecessary loss of ethical confidence. Like the mythical figure, Eve, Beauvoir as the young woman seeking moral knowledge is awakened to the incarnate modalities of her existence, to her cognitive capacity for knowledge of her own body and of her own goodness; and yet Beauvoir's self-doubt and what seems to be her gendering lead to a loss of self-confidence, in her own ability to understand self (and to think philosophically). In the terms of hermeneutic phenomenology of the gendered subject, we could say that a woman's fleshy incarnation appears timelessly destined to action that results in disabilities; and yet, the always capable subject still possesses the power to restore her ability to strive for greater self-understanding.

The question is no longer: "why . . ." the loss of confidence? Instead it is: how can the subject grasp that her loss is not permanent? Intuitively the answer would seem to be that she cannot lose what is fundamentally and originally hers. A real and urgent problem emerges for the hermeneutic phenomenologist who tries to interpret the actual ambiguity surrounding the subject's incarnation within a fleshy, bodily existence. Transcendence of this incarnation is strictly speaking impossible. The woman in that phenomenological account of a fleshy existence becomes aware not of confidence in her own capability, but of lost confidence. Extending this phenomenology, with the help of Beauvoir's 1949 text, it can be argued that what made a particular person "a woman" at a certain historical moment, and within a certain Western philosophical tradition, had also marked her out as "the second sex." Moreover, the variations of gender distinguish her confidence as a relational phenomenon. The difficulty is that neither women nor men in phenomenology have employed the necessary hermeneutical tools to adequately address gender relations.

My proposal is that a Ricoeurian hermeneutic phenomenology of the gendered, yet *capable* subject would address the interpersonal reality of gender, transforming negative relations into something positive. This would require the balancing of confidence between subjects; that is, ethical confidence requires the appropriate degree of confidence—neither under- nor overconfidence—for each and every gendered subject. Today an interpersonal conception of reciprocally related levels of confidence for gendered subjects seems (to me) a necessary condition for self-understanding within our bodily and cognitive life. And this self-understanding



would be supported by a fundamentally human, cognitive-conative capability.

An ethical account of reciprocally related degrees of confidence requires recognition of, on the one hand, a fragile belief in being part of material nature as an active, infinite power, in which each individual can come to understand both the power to act and the power to suffer, and, on the other hand, an ontological grounding of confidence in the infinite power of capable humans to affect and be affected productively. Together the ethics and the ontology of a capable subject could, according to Ricoeur, reverse personal doubt with belief, interpersonal dissymmetry with the practical goal of mutuality, and social-material deprivation with the regulative ideal of fullness of life.

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To illustrate the relation of a pre-given body-mind unity to the confidence of a capable subject, one has to consider a practical issue: that of a cognitive disability. According to Ricoeur, “To believe oneself unable to speak is already to be linguistically disabled, to be excommunicated so to speak” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 76–77). Decisive damage can be done to the ability to speak when a subject loses belief in herself as a speaker. Linguistic disability might strike us as a strange example for unearthing how pre-given capability helps to restore confidence; yet it is meant to point to the relational and contextual nature of lost confidence. In “Autonomy and Vulnerability” Ricoeur re-establishes the moral power of human capability, even though vulnerability renders autonomy fragile. The moral power of knowing that she is capable—as implied in she “ought” because she “can” speak—helps the subject to confront with confidence in a fragile belief in her autonomous capability. With this knowledge of both autonomy and vulnerability in the power of (her) language to communicate, she can recognize that her lost confidence in, for example, speaking is not irreversible.

The critical issue here rests in the degree to which gendered subjects maintain an appropriate self-confidence in relation to each other and, in our example, as speaking subjects. In other words, the subject’s confidence in her own capability seems to be a variable of gender; and gender is both intersectional and interrelational. Why does “he” have so much confidence? Why does “she” have so little? Gender’s relation to sexual identity, race, class, religion and so on affects who she is and how much confidence he has. The worst extreme is the point at which a subject’s loss of confidence in her own abilities is so great that she barely exists in her own right. The complication is that, whether in a lack or an excess of confidence, subjects reflect their gendering without any consistent lines of demarcation.

To repeat, gendering does not have to occur only in terms of a binary of sex. And similarly, feminine and masculine abilities are not simply

mapped onto the female and male sex, respectively. Moreover, gendering is not a fixed process which neither an individual nor a collective can control. On these grounds, it is my contention that the social and material mechanisms controlling gender roles and relations can and must become the object of philosophical debate, if we are to strive for hermeneutical justice.

#### CAPABILITY: ETHICAL CONFIDENCE AND INCREASING POWER

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Ricoeur makes another bold, yet initially strange claim that “The confidence I place in my power to act is part of this very power. To believe that I can is already to be capable” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 76). Understanding this claim requires returning to Ricoeur’s assumptions about self-reflexivity, but also to his later discussions of power (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 77). The power as interactive moves subjects to strive rationally for life with and for others; but this is only if power can be enhanced relationally, not inhibited. An adequate understanding of the latter remains crucial to giving an account of confidence. Earlier in the present essay, confidence appeared as ethical and social; and it is a distinctive characteristic of a capable body. A body’s loss of confidence can be understood in relation to historical and social structures which inhibit or prohibit her cognitive and conative activities. Constraints of both culture and nature become evident in gendering the lived body; that is, whether or not gender inhibits confidence makes a decisive difference to the capable subject. In my previous discussions of the lived body, gender’s intersection with various mechanisms of oppression has had a critical role to play; gender on its own cannot make sense of whether or not a subject’s confidence is ethical. So, together the question of confidence and that of power guide us back to human capability.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology of human capability reflects the changes in twentieth-century European philosophy. His early reliance on French neo-Kantianism by way of his friend and colleague, Jean Nabert, was already signposted in Ricoeur’s account of reflexivity (“On Interpretation” 187–97). Later self-reflexivity informs his phenomenological reading of both ethical confidence as a mutually empowering relation between subjects and power-in-common as a human capability. Briefly, in Ricoeur’s terms, “the ‘I can’” reflects confidence and power. Coincidentally, feminist philosophers in the twentieth century moved their interpretations of the subject of philosophy away from an exclusive Cartesian “I think.” Women in philosophy began to challenge a Cartesian separation of mind and body for privileging mind as masculine and body as feminine. In response, both men and women philosophers began to turn away from

Cartesian dualism; some feminist and non-feminist philosophers turned to Spinoza's monism.

Ricoeur himself reflects this Spinozist trend in his conception of human capability. In particular, Ricoeur's appropriation of Spinoza's *conatus* makes sense of capability as a conative power. And my interpretation of capability as both conative and cognitive depends upon understanding *conatus* as the human striving for complete understanding within the whole of nature (or life). Roughly, but importantly, "cognitive" in the context of Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology describes the knowledge-element in a rational power to act; and "conative" describes the element of striving to understand life. Both the cognitive and the conative elements of human capability remain necessary for the Ricoeurian acting and suffering subject, in order for it to increase in activity in this life. Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology uncovers a subject who is originally capable of increasing simultaneously in knowledge and in joy. If lost, this capability can be restored through actively increasing the cognitive and conative powers of interacting subjects.

In brief, my reconstruction of a Ricoeurian cognitive-conative capability has aimed to capture at least two of the elemental powers of the human subject. Ricoeur derives these ideas of power from the Spinozist dimension of the French neo-Kantian reflexive philosophy in early twentieth-century France. These ideas are most frequently associated by Ricoeur himself with the influence of Nabert, whose philosophy in the 1940s made a profound and lasting impact on Ricoeur ("On Interpretation" 188).

Ricoeur's Spinozism more than his Kantianism might attract contemporary gender theorists and feminist ethicists. An additional attraction in the later Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology of the capable subject is the power in compassion. This moves us to a just distance in friendship; that is, an increase in power becomes apparent in highly distinctive forms of love and respect. Here friendship implies a certain type of love (*philia*) for the sake of a mutually good life. In his last writings, Ricoeur describes a mutual sharing, or an accompanying one another, in life together. He illustrates this compassionate gaze in the extreme experience of dying, or of accompanying the dying, in "living up to death." This means that "the dying person [is] still living, [insofar as] calling on the deepest resources of life" (Ricoeur, *Living up to Death* 14).

Yet it is important to note that Ricoeurian compassion is meant to be a responsible human practice, as such there is no fusion with the person dying, or the person attending to the dying. Instead an active passion retains the possibility of moving—with appropriate confidence and increasing cognitive-conative power—towards what Spinoza calls an intellectual love of the whole; that is, an infinite power of nature, in which we each

play active parts. As long as each of us is increasing in power, each increases in knowledge of nature's dynamic activities.

Ricoeur insists that compassion is like friendship. But here he also seems to have in mind an Aristotelian activity for the sake of the good; this activity is a becoming in the incomplete actualization of a power. The activity of playing parts in the dynamic of nature, then, constitutes a continuously active, positively powerful life. In this way, we have the capability to become confident in "living up to death," that is, we are confident in what we are capable of, including goodness and mutually empowering activity right to the end of each singular life. Crucially, there can be positive power in the activities that make up friendship, compassion and increasing knowledge; such activity increases the infinite relational powers of autonomous, yet vulnerable subjects.

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It is important to note here that for Ricoeur compassion means attending to a dying person without fusion. And yet we can still uphold Spinoza's idea of free emotion whereby a person both loves herself and participates in the infinite intellectual love of life as essential to a self-sustaining love, even in the movements of living-dying. Ironically, this brings us to a fairly Kantian point. While Spinoza conceives the role of power in transforming inactive passions into active ones, Kant recognizes the role of respect in maintaining the right distance between subjects. Ricoeur adds the distinctive characteristic of treating oneself as other in the active and responsible practice of compassion. In the spirit of French reflexive philosophy, "the difficult art of existence is distilled not only in (and thanks to) the love of one's neighbour as oneself but also in loving oneself as another" (Jervolino 536; cf. Anderson, "From Ricoeur to Life" 21–29). This mutual love encourages ethical confidence and so, the increasing ability to understand ourselves.

#### CONCLUSION: THE EPISTEMIC LIMIT OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

To sum up, my own work on "the subject's loss of self-confidence in her own ability to understand herself" began in the 1980s with study of Kant and Ricoeur. An awareness of gendering was beginning to take place, but the awareness of what gendering has done, or could do, to the subject's confidence was not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, I have tried to demonstrate here that Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology can be used to elucidate how philosophical cultures shape the process not only of gendering, but of giving an account of the identity of human subjects; the challenge is to uncover how gendering as a hidden process in determining human identity intersects with other material and social mechanisms as well as cognitive disabilities and human vulnerabilities.

We will not have arrived at any consensus on the subject's gender identity, or, in Butler's words, "of giving an account of oneself." Yet we have hopefully understood that the process of gendering is highly complex, especially in cultures in rapid transition. This is precisely because life exceeds any account we could ever give of ourselves. In Butler's highly significant words,

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the categories of identity, then any effort "to give an account of oneself" will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 42–43, also 34; cf. Cavarero 92)

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Although not a self-confessed Kantian, Butler articulates extremely well the epistemic limit of any phenomenological attempt to give an account of oneself. But this limit is not a reason for despair or inertia. Instead, within epistemic limits each of us can recognize the significance of both confidence in our cognitive-conative capability and power in increasingly understanding one another. No matter what the limit to our self-knowledge, together the ethical confidence and the interactive power of capable subjects could still animate the life of each and every self.

To conclude, let us return to Kristeva's reading of Antigone. As I have already proposed, Kristeva's re-configuration of Antigone serves in re-visioning gender for women today. In "Antigone: Limit and Horizon" Kristeva herself clearly follows after Kant in giving a central role to "limit." She asserts that

a growing number of women confront the limit states of human experience with the indestructible serenity of Antigone. And who reveal themselves as a horizon—for better and for worse. A horizon at which the laws themselves, because this all takes place in the social order, are susceptible of being transformed; but this transformation takes place first in the depth of the psyche, before being consecrated, eventually, by political justice. (227)

I cannot help, but interpret this “indestructible serenity” as an image of woman’s capability: and so, she becomes confident in striving for self-understanding. Moreover, in living the intensity of this human striving to be the confident, self-reflexive subject of a Ricoeurian-inspired hermeneutic phenomenology, we endeavour not only to understand life for and with other subjects, but to live the life of subjects whose ethical confidence maintains the right negotiation of gender in interpersonal relations. So, despite the epistemic limit, a Ricoeurian hermeneutic phenomenologist might agree with the gender theorist’s (Butler’s) conclusion that the crucial message is to let ourselves and others live!

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