

Susan Bredlau

The Other in Perception: A Phenomenological Account of Our Experience of Other Persons
Albany: SUNY Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-4384-7171-6)

Reviewed by Beata Stawarska, 2019

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Quote:

"The *Other in Perception* succeeds in bearing out the central idea that "we are always dealing with other people, whether we notice this explicitly or not" (1). It effectively blends phenomenology and cognitive science to establish that reality is deeply social, and thus equally a matter of ontology and ethics (93-99). This social ontology opens up multiple avenues for further inquiry."

The central tenet of Susan Bredlau's *The Other in Perception* is that perception is a deeply interpersonal affair. Whereas classical philosophical approaches and unbracketed ordinary opinions tend to anchor perception in the first-person-singular viewpoint, phenomenology and developmental psychology strongly suggest that the self is paired with the other and that the world of things is shaped by social relations. The lone figure of a perceiver surveying the furniture of the world, who would one fine day be obligated to respond whether another human is a mere *object* in the perceptual field or a perceptive subject *other* than self, is a byproduct of an obsolete Cartesian framework. Differently put, the other mind emerges as a "problem" to be resolved (typically, by drawing analogies between consciousness accessed from within and a mental specter situated without) within a conceptual setup tributary of a reductive interpretation of Descartes's philosophy that recent scholarship has put to rest. The other is first and foremost a companion within a shared being in the world. Bredlau's objective in the book is thus to critically expose the remnants of Cartesianism within the so-called theory of mind approaches to social cognition in contemporary cognitive science and to offer phenomenological accounts of embodied intersubjectivity combined with empirical research in developmental psychology as an alternative framework that underscores the deeply social character of the human world. In her words, "we are always dealing with other people, whether we notice this explicitly or not" (1).

The exposition of this central tenet proceeds in four chapters that survey classical phenomenology, phenomenological approaches to the experience of others, the experience of familial others in early development, and the experience of intimate others in adulthood. In chapter 1, Bredlau outlines Husserl's phenomenology to make a case that intentionality, the original directedness of consciousness to the world, puts the perceiver in the presence of things (rather than their mental representations). Perceptual experience in particular is a *presentation* of the world to self (10). This phenomenological insight is deepened via Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment, notably the analysis of the phantom limb, a lingering call of the world upon the body-subject to respond to its solicitations (for example, to climb the stairs in a building to access a laboratory where one conducts research or to pick up a child from kindergarten) (14-15). The body-subject is thus immediately situated within a context of professional and social roles one performs as a scientist or a parent. Finally, John Russon's conception of polytemporality--the musical, rhythmic, and harmonic texture of lived experience--highlights the way in which consciousness may be exceeded by the "guiding force" or "authority" of a shared and familiar rhythmic structure that, for example, orients a conversational exchange with a friend (20). These rhythmic structures lead to the construction of a world that also includes material conditions of deprivation or plenty, and may lead to transgenerational conflict between parents and children who project differing normative expectations (for example, ensuring the family's sustenance versus pursuing one's creative passions) and thus literally inhabit different worlds (22-25). The latter discussion highlights that "what is happening in our experience requires us to recognize our deeply submerged prejudices, commitments, and expectations" (25).

In chapter 2, Bredlau outlines Husserl's conception of "pairing" (*Paarung*) as an analytical template for phenomenological approaches to the experience of others. Crucially, in pairing "we immediately experience the world *as* oriented around others" (34), and their bodies appear as points of access rather than obstacles to a shared meaningful world. It follows that "Husserl's phenomenological description . . . denies the very premise on which the 'problem of other minds' depends" (34). Bredlau turns next to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to develop a more embodied and situated understanding of social perception (Merleau-Ponty 2012). She follows his analysis of playing soccer whereby the players are primarily participants in a collaborative process rather than discrete individuals (37). Russon's work crowns the development of chapter 2 (this mirrors the outline of chapter 1 and will be repeated again in the remaining chapters); this time Bredlau draws on his analysis of neurosis as a living vestige of habitual patterns of behavior from familial life that fails to address the demands of a current situation (41-42). Although Russon's analysis of neurosis underscores the central idea that "we are always dealing with other people, whether we notice this explicitly or not" (1), a reader like me begins to wonder why one single (white male) philosopher seems to be holding the key to making these dealings explicit and whether Bredlau creates missed opportunities by not engaging with a greater range of work within contemporary phenomenology (a point revisited below).

In chapter 3, Bredlau narrows the focus onto the familial world of a developing child. She surveys selected psychological literature on neonate imitation, joint attention, and mutual gaze that provides empirical evidence for the precocity of pairing relations between a caregiver and a typically developing infant and child. Of special interest is her reevaluation of neonate imitation (the neonate's ability to copy the simple facial gestures of an adult) as a collaborative process that is "a matter of *participation* rather than *observation*" and should be considered as "incipient play

" (52). This reinterpretation underscores the deeply social character of the so-called imitative behavior by pointing out that both the adult and the child actively participate in face-to-face interactions despite obvious differences in motor and social skills. Bredlau further develops the inherent sociality of play by reinterpreting playful face-to-face interactions between caregiver and infant (Stern's "play periods") as a form of "pairing" that involves a combined behavior of the couplet: they "are playing *a* game or dancing *a* dance--rather than acting separately with each one playing his or her own game or dancing his or her own dance" (56). One could go even further and note that playful collaboration extends beyond the scope of pairing defined (as Bredlau does following Husserl) as the child's perception of caregiver as an *other*, a subject and not a mere object (62). The phenomena of playing and dancing *as a pair* suggest that a shared space of communal action opens up *between self and other* that exceeds an individual subject-centered understanding of sociality that both Husserl's phenomenological conception of intersubjectivity as an aggregate of transcendental egos *and* the Theory of Mind framework implicitly assume. Although transcendental intersubjectivity may solve or even dissolve the "problem" of other minds, it also unwittingly resuscitates some of the premises the problem is predicated upon (such as the atomistic character of subjectivity). If pairing solely provided a window onto another mind or an opportunity to perceive the caregiver as *other*, then arguably the collaborative processes of playing a game and dancing a dance would not get off the ground; the latter process is a form of action as well as perception, and it involves a host of rhythmic structures, such as taking turns or adjusting steps, that exceed the individual sphere of each participant's consciousness or mind. Ultimately, I therefore identify two related but distinct conceptual frameworks of pairing in Bredlau's analysis: transcendental intersubjectivity wherein the subject perceives the other, and situated sociality wherein one acts as part of a duo in a shared space. I believe the latter better captures the social phenomena under discussion in the book.

The third chapter concludes with a helpful discussion of a concrete case study of child's play. Bredlau writes: "For the young girl playing with the truck, . . . her mother's resistance to her running the truck into the cat is inextricable from the possibilities she experiences the truck as affording her. . . . [T]hose interactions with the truck to which her mother is receptive are experienced by the child as tenable, while those interactions that meet with her mother's disapproval are experienced as less tenable or even untenable" (66). Crucially, the child's experiences of worldly affordances (which forms of action are available and which ones precluded) are shaped by interpersonal relations and not by physical capabilities alone (66). In this way, familial others effectively determine the reality of the world, and their determination may be enabling and/or disabling for the child, painting the world as an open field of possibilities or a restricted and dangerous place. Bredlau briefly refers to Beauvoir's analysis of children's development from the *Second Sex* (Beauvoir 2011), and I would have hoped for further reflection on how concrete markers of identity--such as gender as well as race and ethnicity, ability, and social class--affect the social constitution of worldly affordances. Needless to say, this analysis would trouble the underlying framework of neutral universalism where we are all equally subjects that Bredlau assumes in agreement with classical phenomenology, and align it more closely with recent work in critical phenomenology that takes considerations of identity and difference seriously.

The fourth and final chapter tackles sexual relations in adulthood. Here the unchosen "pairing" relations with family members from childhood give way to chosen relations with intimate partners where the otherness of others is foregrounded (74). Bredlau thematizes sexuality as bodily intentionality that provides a unique form of experiencing others: bodily contact itself is an experience of others (rather than a sign thereof), and other bodies are experienced as intentional (75-76). Sexual desire is therefore not a mental event, and intimate others are not experienced in the form of "minds." Presumably a theory of mind framework would uphold such a mentalistic understanding of sexual relations, but in the absence of a clearly stated adversarial position, the chapter gives an impression of fighting a straw man. The case of Johann Schneider (a young, injured soldier discussed by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*) who is attracted to women's personalities first and foremost, and experiences his sexuality as a vague feeling rather than a call to action is offered as a deviation from fully embodied sexuality. Echoing Judith Butler, I wondered exactly why an attraction to personality would be a pathologizing marker for Merleau-Ponty and Bredlau alike, and, more broadly, why contemporary feminist scholarship is largely absent from the discussion of sexual experience (Butler 1989). I consider this a lost opportunity to think through the cultural formation of gender roles within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and beyond. Bredlau devotes a sizable section to Beauvoir's discussion of men's and women's sexual experiences in the *Second Sex* (81-86; Beauvoir 2011), but the near absence of engagement with contemporary feminist phenomenology results in an arguably dated picture of the bedroom as a battlefield for dominance. Bredlau helpfully highlights the significance of trust, vulnerability, and freedom in sexuality; I found the discussion of mutual creativity within "authentic" erotic experiences to be especially revealing. Still, overall, the chapter is beholden to the language of free subjects and inert objects reminiscent of the very mentalistic framework it seeks to overcome. Bredlau writes, "[e]rotic desire is . . . a domain that implies that the full realization of our freedom requires the full realization of others' freedom: in our dependence on the others' freedom, our freedom is ultimately enhanced" (92). Sexuality is therefore thematized chiefly as a matter of recognizing others as free subjects--a form of perception that solves or dissolves the problem of other minds. Yet in assuming a generic function of intersubjective recognition, sexuality loses its phenomenological specificity and becomes indistinguishable from other forms of creative co-expression (like friendship, collaboration, or combat). In following the lead of Hegel's dialectic of desire more closely than Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, we have lost the singular admixture of freedom and *facticity* within erotic experience and retained a classical understanding of universal intersubjectivity.

The *Other in Perception* succeeds in bearing out the central idea that "we are always dealing with other people, whether we notice this explicitly or not" (1). It effectively blends phenomenology and cognitive science to establish that reality is deeply social, and thus equally a matter of ontology and ethics (93-99). This social ontology opens up multiple avenues for further inquiry. For example, how would an engagement with Merleau-Ponty's works beyond the classic *Phenomenology of Perception* deepen the notion of family as social institution? If perception is a form of action, would "pairing" relations be ultimately best interpreted as acting conjointly with others (rather than perceiving them as discrete subjects)? How does contemporary research in critical phenomenology enhance social ontology and make it socially responsive to issues such as perceptual bias, for example, in the white, racist perception of veiled Muslim women or unarmed Black men? Would socially critical research trouble the neutral universalism of

classical phenomenology where we are all presumed to be equally free subjects dispensing and receiving recognition? Would it result in a more socially fine-tuned ontology of bodies that represents a more diverse array of epistemic standpoints and experiences? Could it lead to a more ethically responsible phenomenology that addresses the injustices in social perception and action?

References

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