

# Queering Heidegger: An Applied Ontology

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*Abstract: This paper explores practical application of Heidegger's fundamental ontology to lived human experience and practical concerns beyond those he addressed, specifically the phenomenon of gender. We are so committed to gender norms that we ostracize or even kill those who violate them, yet rarely question the reasonableness of our expectations. Gender needs to be examined from a phenomenological stance, a) because of the ubiquity of gendering, b) because presuppositions regarding gender go largely unquestioned in most Daseins' everyday existence, and c) because cases in which actual fact contravenes our expectations offer insight into what it means to be human.*

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This paper is a thought experiment, a querying and a queering of Heidegger's methods and terminology that yields some interesting results. As such, it has dual aims: 1) to carve out a space for engaging in applied ontology, using Heideggerian theory to examine areas of human experience Heidegger himself did not specifically address, but which are nevertheless urgently in need of attention, and 2) to ask the question of gender as a topic of applied ontology. I have chosen to examine gender in particular for three reasons: a) because of the ubiquity of gendering in human Being, b) because presuppositions regarding gender go largely unquestioned in most Daseins' everyday existence, and c) because gender as a question offers insight into what it means to be human when we examine cases in which our expectations are contravened by actual fact.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For the purposes of this paper, the distinction between sex and gender must be maintained. I use the terms "male," "female," and "intersex" to refer to the classifications of body types known as "biological sex" and the terms "man," "woman," "masculine," and "feminine" to refer to the complex of social relations, personal identity, and social constructions known as "gender." I acknowledge



In *Being and Time*, Heidegger investigates how it is that the understanding of dying is disclosive of Dasein's Being. Dasein's coming to grips with the possibility of its own death shows Dasein *that it is* and *what it is*. What Dasein comes to understand in Being-towards-death is the shape that its own life takes, the possibility of how its own story may be played. This is the point, of course. What good would it do Dasein to come to an understanding of its Being or its ownmost potentiality for Being unless that understanding is to have an impact on how the story is to play out? Heidegger is right about how Being-towards-death operates. That is to say, he is *right*, but his account is not *complete*; no ontology ever could be. Being-towards-death is one way in which Dasein's Being can be disclosed, but it is only *one* way; there are others. Heidegger's phenomenology provides us with a vocabulary and a model of human Being with which to examine *all* the foundational phenomena of Dasein's Being in order to gain insight into the ways lives are shaped.<sup>2</sup> An application of ontology to other facets of Being can be used to "follow through" on fundamental ontology, with the aim of understanding the most basic and primordial ways in which experiences are meaningful to Dasein's life.

In an applied ontology of gender, the question of gender is no mere history of gender difference, but rather an ontological question in that it is concerned with the ways in which gender affects and is affected by Dasein's Being-in-the-world. The conspicuousness of the individuals who transgress gender norms and the concomitant near-invisibility of gender in those who do not radically challenge gender norms taken together suggest that there is material here to unpack and that the story we tell of gender is in urgent need of untangling. We are so strongly committed to a model of gender that does not suffice to describe everyone that we ostracize or even kill those who violate gender norms, even children at times, yet we rarely question whether our expectations regarding gender are reasonable or not.<sup>3</sup>

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that maintaining the language of the sex/gender distinction in a paper that supports Heidegger's challenge to the mind/body distinction is problematic. A full treatment of the question of how the phenomenologist is to avoid biological essentialism is certainly needed, but falls outside the scope of the current paper. Eschewing the language of the sex/gender distinction would presuppose the very points that the paper is trying to make and so I have chosen to retain the language familiar to the field of gender studies, but with reservations.

2. While there are very important differences in Heidegger's early work and his later work, there persists a thread throughout his life's work that theory is always to be subject to practical application, as evidenced by the large number of practical examples he employs. It is this thread I wish to follow, instead of a discussion of pre- and post-*Kehre* distinctions and so I employ *Being and Time* along with later works.
3. Whether because of increased incidents or because of increased coverage of



Heidegger's model of Dasein is helpful precisely because Dasein is not a discrete subject. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler speaks of laying aside the notion of the coherent subject in order to understand gender as performative. As it happens, the model of Dasein is just such a means of discussing human experience that avoids the pitfalls and commitments of various more traditional theories of the subject, while still allowing us to retain grammatical subjects in our sentences, which we need to do if we are to examine how our gendered understanding of ourselves and our world has come about and may continue to change. The questions for the Heideggerian phenomenologist are what Foucault would call "historical" and "archaeological": What is the story of gender we tell ourselves? How does *das Man* understand a given phenomenon and how is it meaningful? What does the understanding of a given phenomenon tell us about Dasein's character? How *might das Man* understand it instead? Why is that important? A full phenomenology of gender would of course be beyond the scope of a journal article, but we can address these questions, beginning with the question of applied ontology.

### Applied Ontology

The shape that Dasein's story takes in the course of pursuing its life is related to the phenomenological notion of truth as disclosure. What is disclosed in the unfolding of a life is nothing less than the myriad ways that life is meaningful, and when a life is disclosed, it always happens within a context, which means that the context itself is impacted by that life. This is to say, the way that any particular life is lived is shaped by many factors that are outside of any individual Dasein's control; each life is uniquely shaped within the context of those factors by its own facticity. In turn, this life shapes those factors, because the individual life-shape discloses *this* Dasein's ownmost potentiality-for-Being within that context. A culture's customs will shape the way a Dasein born and raised in that culture turns out, but the customs themselves only exist *as* the ways Daseins live in the culture.

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incidents, there has been an increase in news reports of children as young as 17 months being killed because of perceived transgression of gender norms. In every one of these cases, non-threatening, gender variant behavior has been met with deadly force. Erin Hartness, "Cult-like Group Behaviors Come Out in Court," WRAL, 18 October 2011, <http://www.wral.com/news/local/story/9836148/>, accessed 6 July 2012; Catherine Saillant, "Teen in Gay-Student Slaying Case Agrees to 21-Year Prison Term," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/11/gay-slaying.html>, accessed 6 July 2012; Josh Einiger, "Man Indicted in Shinnecock Baby Death," *ABC News*, 11 August 2010, <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/local&id=7605381>, accessed 6 July 2012.



This is why the application of Heidegger's methods to the factual aspects of Dasein's world is important—it is only through such a critical examination of these customs and contextual structures that we can come to an understanding of the underlying structures of the way Dasein experiences and constructs its world. Science does not suffice; science is concerned with facts and categories of natural phenomena. But these are not the only truths that shape Dasein's life. Biology and psychology tell us a great deal about how bodies and minds operate, but they cannot tell us why we care about how bodies and minds operate. Similarly, medical experts can tell us whether a newborn is male, female, or intersex, but the medical understanding of biological sex is far different from the way both sex and gender are meaningful in Dasein's life and shape Dasein's experience. Social constructions are phenomena that do not lend themselves to scientific inquiry and do not always operate according to the dictates of formal logic. Now, social constructions are real and they impact Dasein's life in very tangible ways, and while they have been documented in historical and sociological studies, their full import to Dasein's world has not been plumbed. To examine the structures underlying presuppositions and classificatory systems employed in the sciences, and to understand how Dasein experiences them, ontology is the proper method of inquiry.

The phenomena that matter most to Dasein, about which Dasein has the most pervasive and most deeply invested social constructions, are the ones that need examining. Foucault famously illustrates how our social construction of sexuality arose, and we need something similar with regard to gender. For the most part, Dasein becomes concerned with the phenomena that shape its life when these phenomena “break down,” or fail to operate in the expected manner. They become *vorhanden*, the present-at-hand objects of scrutiny. Dasein becomes urgently concerned with social constructions when suffering occurs. Suffering is, of course, an ethical issue, but it is not only an ethical issue. It is also an issue of ontology, as we investigate Dasein's caring (*Sorge*) about suffering. Questions of moral and ethical import have their existential origin not in debates regarding theory or those who suffer, but rather in the conditions out of which suffering arises to begin with, the stories Dasein tells, the presuppositions that shape Dasein's inquiries, and the particular circumstances in which Dasein finds itself. The most obvious instances of gendered suffering are those that spring from violent assault but it is by no means the case that all suffering is quite so evident. Other examples might include the “irritation” that Beauvoir feels at having to address the question of womanhood, the myriad “abjections” that Butler describes, or the shaming of women that Bartky describes as suffering that arises from the systemic and pervasive imposition of conditions of



oppression.<sup>4</sup> Social constructions that cause Dasein to feel uncanny rise to the foreground as *vorhanden* phenomena. In factual life, ontology and ethics are not sharply delineated areas of specialty as they are in the academy. Since cultural phenomena are significant as both a facet of Dasein's personal identity and also as the inscription of cultural norms, there is a significant amount of ethical or political import involved in any examination of the relationships that occur in nature, culture, and social phenomena. By focusing on issues of personal and cultural identity, applied ontology has the potential to influence very real people in their everyday lives, but differs from applied ethics in that it aims to discover the origins of such debates, rather than their solutions.

In his lectures on Parmenides, Heidegger states, "Μυθος is the Greek for the word that expresses what is to be said before all else."<sup>5</sup> What he means by this is that *mythos* is prior to *logos*; what Dasein reasons about are those things that already matter to Dasein. As Heidegger uses the term, *mythos* is more than mere stories or explanations of events; it is the kind of thinking that tells the stories and establishes relationships that make sense of Dasein's world and motivate Dasein to engage in inquiry about its world. For example, one of the most prevalent *mythoi* of our age is the scientific project, taken as a whole. The particular historical heritage of the West in the twenty-first century has brought us to the point where the scientific method and the scientific conception of truth have gained preeminence as the means *das Man* uses to make sense of the world. But scientific thinking is not the only legitimate means of establishing truth that Dasein has at its disposal. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger points out that science is one context of meaningfulness of many available to Dasein, but it is only meaningful because it serves a purpose that is outside the aegis of the scientific project—science poses and answers questions that *matter* to Dasein. Medicine can help Dasein prolong life, but it cannot establish the value of life; that is done in other contexts. This means that ontological presuppositions regarding the essence of life and death lay at the heart of the science of medicine. The art of medicine is practiced as a response to the anxiety felt in the face of death, the end of the Being of any Dasein, and is a factual, existentiell inquiry, but is nevertheless *involved with* ontological concerns.<sup>6</sup> So too with the question of

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4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), xix; Sandra Lee Bartky, "Shame and Gender," in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 95; Judith Butler, "Introduction," in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 60.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 31–32, 291.



gender; examining the ontical features of gender in our time yields insight into the ways that gender and gendering (ontical phenomena) are involved with ontological concerns, with Dasein's ownmost potentiality for Being.

The ways we have of making sense of experience are the technologies Dasein employs in its deployment in the world. Without conceptual structures of some kind, perceptions would be undifferentiated. "Stuff," could not exist, properly speaking, since definition could not occur. "De-finition" is, literally, the rendering finite of things, the limitation of them to what they are and the exclusion of what they are not. The ways in which these limitations occur are the techniques or technologies of thinking Dasein employs. The perceptions themselves are individual, factual experiences of any given Dasein, but the way the perceptions are understood is very much a function of the interrelation of *das Man* and the givenness of the world. Language, techniques of exclusion and inclusion, classificatory systems, and social constructions are all technologies of this sort. Dasein's thinking must take *some* shape, after all, and any given framework can function either as a barrier that limits Being to a given shape or a scaffold (*Gestell*) upon which new expansions of the potentiality-for-Being may be constructed.

As it is ordinarily understood, Heidegger's idea of *Gestell* is a specific historical event, the dangerous enframing that occurred when calculative thinking was embraced over *Gelassenheit*, or letting things be what they are, as a result of traditional metaphysical commitments in Western thought. The danger of *Gestell* is that it fosters a way of thinking that treats things, and more importantly, human beings as mere resources. Heidegger also speaks of this danger as being mitigated by a "saving power" of revealed truth.<sup>7</sup> I offer an alternative, admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic reading of *Gestell* here. I do not dispute that Heidegger was speaking of his time in "The Question Concerning Technology," but it seems to me that he is describing one iteration of a structure that has wider implications. The German term "*Gestell*" does not only mean "enframing." It also means "scaffold," that on which things are built. *Gestell* directs Dasein's thinking in a certain direction, according to a certain style, and at the same time, since truths are disclosed and established by the direction of inquiry, the capacity for thinking further is also ensured.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 333.

8. The themes and variations upon themes played out in the deployment of technology are what several thinkers (Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Husserl, and Butler) refer to as "style." As I use it here, style is primarily an ontological concept and is related to the phenomenological understanding of freedom. "Style," in simple terms, is the way things are and how they have come to be the way they are. In its phenomenological sense, the term "style" refers to more than mere fashions in clothing, music, and the like, although it is manifested in



New perspectives on old technologies of thought are guaranteed by the foundationally factual character of Dasein; each individual Dasein approaches the world and the traditions that mould it anew. Dasein's Being must take some shape or other, after all, and the capacity of technology to alter Being is a capacity that any discourse shares. Reiteration of themes establishes the *Gestell* and this renders Dasein's own Being intelligible to it. But Dasein, being futurally oriented, does not merely repeat the past when it is engaged in stylistic repetition. It is true that the past does provide the possibility of repetition in Dasein's present, but always in a different factual situation and orientation.<sup>9</sup> The repetition varies the past to accommodate the needs of the present and plans for the future. And here too is where the saving power lies—there are always multiple discourses at work in Dasein's Being, also disclosing the world and establishing truth. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger isolates one discourse in order to elucidate the power that any discourse has over shaping Dasein's Being. Yet Being is never isolated to only one aspect. Being is always already made up of inter-reliant and inter-connecting ways of thinking and all these ways of thinking stand to affect and be affected by technologies, particularly as the Daseins engaged in this multi-faceted thinking are themselves uniquely oriented in the world and bring their own individuated perspectives to what is and can be thought. To be sure, this is dangerous; it is outside Dasein's control. But the danger is the necessary condition for the revealing of truth. On my reading, the saving power lies in generating ever more questions about the styles and discourses to be found in metaphysics, technological thinking, and other social constructions, rather than discovering immutable truths. Once Dasein believes it has found absolute truth, it stops looking for what can be revealed and occupies itself with mere ordering of what is known. *That* is the danger. But questioning must always be questioning about something, and so some stability is necessary for Dasein to engage in thinking. There is a tension here, between Dasein's tendency toward the stability of *Gestell* on the one hand and the drive to question and reveal on the other, and out of this tension innovation arises.

This operation is not an historical progression toward utopia, but a tangled web of interactions between various and sometimes surprisingly related technologies. Each age has its dominant discourses, its own set of

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such phenomena. Style is, rather, the direction taken in the field of possibility for Dasein to Be. What makes the idea of style so valuable to phenomenology is that it does not rely on clearly delineated definitions of phenomena, but is rather concerned with the relationships of resemblance and divergence among phenomena, constituting them as meaningful. Style begets Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" between things, rather than discrete concepts, easily definable and packaged for classification.

9. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 437.



technologies that interact and inform one another. These are nothing more nor less than the aspects of life that matter most to the Daseins living in that age, both because the technologies engender the discourses by which life is intelligible, but also because they matter to those Daseins whose age they shape. Technologies shape the style of Dasein's Being; they alter and shift because Dasein becomes concerned with aspects of life that are not satisfactorily accounted for by the ordinary conception of things, by *das Man*. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Human life is not played upon a single scale. There are echoes and exchanges between one scale and another; but a given man who has never confronted passions faces up to history, another who thinks in an ordinary way is free with *mores*, and another one who lives to all appearances like everybody else has thoughts which uproot all things.<sup>10</sup>

And so, Dasein's orientation and work are turned in the direction of its needs and desires, but there are always new needs and new desires to address, and thus will new technologies always arise and Dasein's style will always be in flux. Dasein's historical situation is both the exploration of Being and the production of meaningfulness, which generates new aspects of Being to explore.

## Queering

While the sex-gender distinction is useful in avoiding errors of biological essentialism, it is still the case that gendering is a physical, embodied phenomenon. Heidegger certainly does give some account of the body in *Being and Time*, though not nearly as robust as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. Even so, some have offered the critique that while Heidegger characterizes Dasein as having fundamentally embodied Being, he never provides a robust account of Dasein's embodiment.<sup>11</sup> I think this is no mistake: to give an account of embodiment as such would necessitate isolating the body as an object of discourse and thus undermine the position that

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10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 310.

11. See Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference," in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, ed. Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 53–72 *passim*. As Derrida points out, once sexuality is neutralized, there is a risk of repeating the error of traditional philosophy, which denies sexual difference, and in so doing reinforces the established tradition of regarding the male as the only "true" sex, defining the female only in terms of the male or as a flawed version of the male. See also Tina Chanter, "The Problematic Normative Assumptions of Heidegger's Ontology," in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, 80. As Chanter has noted, Heidegger's descriptions of Dasein are very identifiably masculine.



Dasein is *fundamentally* embodied. Dasein's facticity is largely reliant on its mode of embodiment; the experiences that are within Dasein's potential are delineated by the type of body that has these experiences. The basic modes of Dasein's Being are being-in, being-alongside, being-in-space, being-with, being-towards, and being-there [*Da-sein*].<sup>12</sup> It is not accidental that Heidegger uses so many terms that refer to spatial relationships when describing Dasein's Being. He presupposes and suggests physical relationships, even if metaphorically, precisely because Dasein understands its Being in terms of the physical. The body is Dasein's means of interaction with the world and the condition of its experiences. The equipmental character of entities in the world is only possible because Dasein has a body with which to manipulate both equipment and the world.

The characterization of Dasein, especially in Section I.3 of *Being and Time*, is as an entity fundamentally involved with the worldhood of the world, not merely a thinking thing. The world acts upon Dasein in tangible ways; the physical world has the capacity to disclose or limit Dasein's ownmost potentiality for Being, and even Dasein's temporal Being is affected by its being physical: bodies die. On the individual level, who any given Dasein is, what possibilities are available to him or her or hir, has a great deal to do with what his or her body is like. A basketball player and a jockey have different possibilities for sport that are based in their size; an egg-bearing Dasein and a sperm-bearing Dasein have different possibilities for reproductive roles. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that our cultural assumptions about bodies are based in actual facts of bodies themselves. At the same time, the various ways that the body is understood, the stories we tell about it, the possibilities that are available, all fall within the scope of phenomenological investigation, which means we can avoid simply producing yet another theory that suborns embodiment to mind or soul. The value of the phenomenological approach is precisely this: it allows us to think of body and culture, sex and gender in a way that avoids the "scandal" that proofs of the distinctions that presuppose and reinscribe such binaries are still expected and attempted. Only so long as these phenomena are understood do they have Being, and the ways we understand them are worth investigating.<sup>13</sup>

It does not follow that our corporeality is more "true," or more foundational, than our cultural conception of bodies.<sup>14</sup> We understand the sexed

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12. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 145–46.

13. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 249, 255.

14. See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, which can be read as a phenomenology of womanhood. The condition of womanhood is only possible within a structure of gendering that makes sense of what the word "woman" means, and so a similar phenomenology, one that examines what we mean by *gender*, is sorely



being of our bodies through language and cultural influence, which define “biological sex” and “gender.” Only through discourse can we even have classifications, such as “male,” “female,” or “intersex,” for the myriad forms in which bodies appear occur only through discourse. And discourse is both the product and the generator of the world (in the phenomenological sense) in which Dasein dwells. The body is a phenomenon that is neither a mere product of discourse, nor a raw, immutable fact. The only points of access we have for understanding embodiment are the culturally inscribed methods we have for articulating similarity, difference, and classification. We can only see the medical similarities and differences between bodies because we already have a method with which to examine them. So, while it is correct that without embodiment, and the essential sexual differences that occur in embodiment, the particular cultural construction of gender and sexual difference that dominates twenty-first century–Western thinking would not be possible, it is equally the case that without *some* cultural construction of gender and bodies, the intelligibility of actual bodies, produced by nature in all their diversity, would not be possible.

We do not have males and females because nature makes human bodies of only two types. This is far from the case, as we can see from the existence of various types of intersex conditions, some of which seem obvious, others less so.<sup>15</sup> Most people have heard of persons with ambiguous genitalia, for instance, but most have not heard of the phenomenon of XX males. Some male-bodied persons have XX chromosomes, and generally only find out if they have difficulty causing a pregnancy and have a full chromosomal workup done, which limits the cases known to those who expect and desire to cause pregnancy and who have the resources to pay for expensive testing. For this reason, we don’t even know how many male-bodied people have XX chromosomes. Estimates hold that intersex conditions in total may affect around 1 percent of the population. This may not sound like very much, but it does mean that if the average were to hold, some 80,000 New Yorkers

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needed if we are to avoid reinscribing the very presuppositions that both feminist studies and gender studies seek to challenge.

15. Intersex Society of North America, “How Common Is Intersex?” <http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency> (15 March 2012). The statistics cited here are estimates because some intersex conditions are not readily identifiable. The very number of intersex conditions recognized and the number of persons with intersex conditions are a political issue within the field of medicine. How we are to define “intersex,” why we are not keeping records of the numbers of intersex persons in our society, and why there is often no medical follow-up on intersex cases after “correction” are all questions that are only beginning to be addressed, as a result of patient activism in a remarkable example of how suffering leads to questioning our most fundamental ways of classifying human beings.



would be neither entirely male nor entirely female. That is a great many lives, in human terms. The upshot of this is that nature produces a great variety of humans, and we *also* have males and females primarily because of the labels we apply to the variations that we encounter factually in bodies. We encounter bodies, and then classify them. Without the bodies, classification obviously would not occur, but without the classification, the bodies would not be intelligible in the way they are. While “biological sex” might seem to entail just brute facts about the body, it is actually grounded in a classificatory system that presupposes that bodies will conform to certain definitive types, and is thus gendered.

In the West, “gender” is traditionally (but not of necessity) predicated on biological type. This is to say, persons with the body type defined by biology as female are expected to take on the feminine role in interaction with others; “gender” is expected to conform with “biological sex” (which is itself already a gendered classification), though there are exceptions that frustrate this expectation and render it conspicuous, such as transgender and transsexual individuals. We then designate these classifications as primary according to which types of people are typed and sorted without ever providing justification for why reproductive capacity, as opposed to other sorts of physical difference, is privileged as primary. Reproduction is important, but it’s not unique to humans and other differences, such as age, seem at least as relevant to human thriving. When exceptions become visible, which usually happens as a result of suffering, gender itself becomes a question of concern.

It might seem at first that the typical state of affairs is a vicious circle, and it would be if it addressed the question of logical implication or necessity, but it does not do this. Gender is a condition in which *Dasein* *always already* finds itself, and so any phenomenological discussion of the issue of gender is a descriptive, historical project, rather than an analysis of causes and effects. The point is not to find the *causal* origin of gender, but rather its factual, *existential* origin, i.e., the fact that at any time *Dasein* finds itself always already as having a “cultured body” and an “embodied culture” in its historical situation, something which shows itself most pointedly in the phenomenon of *Dasein*’s gender. The history of *Dasein* is precisely the history of this always-already-established and ongoing intertwining of phenomena in the site of gender. In the same way, we do not first find “naked” physical things and then project “meanings” onto them, any more than carpenters encounter free-floating Platonic forms of “hammer-ness” which are then applied to objects they encounter—rather, *Dasein* is always already *thrown* in the world, which is to say, it is always together with the world, interwoven with it. As it is correct that *Dasein* both encounters and constructs the world, it is also the case that *Dasein* finds itself in a body and constructs the intelligibility of that body within a context that renders both meaningful in *this* way, but this way need not be the only way. So neither construction



nor biological fact is logically prior to the other in this analysis; rather, they are understood as interdependent aspects of the phenomenon of gender. A great deal of literature and debate has been generated on the question of the priority of biological essence or social construction, which ultimately falls prey to the usual difficulties faced by Western dualist metaphysics, estranging two otherwise interdependent aspects of human sexual difference.

Resolving this estrangement is what applied ontology can do. The story of gender we tell ourselves needs to be able to stand up to scrutiny if we are to continue to value it. Given that to queer is to question, from a fresh angle or in a difficult manner that which is taken for granted, the phenomenological method is always already a process of “queering” what is known, particularly what “everyone knows,” the “common sense” that is understood and processed through *das Man*. With regard to the question of gender, it is clear that what “everyone knows” is not the truth of gender. Logic and fact dictate that it not be. In actual fact, while *das Man* expects female-bodied persons to be girls or women, and male-bodied persons to be boys or men, the experiences of some Daseins contradict this “common sense,” and there do exist female-bodied men and male-bodied women. There are bodies that are not unambiguously male or female. There are distinctions to be made between biological sex and gender that are rarely taken into account. Our assumptions regarding the styles of Being understood as “masculine” and “feminine” tend to seem timeless, which discounts the fact that these styles change from culture to culture and generation to generation. This would be impossible, were the story we tell about masculinity and femininity being biologically determined actually true, that men are males and women are females and except for a few sad, easily dismissed anomalies, all human beings fit neatly into these categories. The existence and visibility of Daseins who resist tidy classification raise the question of how the classificatory system arose to begin with. *Das Man*, with its shortcuts and “common sense,” has a tendency to forget that science does not *determine* the development of bodies, but rather *describes* typical bodies. Bodies are born, and then classified, not the other way around. As a result of this forgetting, the existence of atypical bodies predicates the harmful nonsense of those politically motivated “social crises” that demand the “correction” of such bodies by crude surgical methods, frequently resulting in damage to the urinary tract and sexual organs. For this to be a possibility, the categories of sex and gender must have come to be more important than the health of infants’ bodies.

Gender is even more complex than bodies; whereas bodies generally fall within certain biological parameters, gender is a great deal more protean, and is concerned with a great many more discourses than the medical classification of bodies: social and political role, aesthetic preferences, ethical dilemmas, and a great many more discourses of understanding and power besides. The sheer complexity of the question of gender (what it



is, how Dasein understands itself as Being-gendered, what the categories are, and how admixtures occur) demands that it be examined in terms of phenomenology, because no other methodology can possibly begin to address its full scope, particularly the relationship between the existentielle of gender and Dasein's ownmost potentiality for Being. Take the case of Nils Pickert, a father who wears dresses and skirts in solidarity with his son, who enjoys wearing feminine clothing. His story is reported in "Emma," a German-language women's political magazine, and has been picked up in translation worldwide.<sup>16</sup> This story of a father's love for his son is heartwarming, but also demands that we ask: why is it *news*? Why is the way a father and son dress of interest to so very many people? It does matter very much indeed to us, and that raises the question of what is at stake in cases of gender transgression, how we understand phenomena and what that tells us about Dasein in general. One thing it reveals is the tensions necessary for norms to exist, a more foundational and primordial structure than the facts of this particular phenomenon.

Much as the *status quo* is entailed in innovation, the existence of atypical Daseins is logically entailed in our common-sense idea of what "normal" or "typical" is. The possibility of transgression is a necessary condition for social constructions and norms to exist at all, since norms are understood as standards against which individuals are measured. For a bell curve to express a norm, it must also entail the areas at its ends, the atypical, that which violates the norm. We need norms to classify types, but a classification only works as a classification if it excludes that which does not fit the category named. This means that the category itself relies for its coherence on that which is not within the category. What this means in terms of Dasein is that every human is expected to Be-gendered, to operate according to the technologies of gender that fit its particular historical situation. At the same time, *das Man* seeks to eradicate difference, which is precisely what makes gendering possible, creating a tension that pulls Dasein between a tendency toward the stability of *Gestell* on the one hand and the drive to question, reveal, and innovate on the other. Dasein's character emerges from how it plays out this tension. Nils Pickert is providing a challenge to the norm that discourages male-bodied children from behaving in a feminine manner. This is why he made the news. He and his son are not creating a way of gendering out of nothing; they are working within the field of possibility in which they always already find themselves, with ideas of femininity and masculinity they find already in *das Man*. Within its field of possibility, Dasein chooses, or is already oriented toward, or is predisposed to more readily

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16. "Papa im rock: Manchmal müssen Väter eben Vorbilder sein!," *Emma: das politische Magazin von Frauen*, 20 August 2012, <http://www.emma.de/ressorts/artikel/kinder-jugendliche/vater-im-rock/> (accessed 8 September 2012).



understand some options, while others are left behind. And the way Dasein does this is by variation on themes, that which is varied and the variations themselves, gender, language, race, class, and the like, “create and enact a way of life.”<sup>17</sup> Dasein understands differences and variations, as well as repetitions, as being part of what has gone before, as being meaningfully related to what is already well-understood, or at least widely accepted, and Dasein always already finds itself living according to some style or other, whether it is proceeding along comfortably in its fallen state or facing up to its anxiety and discomfort in authentic resoluteness. On this point, Heidegger and Judith Butler are in agreement: Heidegger points out, “By repetition, Dasein first has its own history made manifest,”<sup>18</sup> and Butler has said, “gender is an identity tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”<sup>19</sup> Repetition, then, does not prove the universal truth of any factual conception of gender norms in an objective sense, but it does have the effect of providing the *Gestell*, the framework, according to which Dasein understands itself. Repetition establishes and re-establishes these norms as the context in which truth is evaluated, creating the illusion of nature or necessity, and therefore the enforcement of these norms is crucial to the perpetuation of *das Man* and thus Dasein’s understanding of itself. The illusion of nature or necessity in turn influences the way intelligibility is established. Even when Dasein rebels, as Herr Pickert has, it is only so because Dasein does not fit its context in the expected ways. Dasein’s orientation and work are turned in the direction of its needs and desires, but there are always new needs and new desires to address, and thus will new technologies always arise and Dasein’s style will always be in flux. In this reading, Dasein’s historical situation is both the exploration of Being and the production of meaningfulness, which generates new aspects of being to explore.

### Where Are We Going?

We can’t know now precisely where we are going with this method of applied ontology. It’s got *aporia* built into it, and that’s the point. How we might one day understand gender cannot yet be known but we can look at the possibilities available to us in this here and now. The story of any phenomenon, not only of gender, that has been told so far will continue, but not toward some end-point or goal; the only goal may well be to discover new ways of understanding the phenomena that shape the style of Dasein’s life. These

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17. Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 194.

18. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 438.

19. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.



new understandings will, of necessity, vary the themes of styles already familiar to Dasein, precisely because they are the themes that already matter to Dasein. The question of gender is not only one of biology or politics, after all. It is also a question of ethics in a culture that values individuality, a question of personhood in a context that values human life, a question of rights in nations that value human dignity, a question of health to Daseins who seek to avoid death, a question of education in an age of information, a question of classification in a system of types, a question of religion in a time of strife, a question of freedom in the face of oppression, even a question of beauty for those who seek it.

Gender, when examined in phenomenological terms, would appear to be a style of Being, shaped by the tensions that obtain between individuated Dasein, the brute facts of embodiment, and the social constructs according to which Dasein's Being is rendered intelligible, and operating according to deployments of power by means of technologies. And this is where the saving power lies: in unmasking the seemingly absolute (because they are taken for granted, not questioned) dictates of gender that do cause suffering for some, and shape the lives of all, as being-contingent and thus as being within Dasein's power to change. No Dasein has absolute freedom with regard to its life, but all Daseins experience freedom as a kind of exchange between the self and the field of possibilities that are afforded by the world in which Dasein acts.<sup>20</sup> Any given Dasein's factual Being is lived within the tension that arises out of these conditions, in which Dasein navigates the brute facts of embodiment and the social constructs that render its embodiment intelligible. Any given Dasein is thus both a product of its *Mitsein* and also an individuated variation on the themes provided by *das Man*. To put it in simpler terms, Dasein is always an individual who is nevertheless a product of its culture, an individual who also forms that culture, as a component of it, by placing demands on it. To Be-masculine or to Be-feminine then is to perform a style of Being that is grounded in the cultural inscriptions of given behaviours and also makes Being-masculine or Being-feminine a possibility.

This is where transgressive Dasein comes in and illuminates the discourses already at work and taken for granted in the operations of power which shape and give style to Being—those Daseins who transgress the expectations of *das Man* due to their particular and unique individuated orientations in the world are engaged in a revealing of the contingency of the ordering of life into male/female and masculine/feminine binaries, creating tension with already established truths by revealing the way they shape Dasein's thinking from the start. And what do we find when we take gender transgressive Dasein into account, when we reframe the *Gestell* that shapes

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20. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), 510.



our thinking to allow for female-bodied men and male-bodied women (not to mention all the other types and labels that will insist on proliferating), except that we are left with more questions than we had before? This is an indication that we are on to something important—questioning the gender binary leads to questions of how the transgression of that binary will be dealt with by our legal system, our schools, our medical communities. It leads to issues of marketing, since the presupposition that there are men and there are women and they purchase different products comes under scrutiny. It leads to issues of construction and building, as the demand for bathrooms to accommodate those who fit into neither traditional gender role grows. It leads to issues of child rearing, since parents have had occasion to question whether their children are in fact boys or girls, not to mention how much it matters to them that their children be unambiguously one or the other and *why* it matters. It leads to issues of human identity, and just how fundamentally linked to gender it is. And, most relevant to this project of applied ontology, questioning the gender binary leads to questions about how our most foundational understanding of ourselves and our world has come to take the style it has and also about how we might understand both differently. The questions raised by gender transgression go on and on. But then, questioning is itself the sign that there are issues to be resolved. We do not question that which we already understand, nor do we question that which is unimportant to us. We ask questions about those aspects of Being which have yet to be revealed, with which we are already meaningfully involved, which give us trouble because they involve contradiction or oppress individuals. It is in questioning that the potentiality for truths to be revealed is fostered, and it always has been thus. — • —