

Feeling Differently: Cultivating Anti-Discriminatory Perceptual Habits

One of the most striking features of the natural attitude, as Edmund Husserl describes it, is that it is not natural at all, but rather, is a developmental phenomenon that is acquired through, and profoundly influenced by, specific socio-cultural practices. As the largely unquestioned set of habitual beliefs and behaviors that establish the parameters for “normal” experience for both individuals and communities, the natural attitude is culturally, geographically, and historically variable. Yet, even if we acknowledge that contingent events may have influenced the formation of a given natural attitude, and even if we are aware of major differences that may distinguish one person’s or community’s natural attitude from another, this recognition does not usually prevent our own natural attitudes from being *naturalized*, that is, accepted *as* natural. Insofar as our natural attitudes reveal, as Husserl informs us, not only a practical world but also a world of values, they supply the normative standards we implicitly appeal to on an ongoing basis in our daily lives. It should not be surprising, then, that the embodied, ethical norms associated with a given natural attitude also tend to be naturalized, or presupposed as givens. This naturalization and normalization of our own natural attitudes, I maintain, poses significant challenges to any movement for serious social change since the latter almost always requires dramatic changes in our natural attitudes, and in turn, the expression of new *feelings*, according to which accepted norms of the past, whether on the part of individuals or larger communities, no longer appear to be natural or justified.

Turning to the visceral experience of her own white skin privilege that Beauvoir recounts in her memoir, *America Day by Day*, I maintain that she not only de-naturalizes anti-black racism, but also reveals an *existential responsibility* that extends beyond one’s own actions and one’s own natural attitude to encompass not only the attitudes and actions of other people but also the society in which one is immersed even if, as in Beauvoir’s case, this is not one’s own native country. In contrast to traditional, liberal accounts that emphasize personal autonomy and thus associate responsibility exclusively with one’s own actions and intentions, Beauvoir’s account reveals an excess of responsibility for anti-black racism that overruns bodily borders, flowing not only from body to body but also between bodies and societies.

Two years before her 1947 trip to the U.S., Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that “an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us.” (PhP 441) This latter account, I suggest, offers us a way of understanding how racist attitudes are confirmed and sedimented our bodies over time, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies for those who express them. Taken together, I argue, Beauvoir’s anti-liberal expansion of bodily responsibility beyond the body proper and Merleau-Ponty’s account of the sedimentation of attitudes in the habit body reveal the intercorporeal, ethical challenges posed by racism, homophobia, sexism, and disability for all members of a society, including those who are most committed to combatting them.

Bio: Gail Weiss is Professor of Philosophy at The George Washington University and General Secretary of the International Merleau-Ponty Circle. She is the author of two monographs: *Refiguring the Ordinary* (Indiana U. Press, 2008) and *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (Routledge 1999) and she has edited/co-edited four other volumes: *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty* (SUNY 2008), *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Penn State Press 2006), *Thinking the Limits of the Body* (SUNY 2003), and *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture* (Routledge 1999). She has published numerous journal articles, book chapters on embodiment and co-edited a Special Issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* on “The Ethics of Embodiment” in Summer 2011. She is currently completing a monograph on Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir.