

# GENDER AND THE PERCEPTION OF OTHERS A CRITIQUE OF SCHUTZIAN ANALYSIS

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*How* we perceive others in everyday life and *how* we account philosophically for that perception is central to a philosophy of the social world. Completeness in the articulation of the many perspectives in which we “see” others in daily life is considered, most frequently, an endeavor complementary to the task of critical reflection on the conceptual foundations of a philosophy of the social world. The “adding on” of a new aspect of our perception of others may be held, at best, to bring to full presence the philosophical assumptions at work in our viewing of others, or, at the very least, to serve as one more illustration of how the presuppositions of a specific philosophy of the social world actually function.

The recognition of a new aspect of our perception of others may, however, act as a supplement dangerous to the philosophical theory under consideration.<sup>1</sup> The desire for completeness in an account of our perception of others may have as its primary consequence the unsettling of the accepted direction of on-going criticism on the foundations of a philosophy of the social world. It is precisely as a supplement that endangers the phenomenological enterprise of developing a philosophy of the social world that we propose to add gender to our reflection on the perception of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 144, 145.

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*Diálogos*, 49 (1987) pp. 121-128.

## *I. Schutz and Gender*

Social phenomenology might well be considered the form of contemporary continental philosophy which has endeavored, with the greatest of vigor and success, to describe and analyze the everyday activities and basic theoretical presuppositions in light of which we perceive others in the social world. Common to all phenomenologies of the social world is the development of a methodology for understanding daily social interaction through a series of reflective stages:

1. *The suspension of prior assumptions.* The setting aside of our presuppositions in order to see how the social world is given to us.
2. *Description of phenomena.* A making evident of the multiple levels of meaning present in our perception of the social world and an attention to the interconnectedness of all aspects of that perception.
3. *Analysis of structures.* An identification of the patterns of perception that are salient in phenomenological description and a reflection on their meaning and constitution.
4. *An awareness of the philosopher as a social member.* A recognition of those preconceptions that one brings, as a member of the social world, to any phenomenological study of interaction in the social world.

The method of social phenomenology is applicable, in principle, to all social phenomena. A phenomenological approach to the perception of those preconceptions that one brings, as a member of the social world, is notably, in his major work, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. We perceive others, Schutz claims, through "schemes of typification" that provide us, even at the prereflective level, with the necessary tools for identifying and interpreting the actions and motives of others. Schutz' distinctive approach to the perception of others includes, even, an account of social roles. Schutz' social phenomenology does not, however, address how we perceive others as gendered.

A *Schutzian analysis* of the perception of others introduces gender to Schutz, phenomenology of the social world. Since gender is central in our perception of others, social phenomenology can meet the demand for completeness only by including analysis of our perception of others as gendered. Schutz' basic concepts for understanding the perception of others can readily be expanded to include how others are given to us as gendered beings, making Schutz' social phenome-

nology paradigmatic for how social phenomenology in general might address the gendered aspects of daily life. How a Schutzian approach to the perception of others might begin within the framework of Schutz' social phenomenology can first be examined by focusing on four elements basic to Schutz' account of the perception of others: the pregivenness of others, the stock of knowledge, social typification, and systems of relevance.

Schutz' social phenomenology begins with the assumption that there is a social world.<sup>2</sup> Other people are "pregiven" to us with the social world. Other people are simply there for us, flagging a taxi, opening an umbrella, or standing in the marketplace. We take it for granted that others have physical bodies and consciousnesses cogiven with our own, that others are human. Since all aspects of the other are perceived by us at a prereflective level, and since gender is one aspect of the other, gender too appears to us prereflectively, that is, almost immediately and without question. From a Schutzian perspective, the pregivenness of others in the social world is the pregivenness of others as gendered.

Our experience in the social world constitutes, according to Schutz, a "stock of knowledge" upon which we rely in the perception of others.<sup>3</sup> The stock of knowledge is acquired largely through socialization. It is consulted repeatedly, undergoes constant revision, and increases with each new experience. Although each individual's stock of knowledge is somewhat unique, the stock of knowledge for members of a given social community is quite similar, containing rules of logic, norms of cultural behavior, a specific language, etc. From a Schutzian viewpoint, gender, because it is present in social interaction, is also embedded in the stock of knowledge.

One of the most significant aspects of the stock of knowledge is constituted by "schemes of typification." Schemes of typification, or social types, are formed, Schutz states, by a process of "taking a cross section of our experience of another person and freezing it into a slide."<sup>4</sup> Whenever we turn our attention, repeatedly, to a select series of

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Ichnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Lifeworld*, trans. Richard Zaner and J. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 99-124.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

characteristics among the virtually unlimited diversity of traits present in our perceptual field, we “freeze,” or delineate in advance of any lived encounter, a scheme of typification in the social world. We draw on our stock of social types whether we experience others directly, in a we-relationship, or indirectly, in a they-relationship. Social types give us the other as “one of them,” an autoworker, banker, intellectual, or as a collective, the board of directors, the press, the people. Social types make it possible, Schutz claims, to identify “what sort of a man (that is in his ‘being-thus-and so’) is standing in front of me.”<sup>5</sup> *Social types enable us to perceive others*, for social types constitute a point of reference according to which we identify what is given to us in the field of perception.

Schutz does not identify gender as a scheme of typification. Yet, if we take a second look at Schutz’ statement we can see how gender functions as a scheme of typification. Schutz’ reference to “*his [sic] ‘being-thus-and-so’*” conceals a duplicity of social types. The individual’s “being-thus-and-so” that is, social role as autoworker, banker, etc., is the sole explicit point of reference in the statement. A silent, virtually unnoticed, second level of typification is designated, however, by reference to “his.” There are at least two levels of typification operative in Schutz’ statement: the scheme of the social role and the scheme of the gender role. Our perception of others in a specific social role is filtered through a culturally constructed scheme of typification that is, in many ways, gender specific. As indicated by analysis of Schutz’ statement, we perceive individuals not merely as human, but as male or female. Even at the pre-reflective level, we identify people as “male carpenter,” “female carpenter,” “male nurse,” “female doctor,” “male children,” “female children.” Gender functions, in a Schutzian analysis, as a scheme of typification according to which we perceive others in the social world.

We engage in social typification, Schutz claims, according to “principles of relevance” that order our perception in terms of what is significant to us. Principles of relevance determine whether our perception of others within specific schemes of typification is “thematic,” that is, a central topic at hand, is “interpreted,” understood gradually through a process of gathering selected information, or is “motivationally” pertinent, refers primarily to the furthering of our own goals and

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<sup>5</sup> Schutz, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

ambitions.<sup>6</sup> Principles of relevance establish which social types we use to interpret our perception of others and how we apply those types in specific social interactions. In a culture where virtually all individuals are identified as men or women, gender may be understood, from a Schutzian perspective, as *a major system of relevance, operative even at the prereflective level, that orders our perception of others through selected schemes of typification*. Gender seems, at first glance, a significant addition *and* complement to Schutz' phenomenology of the social world and to social phenomenology in general.

## ***II. At the Pass***

Reflections on a Schutzian analysis of the perception of others in a hypothetical situation of social interaction at once illustrates and places in question the truth of its foundations. Let us consider that brief moment in which our perception of the gender of the other is "in suspension":

Consider two people, A and B, approaching each other on an otherwise untraveled mountain pass. How will gender typification affect their perception of each other?

The air is brisk and thin as A hurries along the rocky mountain path. Suddenly, A glimpses B in the distance. A identifies B as human. Like most people in the natural attitude, A wants to typify B according to gender. A may even be irritated at the ambiguity of B's gender. What actions will be possible and appropriate at the mountain pass? When A meets B, what will be B's probable consciousness, character, and function? A sees B's gender as a problem to be solved. A summons interpretationally relevant aspects of man and woman hikers from the stock of knowledge. Using gender as an explicit principle of relevance, A tries out several gender assumptions to identify B's gender.

B, on the other hand, finds that A's gender is an easy problem to be solved. B hurries along the path, sees A, and perceives that A is human. A's gender is typified automatically, for A is smoking a pipe that juts out from A's profile in the sunlight. Further, A's body frame is clearly "man-sized," A's gait is "manly," and the equipment A carries is quite heavy. B perceives A as a "man."

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<sup>6</sup> Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, ed. Richard Zaner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 5-40.

Even before A and B meet, even before the gender typification of one another as man or woman has slipped firmly into place, each hiker projects a situation that evidences the limits and constraints of gender typification. Each anticipates, even in advance of gender confirmation at close range, one type of hiking situation if the other is a man, and a different state of affairs if the other is a woman.

Power is present at the pass: the power, that, quite literally, makes a difference. The perception of others as gendered motivates a specific understanding and response to others in daily life. Different meanings are assigned, different social actions and practices are deemed possible, on the basis of an individual's perceived gender. The scheme of typification that constitutes gender as difference restricts for each individual, rather than expands, the scope and variety of human endeavors.

Can a Schutzian phenomenology of the social world account for the presence of power? We must shift from a phenomenology of the social world, in which a specific gender assignment is in question, to the placing in question of social phenomenology and of gender itself.

### *III. Social Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*

The Schutzian account of A and B at the mountain pass presents a dilemma that is at once existential and epistemological. The problematic accomplishment of gender typification in everyday life is alluded to by Schutz when he writes, "many careers (warrior) or models of action (pederast) are 'open' to men, others only to women (mother, suffragette.)"<sup>7</sup> Career choices and, indeed, all choices and actions are limited by gender typification. The perception of others as gendered demarcates what one can do, what one ought to mean, what one "is." Yet, even more than enabling us to identify what the other is, gender typification points to what the other is not. The perception of others as gendered draws boundaries around clusters of social actions, silently closing them off from access.

The existential limitation of choice and meaning that is effected in gender typing reflects an epistemological limitation of the parameters of knowledge, brought about by a philosophy of perception as typifi-

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<sup>7</sup> Schutz and Luckman, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

cation. Social phenomenology, as exemplified by Schutz' work, claims to establish a middle course between the Cartesianism of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and the historicism and psychologism frequently prevalent in social science research. It retains, as foundational, the phenomenological subject as meaning-giving, and lodges that subject in the social world. Yet, it is precisely by tracing meaning-giving back to the subject, and by equating perception with typification, that social phenomenology comes into question.

The foundations of social phenomenology, as articulated by Schutz, give rise to an arbitrary existential and epistemological closure. Our interpretation of others in the social world is, for Schutz, limited to the recognition of others as corresponding to a scheme of social types. We perceive others when the subject, through its belief system, or principles of relevance, gives meaning to a scheme of typification and recognizes the other within that scheme. In the act of perception, the other is identified and, in effect, classified, in the frame of a social type.

The self-validating truth system of social phenomenology at once posits the subject as giver of meaning and meaning as that scheme of typification constituted by the subject. That the notions of meaning as type and of subject as giver of meaning are, like particular schemes of types, themselves interpretations, cannot be recognized by a philosophy of truth as correspondence. A philosophy of truth as correspondence cannot move past its self-enclosed network.

To the degree that social phenomenology does not understand its foundations *as* interpretation, it exercises, while appearing not to exercise, a power to delimit the social world as known and as lived. The power to establish limits, first evidenced in the act of gender typification, appears in the act of perception as typification and, finally, in the very foundations of social phenomenology. A social phenomenology of the perception of others is but a special case of a hermeneutics of the other as gendered.

To give an analysis of power, a Schutzian phenomenology of the social world must take a hermeneutical turn. Meaning lies not in the subject, nor even in two subjects on an otherwise untraveled mountain pass. Meaning is in the interpretation of the historical, cultural, and linguistic practices within which "subject," "type," and "truth as correspondence" have emerged.

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