

Book Review: Becoming Gendered

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Classical Phenomenology Applied to Gender Identity, by Ian Rory Owen,
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In *Classical Phenomenology Applied to Gender Identity*, Ian Rory Owen explores the phenomenological foundations of gender identity through the lens of Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. Structured in ten chapters, along with an interlude, a concluding chapter, and an epilogue, the book offers a detailed account of how phenomenology can deepen our understanding of gender as a dynamic, lived experience that integrates personal, cultural, and social dimensions. Owen's work presents phenomenology as a framework for investigating identity in a way that transcends rigid binaries, highlighting the relevance of classical phenomenological ideas for contemporary questions of gender.

The introductory chapters set up the theoretical foundations of Owen's argument, examining how Kant's (1781) notion of the "conditions of possibility" for understanding influences both Husserl (1936) and Heidegger (1927). Chapter 1 introduces Kant's ideas on sensory experience as foundational for understanding and explores his influence on German Idealism. Owen shows how Kant's work laid the groundwork for Husserl's interest in how experience is structured by consciousness. This exploration situates phenomenology

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within a broader philosophical tradition that emphasizes the intentional structure of consciousness and frames identity as something that unfolds within and is shaped by experience.

Chapters 2 and 3 then shift the focus to the similarities and philosophical overlaps between Husserl and Heidegger, particularly in how each thinker addresses the nature of intentionality and the role of consciousness in understanding identity. Owen argues that both philosophers contribute unique insights that inform a phenomenological approach to gender. He outlines the basis for what he calls “classical pure psychology,” which combines Husserl’s focus on intentional sense with Heidegger’s emphasis on the historical and cultural dimensions of experience. Chapter 3 specifically explores shared ideas from Husserl, Heidegger, and Gestalt psychology to examine how consciousness structures our understanding of identity through the intentional process of relating to the world.

Chapter 4 dives into Heidegger’s critique of Husserl, specifically Heidegger’s views on temporality and his concept of the historical “lifeworld” as a framework for understanding experience. Owen uses Heidegger’s concept of temporality to demonstrate how identity, including gender identity, is continually reshaped within historical and social contexts. This leads to a discussion of how culturally constructed items, such as gendered footwear, illustrate the subtle ways that society encodes identity through ordinary objects.

Chapter 5 revisits the Husserl-Heidegger relationship, focusing on their differing views of temporality. Owen emphasizes Husserl’s understanding of temporality as a foundational process that lends stability to identity, allowing it to persist over time even as it evolves. This concept is central to Owen’s argument for a phenomenological approach to gender that is flexible enough to accommodate changes across the lifespan.

In Chapter 6, Owen delves into Husserl’s concept of “intentional sense-history,” discussing how historical ideals and universals are embedded within the lifeworld and influence how we construct meaning. By examining Husserl’s view of intentionality, Owen argues that phenomenology provides a framework for understanding how ideals about gender are passed down and adapted over time. This approach frames gender identity not as a static category but as a process rooted in individual and cultural history.

The interlude serves as a reflective pause, allowing Owen to revisit the themes of intentionality, temporality, and historical context from the preceding chapters in a psychological perspective. Here, he emphasizes the importance of phenomenological methods in interpreting gender identity as something that is relational, situated, and continually reshaped through engagement with the

world.

Chapters 7 through 10 apply phenomenology more directly to gender and identity, drawing on concrete examples to illustrate Owen's theoretical framework. Chapter 7 introduces gender as a cultural object shaped by social learning and shared meanings. Owen examines how gender roles and identities emerge within specific cultural contexts, arguing that phenomenology can help disentangle personal identity from rigid societal expectations. In Chapter 8, he uses the example of Euclidean geometry to explain how universal ideals—such as norms around gender—are formulated through shared cultural understandings but do not necessarily reflect individual experiences.

In Chapter 9, Owen explores how gender is experienced through the embodied self, emphasizing that gender identity is not merely a matter of social labeling but is deeply entwined with the physical, sensory experience of one's body in social space. He contends that phenomenology's focus on lived experience allows for a richer understanding of how people relate to their bodies and perform gender in ways that may transcend binary classifications.

Finally, Chapter 10 discusses the ethical and philosophical implications of a phenomenological approach to gender. Owen argues that recognizing the complexity of gendered experience can foster a more humane and inclusive understanding of identity. He contends that phenomenology, with its focus on empathy and inclusivity, can guide us toward a more compassionate view of gender diversity. The concluding chapter and epilogue reinforce this message, suggesting that phenomenology's emphasis on subjective experience and intentionality provides a powerful framework for understanding identity in a way that respects both personal agency and social belonging.

Owen presents phenomenology as a means to bridge the gap between subjective experience and the objective structures imposed by science and societal norms. By arguing that gender identity cannot be fully captured by scientific or biological determinism, Owen aims to elevate phenomenology as an approach that respects the complexity and variability inherent in human identity. In a proper and very critical manner, the book contends that phenomena like gender must be understood as part of a qualitative, lived experience—a stance grounded in what Owen terms a "Husserlian empathic theory of mind." This approach allows Owen to foreground individual agency and perception within social and historical contexts, emphasizing that understanding gender identity requires us to move beyond simplistic binaries and engage with personal experience.

A significant portion of the text is devoted to comparing Husserl and Heidegger's interpretations of phenomenology and their implications for

understanding human identity. Owen carefully outlines the methodological similarities and differences between the two, noting that while Husserl's approach emphasizes descriptive accuracy and intentional analysis, Heidegger's phenomenology is more concerned with historical context and the nature of existence. Owen navigates this terrain to argue that both thinkers contribute to a richer understanding of gender as something enacted within and shaped by cultural frameworks. For example, he examines how masculinity and femininity are often seen as mutually exclusive in cultural logic, and yet, phenomenologically, these identities are shaped through ongoing, context-dependent interactions.

One of Owen's key arguments is that gender identity is not a purely biological or psychological construct but is shaped by cultural narratives and personal history. Through phenomenological analysis, Owen differentiates between the socially constructed categories of masculinity and femininity and the actual lived experiences of individuals, which often transcend these labels. This approach aligns with Owen's broader critique of binary logic, which he sees as overly restrictive. Instead, he advocates for an inclusive, empathic view of gender that respects the fluidity and complexity of lived experience. By doing so, he suggests that phenomenology can offer a pathway to understanding gender in a way that is responsive to both personal agency and cultural context.

One of the great merits of the book is to combine the deep knowledge in classical phenomenology with examples from everyday life to illustrate these complex philosophical points. For example, the idea of gendered items like footwear is used by Owen to show how gendered meanings are imposed upon mundane objects through cultural history. This example serves as an accessible entry point for readers into the more complex discussions of intentionality and sense-making in phenomenology. For instance, Owen argues that our recognition of items as "masculine" or "feminine" is less about the objects themselves and more about the historical meanings that have accumulated around them. Such examples provide practical illustrations of how phenomenology enables us to see beyond mere appearances to the deeper, intentional structures that give shape to our understanding of identity.

Moreover, in discussing temporality, Owen argues for Husserl's perspective on how temporal consciousness contributes to a cohesive sense of self. He suggests that temporality is central to the formation of identity, as it allows for continuity over time, even amid personal and social changes. Here, Owen also touches on Heidegger's critiques, acknowledging Heidegger's view that temporality is embedded within the historical lifeworld and thus subject to cultural shifts. This temporal dimension is crucial to Owen's approach to

gender, as it allows for a more dynamic understanding of how individuals relate to cultural norms across their lifespans. He asserts that gender identity is not static but unfolds within a temporal process that incorporates memory, anticipation, and experience.

Owen's treatment of phenomenology is deeply grounded in the philosophical traditions he engages with, and he revisits classic themes within phenomenology to explore their relevance to contemporary discussions of identity. This approach brings phenomenology into dialogue with modern issues, arguing that the classical methods of Husserl and Heidegger provide valuable insights into how we might conceptualize identity beyond rigid, scientific categories. Through his analysis, Owen brings the classical phenomenological themes that inspired thinkers like Sartre (1943), de Beauvoir (1949), and Merleau-Ponty (1945) into the present, using them to build a nuanced view of identity that honors the complexity of human experience.

In sum, *Classical Phenomenology Applied to Gender Identity* is a thoughtful, rigorous application of classical phenomenological theory to the contemporary discussion of gender. The book can also be used as a textbook for graduate students thanks to the useful questions and concluding sections. Owen's detailed examination of Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger provides a philosophical foundation that is both comprehensive and deeply relevant to the lived realities of gender today. His work contributes to phenomenology and gender studies alike, offering insights that are valuable for those interested in the philosophical dimensions of identity as well as the practical implications of inclusivity in understanding gender. Through its detailed engagement with classical phenomenology and its application to contemporary issues, Owen's work provides a nuanced, empathic model for understanding identity as something dynamic, relational, and deeply embedded in the fabric of human experience.

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