

Affective Schemas, Gestational Incorporation, and Fetal-Maternal Touch: A Husserlian Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue that one's participation in the experience of pregnancy is an essential part of the constitution of selves (maternal and fetal). Taking the radical notion of concrete essence as my point of departure in the first part of my paper, as well as the fundamental continuity between essences and facts proposed by Husserl (1913), I will briefly map out my proposal within the contemporary feminist debate. In particular, I will argue for re-framing the role of pregnancy, rejecting the idea of birth as an unattainable limit for human selfhood (Heinämaa, 2014), and defending two complementary theses: the experience of pregnancy essentially shape the self/other distinction; the continuity between our "pre" and "post" natal lives is primarily expressed through the embodied nature of the self. The core of my argument is this: everyone has taken part in the experience of pregnancy and, in doing so, their self-constitution and development have been shaped during this deeply transformative process. The implication is that the self has an essentially embodied origin which is closely connected to another self (the maternal subject); relationality, intersubjectivity, and affectivity turn out to be the grounding features in defining the self. Even though arguments about embodied aspect of the self have been widely discussed from several philosophical perspectives, there is a significant lack of phenomenological attention in this regard for the issue of pregnancy as the constitutive experience for self's constitution. Conversely, the literature focused on maternal-fetal encounters, and on the process of pregnancy, tends to address unilaterally the experience of the maternal subject, and then to neglect the proper view of the fetus as pre-infant. When attention has been paid to the fetal perspective, the issues tackled are mostly bioethical. In this context, I offer an account of the complexity and non-linearity of fetal-maternal bodily encounters on a phenomenological level, putting forward a third alternative. In particular, I aim to show the intertwining of fetal and maternal perspectives, and to analyse and articulate philosophically the empirical fact that everyone has been a pre-infant. In the second part of my paper, I will take into account some essential structures that shape and constitute the process of pregnancy, as well as the actors involved – that is to say, the maternal subject and the fetal self. All in all, I aim, as a theoretical outcome of the paper, to build a phenomenology of pregnancy that contributes towards a rethinking of embodied selfhood from their origin.

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1. Introduction

Not everyone can or wants to undergo the first-person experience of pregnancy but, conversely, everyone is born after a shorter or longer period of gestation. Simply put, given the present parameters of reproductive technologies, every human being is involved in the gestational process, through their role as the fetal subject.¹ This very plain statement – which has been widely accepted but otherwise ignored – implies that everyone has had a pre-historical experience,² some inputs from the environment, different forms of relationality, and communication with other human beings. It is a universal fact that everyone is born, and that their birth did not come from just anywhere but rather from another human being, who is biologically female.

The gestational process may provide a theoretical ground and a fleshy experience for showing the embodied character of self as essential and constitutive: what is the phenomenological significance of the empirical fact that everyone has been a pre-infant? I aim to discuss together the following – intertwined and complementary – theses: the experience of pregnancy essentially moulds self/other distinction; the continuity between our ante- and post-natal life can be found precisely in our embodied nature. Since my analysis explores the human prehistory of one's living experience, I assume that every human subject has been, in the past, a fetus. But, to be clear, I firmly reject the statement that a fetus has to be, in the future, a baby. In doing so, I accept and follow the proposal advanced by Wynn (2002), who argues for the necessity to substitute the denomination of “fetus” with “pre-

¹ According to the good practices that suggest a neutral language for avoiding gender bias and implicit gender assumptions in academic writings (see for instance APA guidelines), I employ the singular they as a pronoun when I am referring to a subject whose gender identity is unspecified or irrelevant for my argument (e.g.: human being, pre-infant, fetal self).

² For more, see Petit (1999): “Such an intentional regression toward the origin finds its inaccessible limit in ‘hereditary factors’ characterized by Husserl as an ‘empty horizon’ asymmetrical with that other empty horizon which characterizes the totality of all the means of action available to humanity. These two horizons delimit our life-world as a practical field. Their ‘emptiness’ does not imply any lack of determination but the sedimented foundation of phylogenetic experiences from which nothing stands out at first, even though this horizon is still needed as the indispensable background for our acts. For even if the structural constraints of the species are to be located in it, some activity on the part of the organism is required to expose these constraints. Husserl even goes so far as to outline a phenomenology of fetal experience [...]” (Petit, 1999, p. 223).

infant”. The reasons she invokes for this change, which is not merely lexical but has a grounded philosophical reason, are double. First, she problematizes the symbolic and medical construction around the term and the concept of fetus, which implies a specific bio-politics and control of the baby-to-be, as authors like Duden (1993) have largely inquired. Narratives of the fetus rely on the basic assumption that technologies of visibility play a larger role in establishing the health status of the baby-to-be than the personal testimony of the pregnant subject – thus effacing the lived experience of the woman,³ as well as putting her in a position of undermining her epistemic authority.⁴ Wynn interprets this tendency as an obscuration of the “chiasmic relationship”, that she believes is grounding the experience of pregnancy: “Another obscuring of the chiasmic relationship is demonstrated by the prevalent use of the term ‘fetus’, a recent technical invention, that appears to have replaced the terms embryo and ‘with child’” (Wynn, 2002, p.7).

Second, the author advances the proposal to employ the term “pre-infant”, by relying on Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the issue of origin, especially in the late work *Le Visible et L’Invisible* (1964). As she notes, the prefix “pre” signifies “the originary, the primordial, the latent and the virtual.” “Pre” does not merely indicate the “before” in a linear temporal usage – which, in the case at stake, may have also a problematic nuance of teleological determinism⁵ – but it has a fundamental ontological meaning, as

³ Cisgender women are not the only pregnant subjects: non-binary people, transgender FTM, intersex individuals are equally included under the term ‘gestating subject’. Nonetheless, statistics acknowledge that the *majority* (albeit not the totality) of women implied in the gestational process consists of cisgender women. Furthermore, it is *commonly* (and problematically) assumed that cis women are the only subjects involved in the gestational process.

This does not imply that non-cisgender people do not deserve attention and visibility, but it simply shows that major issues related to pregnancy (also from a historical angle) come from the fact that gestating subjects are mostly (cisgender) women. Moreover, most part of the literature I am engaged with tends to identify uncritically *all* the gestating subjects as women. For the purpose of my argument, I think that these reasons could warrant the (imperfect) identification between gestating subjects and women.

⁴ The problem of epistemic authority is central in gestational experience. Following Fricker (2007) proposal of the concept of epistemic injustice, several contributions go in the direction to conceptualize this issue. See e.g.: Chadwick, 2019; Cohen Shabot, 2019; Freeman, 2015.

⁵ One of the issues with the use of the term “pre-infant” concerns some ethical outcomes: one could claim that arguing for the self/other distinction in gestational experience, and for the

it points to irreducibility and to foundation. The expression pre-infant thus “anticipates but does not necessitate the baby’s existence” (Wynn, 2002, p. 8).

2. Feminist, eidetic, and generative phenomenology

Welsh (2013) explores the ways in which phenomenologies of pregnancy revise or reject theories of the subject. After a brief introduction concerning the historical reception of Feminist Phenomenology, she claims that one of the main contributions of phenomenology of pregnancy has been to propose various revisions to theories of the subject, confronting the fact that our uterine life is not autonomous or discrete; as she puts it, “this is not merely a historical fact, but such primary experience remains also primary in adult life. Thus, any account of the human subject would have to reconsider its designation of human life as independent monad” (Welsh, 2013, p. 289). The exploration of pregnancy discloses the possibility of working from the subject’s lived experience, as well as revealing the problem of accounting for the subject as an exclusively “autonomous, rational, genderless, unified and discrete” agent (p. 291). According to Welsh (2013), the phenomenology of pregnancy and the embodiment tradition share the common goal of affirming that mind and body are not separate metaphysical entities, especially suggesting that embodiment is prior to all other subject characters. In overcoming the dualistic Cartesian-based tradition of the distinction between a mechanical body and a mind-consciousness as regulating principle of the whole subject, the experience of pregnancy provides both a theoretical path and a carnal experience that is neither universal nor generic. Instead, it is essential for the “coming into life” of every human being. As Welsh (2013) remarks, “Pregnancy is a clear manner in which to bring this

continuity between pre- and post-natal lives may entail a pro-life theoretical position. In the present analysis, I do not want to suggest that pre-infant is a *person*, or a *subject*, or merely an *organism*. I employ the term pre-infant because it perfectly fits with the general idea that everyone has been part of the gestational experience. Put another way, every human subject has been a pre-infant in the past (namely, in their *in utero* life).

The argument does not work in the opposite sense: I am not arguing that every pre-infant is already a *person* or a *subject* implied in the gestational pregnancy. My point is much more plain: a pre-infant – who would become eventually a child –, during the gestational experience is simply a human being who has specific kinds of relationship with the gestating subject.

truth to the forefront by noting that phenomenologies of pregnancy indicate the primacy of embodiment over a self-enclosed mental experience and also remind us that our first experiences are ones of inseparableness from our mother in utero” (p. 296). While the author suggests pregnancy may disclose the self as embodied and relational, it is under debate how to forward possible theoretical frameworks to achieve this goal.

Hence, it emerges that the preliminary theoretical issues of the phenomenology of pregnancy are the following. The first concerns every phenomenology engaged with the concreteness of the lived body and its uniqueness, in terms of race, gender, physical and psychical abilities, while maintaining the “generalizing” gaze of philosophy.⁶ The second issue is specific to the phenomenology of pregnancy, in that it is yet to demonstrate under what circumstances and theoretical criteria it is possible or profitable to analyze a (pregnant) experience which only some people could experience as maternal subject. In response to this concern, I propose a consideration of the other side of the experience of pregnancy – that is to say, the fetal perspective. Doing that requires a theoretical justification for using the phenomenological toolkit in inquiring what Steinbock (1995; 2017) defined “limit-phenomena”.⁷ The first issue may be a task of eidetic phenomenology, the second one may be tackled by the generative phenomenology. In general words, phenomenology could be described as:

A transcendental-philosophical investigation into the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity, or consciousness and being, characteristic of all

⁶ The theoretical *lacuna* that I will try to emend with this contribution concerns the lived experience of the gestational subject. Thus, the project of phenomenology of pregnancy moves precisely in the direction to overcome various “universalistic” positions for addressing explicitly the question “from whom” we came from. “Who”, and *no more* “where”. Cavarero explains this distinction, applying it to the epistemic distance between philosophy and narration: “Indeed, the absence of the mother is immediately perceptible in the question that is inevitable but is destined to remain unanswered: ‘who gave birth to this creature?’ With this question, the language of the existent reveals its symptomatic opposition to the language of philosophers. The latter, looking for the existent in general, asks ‘from where’ the newborn came, and is therefore required to confine its explanation to the alternative, as solemn as it is empty, between *being* and *nothingness*. But the question that is addressed to the unique, newborn being is precisely that which asks ‘from whom’ the newborn came.” (Cavarero, 2014, p. 1).

⁷ Limit-phenomena are preliminarily described as “‘phenomena’ that are in some respect given as not being able to be given.” This general definition may include “the unconscious, sleep, birth and death, temporality, the other person, other worlds, animal and plant life, the Earth, God.” (Steinbock, 2017, p. 29). I will analyze this concept at the end of the paragraph.

experience. It aims at disclosing the essential features of the intentional acts that take part in the constitution of the different senses of objectivity and being. In addition to these acts, it illuminates the passive aesthetic synthesis which establishes the most rudimentary, primordial objectivities on which acts can operate. (Heinämaa, 2003, p. 135).⁸

Heinämaa's definition raises the central issue of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, personal and philosophical perspectives. This issue, according to Sandford, becomes even more crucial for feminist phenomenology, due to its commitment to specific sexed bodily experiences. The question is how to build a "philosophical phenomenology"⁹ able to grasp the constitutive and eidetic features of the lived experience. The debate view different voices, among which Oksala's perspective (2006). She argues that philosophical phenomenology, when inquiring into issues related to gender, must be understood "as an investigation of the constitution of gendered experience, not as a conceptual analysis of language or a biological investigation of the body" (p. 238). From her perspective, the main goal is to understand how phenomenology, as a philosophical method of investigation, could account for the issue of gender.¹⁰ Against Fisher, who argues that the classical phenomenological eidetic or essential analysis is completely adequate in order to account for feminist themes and issues, Oksala (2006) states that:

⁸ I quote here Heinämaa's definition and not a Husserlian one for a specific methodological reason: Heinämaa's situated perspective – as a contemporary phenomenologist who employs Husserlian toolkit for addressing feminist-related (or we can simply say "critical" *lato sensu*) issues – helps to directly touch the central point of the singular/universal problem.

⁹ Sanford uses this term in order to highlight the distinction between the phenomenological method applied to empirical science and the phenomenology as a philosophical discipline.

¹⁰ The sex/gender distinction entailed an enduring debate in philosophy (for a good historical and theoretical reconstruction, see Mikkola, 2016). Classical texts are, for instance: De Lauretis, 1987; Butler, 1988; Haraway, 1991. In the phenomenological field, there are some contributions that may help to disentangle this thick controversial question: a remarkable essay by Heinämaa, where the author distinguishes two ideas of gender (substantial and criterial definitions) and proposes a historical and conceptual clarification, suggesting to employ the rich account of corporeality put forth by classical phenomenology. A similar theoretical strategy is advanced by Young (2002), who argues nonetheless for the theoretical profitability of the category 'gender'. A paper by Lindemann addresses the specific kind of relationship between the 'body' and the concept of gender. In particular, the author states that "Gender difference is a social form, the local realization of which is irreducibly broken through the inherent logic of the objectified or living body" (1996, p. 357).

It is not enough just to give up the phenomenological reduction to transcendental consciousness and the totalizing understanding of the epoché, however. We also have to give up the first-person perspective as the indispensable starting point of our analysis. In striving to understand the constitution of gendered experience it is more helpful to start by reading anthropological and sociological investigations, medical reports on intersexed children, or psychological studies of children's gender beliefs than by analyzing one's own normatively limited experiences. (p. 237).

This methodological problem becomes crucial in the experience of pregnancy since it is typically analyzed in medical terms or as a private and even idiosyncratic experience.¹¹ Sandford (2016) disagrees with Oksala's view, and emphasises the philosophical value of a transcendental enquiry aimed to grasp the "shared structure" of the sexed bodily experiences: "What is discovered in such a study is only philosophically interesting, and can only have transcendental significance, if it is more than subjectively valid, if the structures revealed are shared structures: that is, only if the reflecting subject is understood in its universal aspect – as a transcendental subject." (p. 54)

I start simply by asking how it is methodologically fruitful to connect the personal and universal, without losing the irreducibility of one's lived experience nor falling into coarse approximations. I suggest that the solution to this never-ending riddle has been widely debated with reference to one philosopher in particular, and that it has not received enough attention from Feminist Phenomenology: I am referring to the notion of the *Eidetik* in Husserl's thought, especially in *Ideas I*.

¹¹ While Oksala points out that phenomenological reduction is to be given up, as well as the "totalizing understanding of epoché", feminist scholars argue for the critical and groundbreaking force of these theoretical strategies. Sandford, for instance, argues that "common experiences in pregnancy only become a philosophical phenomenology of pregnancy after a process of reflection, a reflection that must be worked through to achieve the status of a new paradigm for articulating bodily experience" (Sandford, 2016, p. 56). She invokes the necessity to talk about the experience in the first person, but the first person implicated here is not the empirical subject. In engaging with Young's canonical paper on feminist reflections about pregnancy, Sandford maintains that the use of second-hand reports from diary entries, and literature that complement it, is problematic. Moreover, she disagrees with the methodological account of Young (1984), in that it simply confirms the theoretical postulate of the Split Subjectivity, (Sandford, 2016, p. 55) as well as her emphasis on the privateness of the experience, which resonates with Wynn's criticism of Duden's account.

I argue it is necessary to maintain the essential character of self's experiential richness, at least for two reasons: firstly, feminist phenomenology has highly underrated Husserlian essentialism, because of the hesitation (if not embarrassment) in defending essentialist positions.¹² This worry has motivated the most common – biased – interpretations of Husserl's phenomenology as an abstract, solipsist and disembodied philosophy, which may have prevented feminist scholars to directly engage with his writings.

Secondly, eidetic phenomenology may offer a profitable solution for feminist doubts in building philosophical theories of female embodiment: the Husserlian rich definition of essence opens up a fruitful space for finally reconnecting the demands of concrete existences of human being and the necessity to build a philosophical framework, which is profoundly epistemologically different from the sociological use of the phenomenological method. The eidetic analysis is an attempt to account for both levels of one's subjective experience (namely individual, singular and, in some sort, private), and the core experiential features without which this particular kind of experience ceases to be as such and becomes something *other*. So, in this framework, how can we engage with the intrauterine existence? In other words, does the immanent lived experience of pregnancy have an eidetic structure, necessarily shared across every singular gestational experience?

Husserl devoted the first part of the first volume of *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* to the discussion of the essence and eidetic cognition. Nonetheless, *eidos* (or essence or material *a priori*) is the central notion of Husserlian phenomenology, in particular in the construction of the so-called “static method”. In the first volume of *Ideas I*, Husserl states that individual existence is contingent: “It is thus; in respect of its essence it could be otherwise” (Husserl, 1982, p. 7). The kind of contingency here presented is called by Husserl “factualness”, and it is correlative to “a necessity which does not signify the mere de facto existence of an obtaining rule of coordination among spatiotemporal matters of fact but rather has the character of eidetic necessity and with this a relation to eidetic universality”

¹² For the feminist debate on essentialism, see e.g. Fuss, 1989; Schor, 1989; Witt, 1995, 2011; Stone, 2004; Malabou, 2009. For an eidetic analysis in a Husserlian sense, see Salamon, 2018.

(Husserl, 1982, p. 7). Arguing that every matter of fact, in respect of its own essence, could also be otherwise, means that anything contingent has an Eidos that could be focussed on, according to the phenomenological research of typical features in any token of the experienced object.

Therefore, every individual is more than an individual object as such, since it has its own specific character, as well as “its stock of essential predicables which must belong to it” (as “an existent such as it is in itself”)” (Husserl, 1982, p. 7). The eidos of anything is not a separate universal, like an ontological object abstracted from the factualness of the thing, but instead “it is nothing but a bond or constraint on possible variations of the thing’s contents, beyond the limits of which that thing ceases to exist or to be a “good” instance of that eidos.” (De Monticelli, 2019, p. 13). The principle of eidetic is groundbreaking in the analysis of the experience of pregnancy, since “[in] the providing empirical reality with intrinsic bounds or limits that anything of a given sort – a mountain, a piece of music, a human being, a human civilization – must comply with or risk ceasing to exist.” (De Monticelli, 2019, p. 13).

If medicine simply accounts for the level of objective embodiment, other kinds of narratives – anthropology, psychology, sociology – tend to present specific and defined cases of pregnancies, giving an empirical but universalistic definition. Metaphysics and ontology of pregnancy (see e.g. Kingma, 2018), on the other hand, seem to lack a direct engagement with the concrete lived experience. Eidetic phenomenology represents a third way to define the self as a thread of invariance, namely a structural invariance within variance (Fisher & Embree 2000).¹³

¹³ “Feminist thought has always had to contend, though not always doing so explicitly, with such tensions: the emphasis on specificity and the personal on the one hand—the uniqueness of women’s experience that serves as the impetus, as we have seen, for so many feminist critiques and contributions—while at the same time endeavoring to articulate a ‘women’s situation,’ the shared and generalized situation or structure of women’s place, role, and oppression in society and culture. Clearly, this latter has implications not only for feminist theory, but also has more general political implications, relating to the articulation and forging of sisterhood and solidarity. Phenomenology displays the same sort of dialectic, although in phenomenological terms it is not necessarily represented as a particularly problematic tension, but rather as the particular complexity and contingency of a philosophy of subjectivity—attempting to articulate a generalized account of the structures of subjectivity from the perspective of individual subjectivity and oneness; investigating the essence of subjectivity while also elaborating the immediacy,

While Eidetic phenomenology may offer a path for re-thinking the personal/universal issue, Genetic method represents a necessary integration for the specific pre-infant's perspective.¹⁴

According to Smith (2016, p. 36), contemporary scholars often invoke the necessity of complementing the static phenomenological tradition with the genetic perspective. He states that “every birth must be preceded by something which generates it, namely sexual intercourse (at least this was so prior to in vitro fertilization), and then intrauterine life in the pregnant body of the mother.” (p. 36). This move shifts from an egological perspective (the dream of the auto-generation of the transcendental ego) to that of an intersubjective horizon, where one cannot understand by themselves the own birth, but they have necessarily to include a maternal subject, a paternal organism, as well as a more general *milieu* where their origin has its roots. This emphasis on the originally relational and embodied characters of the self does not fully avoid the question concerning how is it possible to account for an experience which one cannot reach through recollection. The answer lies on two levels: epistemologically, I simply suggest extending Steinbock's proposal of generative phenomenology and his concepts of Limit-phenomena; phenomenologically, I follow Heinämaa's thesis (2014) that even if some things are beyond one's own recollection, that does not mean that they were not taking place.

Steinbock's focus on generative phenomenology could provide a further complementary theoretical grounding. In discussing the status of phenomena, he introduces the notion of “limit-phenomena”, to account for “those matters that are on the edge of accessibility in a phenomenological approach to experience” (Steinbock, 2017, p. 29). In suggesting a basic framework for discussing limit-phenomena, Steinbock (2017) states that they are not arbitrary, “which is to say, not just anything can become a limit-phenomenon” (p. 29). He adds that, “They are nevertheless relative

particularity, and intensity of *my* experience as a subject. The unique subject-generalized. Such a general account need not be equivalent to the absolutist sense of generic, but is understandable rather as the thread of invariance; not one model fits all, but structural invariance *within* variance, that which gives shape and coherence to the variance.” (Fisher and Embree, 2000, pp. 28-29).

¹⁴ Husserl distinguishes static and genetic methods in Manuscript B III 10, translated and published in Italian in the volume Husserl, E. (2013). *Metodo fenomenologico statico e genetico*, ed. M. Vergani (Ed.), Il Saggiatore. See also Manuscript A V 3, Schluchsee, 1933, it. trans. “Fenomenologia statica e genetica. Il mondo familiare e la comprensione degli estranei. La comprensione degli animali”.

determinations, relative to a particular methodological approach. Thus, there will be methodological reasons and justifications for certain phenomena becoming limit-phenomena, and others not being able to have this status at all” (p. 35). Far from being marginal or secondary issues in phenomenology, this particular kind of quasi-phenomena are “relatively necessary”, and marked by a typical form of liminality.¹⁵

This analysis of pregnancy opens up to a re-framing of the philosophical reading of birth, that, far from being understandable within the “dominant recollection-paradigm” (Heinämaa, 2014) as an “unattainable limit”, is conceptualized as “a specific type of lived bodily process that is evidenced to us by one single person – our mother – who serves paradoxically as its location, its witness, and its executor (agent)” (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 47). According to Steinbock (2017):

If phenomenological givenness is restricted to the confines of my self-temporalization, the process of being born into a homeworld is admittedly beyond my immediate experience, since in this case my birth and death would be constitutively at the limits of that individual experience. But at least my own birth can be experienced by me another way, generatively, through what Husserl calls my “home companions” or “homecomrades” (*Heimgenossen*), for example, my mother, father, guardian, siblings, neighbours. Moreover, since the “home” is really what is at issue here as a socio-historical constellation, generatively speaking, one’s own death can be experienced generatively, and become a transcendental feature, because it is integrated into the very generation of meaning of our world. From a generative phenomenological perspective, it no longer “makes sense” to restrict the responsibility of sense-constitution merely to the individual (actively or passively). For example, when I have a child, “I” or even “We” do not merely constitute this child as son or daughter; this child generatively constitutes me as “father” – a dimension of constitution to which a genetic phenomenology is essentially blind. The latter cannot account for phenomenological ancestors or successors. (pp. 46- 47).

Childbirth does not mark the first emergence-existence of the self, whose intra-uterine life is already constituted by the primary sense of self that

¹⁵ It is quite interesting to point out that Husserl quotes in passing the problem of pregnancy precisely in the Manuscripts dedicated to the discussion of “marginal” or “peripheral” problems. This idea of “liminality” seems to concern both the “act” of birth and the very process of pregnancy.

Husserl explored, focusing in particular on the kind of relationship between gestating subject and pre-infant. In a brief footnote in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie. Analysen des Unbewusstseins und der Instinkte. Metaphysik. Späte Ethik. Texte aus dem Nachlass* (1908-1937), Husserl argues that:

The child inside the womb, with its sensory fields in even transformation. The child inside the mother. Do we not here have to do with an intermingling of primordialities, that does not depend on empathy? Does the mother amongst her own, inner sensory fields [...] also have those of the child, its sensibility of movement, its kinaesthesia? But if that is not the case, then what kind of community is it? How does the mother suffer when the child feels unwell? (Husserl, 2013, p. 27, quot. In Smith, 2016, p. 33).¹⁶

The questions posed here raise at least two fundamental lines of interrogation. First, by addressing the essential structure of the relationship between gestating subject and pre-infant, Husserl implicitly acknowledges that pregnancy entails a plurality of different subjects (“what kind of community is?”). Secondly, he engages with the boundaries of one’s “sensibility of movements”, asking whether the gestating subject has the same kinaesthesia as the fetal self. As Husserl notes in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*:

The originary child – in what sense is it like an “I,” directed towards its first sensory data like an early ego-pole, what does its “instinctive” habituality consist of? The child in the womb already has kinaesthesia and kinaesthetically moves its “things” – already a primordiality at an originary level developing itself. [...] The infant, the newly born. [...] It is already an experiencing I at a higher level, it already has its acquisition of experience from its existence in the mother’s womb, it already has its perceptions with perceptual horizons. Besides this there are also new kinds of data, saliences in the sensory fields, new acts, new acquisitions in the substratum, which is already pre-acquisition, it is already an I of higher habitualities, but without

¹⁶ “Das Kind in der Mutter. Haben wir (da) nicht ein Ineinander der Primordialitäten, das nicht auf Einfühlung beruht? Hat die Mutter unter ihren inneren Sinnesfeldern – die keine objektivierende Ausgestaltung erfahren vermöge ihrer glatten Wandelbarkeit – auch die des Kindes, seine Bewegungsempfindlichkeiten, seine Kin(ästhesen)? Wenn aber nicht, was ist dar für eine Gemeinschaft? Wie leidet die Mutter, wenn das Kind sich nicht wohl fühlt?”, Husserl, 2014, p. 27.

self-reflection, without developed temporality, without recollections at its disposition, streaming presence with retention and protention. (Husserl, 2013, quot. In Smith, 2016, p. 35).

According to Husserl's reflections, one's intrauterine life has already some essential characters of the born self; in particular, the pre-infant has kinaesthetic movements, acquires a form of experience through the maternal body, and is already within a specific perceptual horizon. Moreover, as I will show in the next section, the affective aspect of pregnancy – as a twofold experience which shapes, at least, two different selves – shows the self's essentially embodied origin along with some essential structures. It emerges that the pre-infant has a body schema which is generated and reinforced through the continuous interaction with the maternal one, which for its part is continuously modified and re-adjusted; furthermore, the gestating subject experiences the presence of another organism within own body as a form of incorporation, moving across a spectrum of alienation/participation affects where touch plays a fundamental role.

3. Maternal and fetal bodies

3.1. Affective body schemas

From the maternal perspective, the body “is no longer the simple extension of her own activity” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 78). As Welsh (2015) points out, “For each woman, this sense of alienation is naturally different given the context of her pregnancy, her physiology, and her psychical state; however, it is similar in all women given the presence of this alien being.” (p. 53). The presence of a human organism inside one's bodily boundaries is the first essential structure of pregnancy.¹⁷ Both as method and philosophical

¹⁷ I mean the cases in which corporeal feelings of pregnancy are consistent with the actual presence of a fetus. Hysterical or fake pregnancies show the possibility of having a corporeal experience of pregnancy, without biological evidence. Mental factors may cause physical changes in the case of “fake” or “hysterical” pregnancies. Technically called “pseudocycosis” (e.g. Brown, Barglow, 1971; Cohen, 1982; Small, 1986) – this phenomenon occurs when a person has several symptoms commonly linked to pregnancy (e.g. weight gain, nausea, altered hormones levels, and backache), but no presence of an actual fetus. Explanations of pseudocycosis converge on an essential correlation between a woman's mind and “her-other” bodies. In pseudocycosis – labelled as “psychosomatic” disturbance –, a woman experiences many of the signs of pregnancy, since

tradition, phenomenology offers rich accounts of corporeality. One of the most relevant for the present analysis is the broadly debated distinction between body image and body schema.¹⁸ A correlation could be drawn between the body image, as related to the personal level, and the body schema, as the pre-personal, anonymous, and general bodily existence. Among the criteria that Gallagher (1986) proposes to distinguish body schema and body image, one is especially crucial for my account – namely, the fact that a body schema is not “something entirely in it-self” (Gallagher, p. 552). Unlike the body image, in which the body is seen and felt like something “distinct for the environment”, the body in its body schema, “most genuinely lives as a body-environment” (Gallagher, p. 552). In arguing that the pre-infant has a corporeal style, it is worth highlighting the impossible functional separation from their environment, which is composed of the placenta and the umbilical cord, parts of the living body of the gestating subject that provides them with nurture, comfort, protection. Merleau-Ponty (1995) stresses the co-constitution between body and environment, arguing that, “Le corps est non seulement chose, mais rapport à un *Umwelt*. [...] Le corps humain, donc, est corps qui se meut et cela veut dire corps qui perçoit – C’est là un des sens du ‘schéma corporel’ humain” (p. 270).

This opens up the conceptualization that Lymer offers in her insightful analysis of the maternal-fetal bond. She proposes to apply Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of child development from one’s *in utero* life, stressing the relevance of the maternal body schema in development (Lymer, 2011, p. 127). In

she feels pregnant (the phantom foetus is perceived as actual), and her body has a mimetic attitude with her desires/fears.

What happens, in this case, is similar to that of other disturbances, such as phantom limbs: people have a lucid experience of having a part of the body, or some organism in the body, which is absent on a physical level. These cases have a strong heuristic power, in that they allow us to introduce the first essential feature: pregnancy is both a corporeal and physiological experience.

¹⁸ In his crucial 1986 paper “Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification” Gallagher explains that on the pre-reflective level, one’s body is not present in an explicit way to consciousness. The transparency of body persists until the implicit relationship between my material body and my motor tasks break down, as happens with pain, discomfort or fatigue. He adds: “However, when the body is ‘in tune’ with the environment, when events are smoothly ordered, when the subject is engaged in a task that holds the attention of consciousness, then the body is anonymously performing with its environment on a behavioural level that escapes consciousness.” (Gallagher, 1986, p. 549). The body schema is thus defined as “the style that organizes the body as it functions in communion with its environment” (Gallagher, 1986, p. 550).

describing the development of the child, Merleau-Ponty states that, “The first stage is the existence of a kind of pre-communication, an anonymous collectivity with differentiation, a kind of group existence. The second stage is the objectification of one’s body, segregation, distinction between individuals.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 248). According to his theory, the newborn has a syncretic life, in which there is no difference between self and the other. The original distinction appears only when the child acquires body ownership, that is to say, the sense of taking possession of their body as their own and to recognize their movements as their own. The access to one’s own body – as bodily ownership – is then the first form of a subjectivity that, as Lymer points out, “is thus embodied” (Lymer, 2011, p. 128). The passage from the state of “anonymous collectivity”, syncretic, and undifferentiated life to the self-objectification occurs gradually through the constitution of the body schema: “The body schema emerges, for Merleau-Ponty, as the child begins to structure her behavior into habituated patterns of movements and adjustments that allow her to maintain homeostatic equilibrium within her world.” (Lymer, 2011, p. 128).¹⁹ Lymer acknowledges that, despite the criticisms related to the ocular-centrism in Merleau-Ponty’s account of self-development, the concept of body schema, as understood in the influential Gallagher proposal, is fruitful, especially because it turns out to be consistent with recent empirical studies about fetal development: “Thus, very early foetal movement is regulated or ‘practiced’ in a manner which is not initially or foetal origin. Rather, the habituated movement patterns of the mother are underpinning, and thus structuring and regulating these early movements by literally repeatedly moving the foetus in certain ways by her body moving in certain ways.” (Lymer, 2011, p. 137). What is especially interesting about this originally embodied and relational selfhood is that fetal movements are shaped and modelled around the gestating subject’s particular movement patterns. Lymer points out that the fetal schema structuration emerges as “an adaptive style of movement” (p. 139) with the gestating subject. This kind of pre-communication and reciprocity is especially important for the neurological development of the pre-infant. From the 22nd week onward, fetal movements become more

¹⁹ Developmental psychology focuses extensively on the role of neonatal imitation in shaping the self: see e.g. Meltzoff, A., & Moore, K. M., (1977) and Moll, M. & Meltzoff, A. N. (2010).

deliberate, showing a form of pre-reflective consciousness in engaging with their environment – the maternal lived body:

It is relevant that foetal ECG readings begin concurrently at around 22 weeks' gestation, at about the same time as the connection between the spinal cord and the thalamus completes. Following very closely afterwards, at 24-26 weeks thalamocortical connections will have begun to grow into cortex. Thus, we can see the 'movement influences morphology' paradigm quite literally acting out developmentally and this whole process both requires the presence of, and is facilitated through, the maternal body. (Lymer, 2011, p. 139).

The foetal body schema, whose development is rhythmic with the maternal schema, moulds the morphological constitution of the pre-infant. These sub-personal constitutions are under the conscious and reflective awareness, rather they share an anonymous horizon; both the foetal motor development schema and the motor adjustment of the gestating subject are neither deliberate nor rational.

Lymer's phenomenological proposal has at least one massive outcome: the implication of having one's body schema form *in utero* points to the fact that foetal and maternal motor structures are relational and intersubjective from the very emergence (Lymer, 2016, p. 79). Pushing further the argument, it means also that the subjects involved in the gestational process (every human being – at least until ectogenesis becomes the exclusive or primary means of reproduction) are embodied and relational from the very origin of their lives.

3.2. A unique kind of affective incorporation

The process of pregnancy has several effects on the gestating subject's body schema, bodily self-perception and proprioception, as well as her body image. Paraphrasing Guenther's pertinent statement that "the child makes the woman a mother, even as the woman 'makes' the child within her own body" (Guenther, 2006, p. 99), I would argue that pre-infant makes the woman a gestating subject; more specifically, I propose to frame gestating feelings in the context of the "affective incorporation", asking whether is possible to account for the experience of pregnancy as a unique kind of incorporation.

Broadly debated both in phenomenology and cognitive science, the incorporation of external objects and the acquisition of new bodily habits could be briefly explained as follows: artefacts and objects that we manipulate in our everyday life, as well as gestures and movements that we regularly perform, are fully integrated as part of our body schema. Generally defined as the potentiality and the capacity of the *Leib* to take and to integrate something else into itself, I follow Colombetti (2014, 2016) in focusing on the affective quality of phenomena of habit-incorporation and object-incorporation.

These phenomena respond in an affective way to external stimuli, and the success of the incorporation is partially determined by the affective predisposition of the subjects.²⁰ In the category of “new bodily habits”, it is possible to count all the facial expressions and gestures acquired through repetition, and dependent on one’s cultural context and environment. These bodily habits, regular and flexible, are performed “with spontaneity and lack of antecedent reflection” (Colombetti, 2016, p. 237). Objects that become “quasi-transparent” (e.g. shoes for hikers) or that are experienced “as that through which the musician can let herself ‘go through’ a certain affective process” (e.g. the instrument for the musician) are exemplary cases of object-incorporation.

Otherwise, the concept of incorporation has been also used in accounting for the phenomena of social understanding. For example, Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009), in criticizing the representationalist view of social cognition, develop the idea of “mutual incorporation”, as the process where lived bodies of subjects extend and constitute a common inter-corporeality.

When we come to gestational incorporation, both the ideas of mutuality and affectivity have specific roles. Regarding the former, it is worth highlighting that the reciprocity in the maternal-fetal encounter is an asymmetrical kind of relationship. In the case of the latter, it has been widely

²⁰ As Colombetti (2016) explains, “Incorporating an affective style in the sense just specified is, importantly, not only a matter of acquiring a way of performing a gesture but also of undergoing an affective experience while doing so. Indeed, that is what warrants talking of an affective style in the first place. [...] The point of these considerations is that affective habit- incorporation is not just a matter of taking into the body a certain way of outwardly expressing some emotion (for example), but also a matter of inwardly acquiring a bodily affective way of feeling. The acquisition of an affective style affects both how our body appears to others and how it is experienced in the first person.” (p. 237).

acknowledged that affectivity massively influences the integration of “external” parts within one’s body schema. Lymer seems to agree with the affective quality of the object-incorporation, employing the analysis by Cole and Montenero of the bodily response of patients confined to a wheelchair. She argues on the basis of the wellbeing of patients, that “the wheelchair, as well as the body, must become phenomenologically absent” (Cole and Montenero, quot. In Lymer, 2016, p. 77). The experience requires and entails an “affective integration”, as it emerges from the fact that “patients who struggle to incorporate their chairs into their body schema are those most likely to experience their condition as a frustrating disability” (Lymer, 2016, p. 78). From this case, Lymer can argue that affectivity has a key role in alternately improving or disrupting the functionality of corporeal schema. She quotes, for example, the case of a mother suffering from forms of body schematic disease after the death of her two-year-old son: “Just towards the end of meal times each night, around the time when, for the past two years, she had sat and nursed her child until he fell asleep, her arms would physically ache from his absence.” (Lymer, 2016, p. 77).

This painful feeling of the mother could be seen as the counterpart of the incorporation of objects and gestures in one’s corporeal schema; the sense of loss affects her bodily experience as if she lost a part of her body. The case of the mother could raise this interesting question: is it possible to incorporate another subject? Focusing on the gestational process, I will propose to call the unique kind of process that pregnancy entails “quasi-subject incorporation”. The gestating subject anonymously incorporates the presence of the pre-infant within her body boundaries and, more crucially, in her corporeal “I can” – namely in her *Leib*. This actual presence could be experienced across a spectrum of affects, from the complete participation of the gestational process to a total negation and even denial of carrying another human being in herself. This spectrum of affects could be defined through the classical Beauvoirian (1949) and Youngian (1984) “alienation/participation” polarity, that is constitutively related to the ways in which the gestating subject experiences her own lived body, as well as her emotional and psychological condition. In particular, the gestating subject feels in a more perspicuous way the existence (and the resistance) of her body, that ceases to be a transparent medium in the accomplishment of her motor goals. In her milestone paper “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and alienation”, Young returns to Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the awareness

of one's body happens when the motor spontaneity and the facility in achieving bodily tasks break down. This feeling, according to the Youngian lecture, "occurs only or primarily when my instrumental relation to the world breaks down" (p. 50). During pregnancy, the gestating subject experiences a form of alienation and extraneity from her body.

Young (2005) makes it clear that, during pregnancy, "I do not feel myself alienated from [my body]" (p. 63), as in a pathological framework. In certain pathological cases, something in the body does not move according to one's expectations: one can no longer achieve the movements that were possible for the pre-pathological self. Similarly, the gestating subject witnesses a partial impediment of her motor possibilities, but also a motor surplus originating from movement over which she has no agency, but merely ownership:

Pregnancy, I argue, reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves and the body attends positively to itself at the same time that it enacts its projects. [...] Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body. (Young, 2005, p. 54).

Pugliese (2016, p. 73) describes the feeling of having "a foreign body in one's own body" through the Husserlian distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, especially developed in *Ideas II*:

The foetus may be a material *Körper* but once it begins to move of its own accord, it is unmistakably a *Leib*. The status of the foetus as *Leib* means that it cannot be regarded as altogether external to the mother in the manner of a merely transcendent thing. The body of the foetus, perceived as *Leib*, cannot be completely objectified. (Pugliese, 2016, p. 73).

The impossibility for the gestating subject to perceive the foetus as if it were only an object – that is to say, to perceive it merely as a *Körper* – is given by the free movements of the pre-infant, which can respond to movements, feelings, physiological changes, and psychological life of the maternal subject.²¹

²¹ Which kind of modality allows the emerging intersubjective field of the pre-infant and gestating subject? Husserl (2014) suggests in passing that the relationship is not based on empathy (*Einfühlung*): "Do we not here have to do with an intermingling of primordialities, that does not depend on empathy?".

Affectivity plays a fundamental role in modulating the “success” or “failure” of incorporation. Nonetheless, concepts as “lucidity” do not make sense in gestational case, in that it is physiological possible (and non-pathological) to experience the otherness of fetal quasi-subject. Object-incorporation is never a unidirectional process: as the (imperfect) analogy with limbic prosthesis shows, experiences of incorporating the gestated self are shaped by the incorporated one even in more radical ways, due to the human nature of the fetus.

3.3. Touch

For the purpose of my argument, I am particularly committed to the link between movement and touch: what kind of touching-touched is implied in the gestational relationship? Does the gestating subject touch herself or a part of her body or again another self? And how are the movements of the pre-infant related to the maternal touch?

In a 2014 paper, Heinämaa aims to discuss two fundamental ideas in the field of the phenomenology of pregnancy, criticizing both the dominant arguments in feminist thinking – the idea of a dyad or a motherhood continuum – and the phenomenological assumption that human birth represents an *unattainable* limit. Against the first kind of arguments, whose central idea is that organic birth establishes the original separation between the self and the other, Heinämaa (2014) advocates for an antenatal, intersubjective relationship between “two separate sub-systems”. In doing so, she argues that pregnancy involves a unique self-other divide and not forms of “non-distinction” or self-other fusion (p. 43). Maternal subject and pre-infant are two “separate subsystems”. They share an essentially asymmetrical relationship, where the gestating subject is a self and the pre-infant is a potential one – a self who may or may not have an experience of the world as an individual and a person. Her central claims are that “a primitive self-other relation of mutual awareness and reciprocal gesturing is established prior to the birth of the infant and that the newborn baby is not an egoless tabula rasa for us but has a sensory-motor identity and a potential for communication.” (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 44). Self/other distinction is maintained: the experience of pregnancy establishes it through fetal movements and touch-sensations. If vision is not very important, taste and smell (of the amniotic fluid) are

distinctly present in the life of the pre-infant (Bornemark, 2016, p. 255). However, the original experience of the interpersonal relations between the pre-infant and the gestating subject is held in the multi-layered processes of motions, which primarily concerns the sense of touch. In the present analysis, I will focus exclusively on touch carried “voluntary” by the maternal subject; nonetheless, most of the touches that provoke responses by the pre-infant are unconscious: hormones, digestion, involuntary muscular movements play a key role in the motor process and self-constitution of both selves.

According to Bornemark, there are at least three kinds of motion: “motions that include a change of position, pulsating motions, and smaller motions of touch” (Bornemark, 2016, p. 255). If the first two are mostly kinaesthetic, the third constitutes an interplay between different parts: “The third kind of motion includes the difference between touching oneself and touching the womb or placenta. Even if there is no face-to-face meeting with another person, this is a central experience in order for alterity to be developed later on.” (Bornemark, 2016, p. 255). In the intra-uterine experience, the role of touch is crucial in the constitution of gestating and fetal selves. More specifically, touch exemplifies the liminal kind of relationship between gestating subject and fetus – always in-between subject and object, activity and passivity, the fetal/maternal relationship is constituted by reciprocal and rhythmically-adjusted movements. Furthermore, touch represents the first medium of interaction between fetal self and maternal self, and it involves not only the development of the fetus but also the self-awareness of gestating subject. The denial of pregnancy²² may be related to the impossibility to acknowledge the presence and movements of the pre-infant;²³ for example, cases of traumatic experiences may prevent the woman from feeling herself pregnant. In this case, I argue that the mechanism is similar to the case offered in Lymer’s analysis – trauma prevents the being-touched feeling that pregnancy entails for the gestating subject. Before directly addressing this issue, I shall briefly consider the Husserlian account of touch in *Ideas II*.

In §36 and §37 of the *Second Volume of Ideas Pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, Husserl focuses on

²² On the condition called pregnancy denial, see e.g.: Jenkins et al. 2011.

²³ “Reinterpretation of physical changes allow sustained unconscious and thus conflict even in the presence of fetal movements and while body weight and abdominal girth are increasing” (Rott, 2016).

the concept of Sensings (*Empfindnisse*) and offers an articulation of the relationship between tactile and visive realms. Notoriously, in these writings, the author addresses the issue of corporeality from several angles, opening up a radical re-framing of the simplistic distinction between body and mind. The more fine-grained analysis of body that is offered here could be applied to the unique case of pregnancy, in which two (or more) different bodies are in a particular condition of asymmetry, overlapping, and co-constitution – not only at a biological level but also at a phenomenological one.

Within the Husserlian analysis, the body turns out to be “the perceptual organ of the experiencing subject” (Husserl, 1989, p. 152); the constitution of this corporeality may be investigated from the case where the spatially experienced body is the Corporeal body itself. The body is so perceived from outside – with, of course, all the limits and the structural rules that pertain to the process of visual perception – and some part of that may be perceived by touch but cannot be seen:

Touching my left hand, I have touch-appearances, that is to say, I do not just sense, but I perceive and have appearances of a soft, smooth hand, with such a form. The indicational sensations of movement and the representational sensations of touch, which are Objectified as features of the thing ‘left hand’, belong in fact to my right hand. But when I touch the left hand I also find in it, too, series of touch-sensations, which are ‘localized’ in it, though these are not constitutive of properties (such as roughness or smoothness of the hand, of this physical thing). (Husserl, 1989, p. 152).

Speaking of the physical thing (the left hand) means abstracting from the sensations entailed in the act of touching; but including them in the reflection is not merely the additive result of the physical thing plus the sensations: “Then it is not that the physical thing is now richer, but instead it becomes Body, it senses.” (Husserl, 1989, p. 152). This case shows that touch between two parts of one’s body entails a doubling of the sensations in the two parts of the body engaged in the process. In Husserl’s words, “If this happens by means of some other part of one’s Body, then the sensation is doubled in the two parts of the Body, since each is then precisely for the other an external thing that is touching and acting upon it, and each is at the same time Body” (Husserl, 1989, p. 153). Hence the body is originally constituted as a physical thing with an extension, exhibiting in perception some real properties, such as color, smoothness, hardness, and so on; on the other hand, body senses “on it and in it”, it has “specifically bodily

occurrence” that Husserl defines *Empfindnisse* and that are missing in the mere physical thing (Husserl, 1989, p. 153). These localized sensations are defined as “effect-properties”: they arise when the Body is touched, pressed, etc., where it is touching and at the time it is touched; “only under certain circumstances do they still endure after the touching takes place” (Husserl, 1989, p. 154). The where and the when of touching entail particular kind of Sensings: even two objects can touch each other, but the touching of the body provides typical sensations “on it or in it”. In the example of one hand touching the other, we witness the unfolding of two sensations, where “each is apprehendable or experienceable in double way” (Husserl, 1989, p. 154).²⁴ In discussing the profitability of using Husserlian theoretical approach in the feminist debate, Al-Saji argues for the centrality of concepts of *Leib* and Sensing for re-framing classical discussed dichotomies such as subject/object and activity/passivity.

Al-Saji (2010) reads the emphasis of touch as an emphasis of affectivity, arguing that “through touch, body and world are given in necessary proximity and reciprocity. It is due to this intimacy of touch and because the entire body is a touch surface, continuously in contact with itself and its surroundings, that touch has primacy for Husserl” (p. 19). This opens up the possibility of thinking fetal-maternal encounters through the triad movement-touch-affect. As already shown, affectivity actively shapes, at the body schema level, both fetal development and maternal experience of pregnancy. That means that one’s original bodily self (both in temporal and in correlative senses) is moulded through mutual and inter-related movements, among which maternal touch is particularly relevant. Engaging with epigenetic studies gives further confirmation of this intuition; the first sense to emerge in child’s development is touch, around eight weeks of gestation (Hooker, 1952; Humphrey & Hooker, 1959; Piontelli et al. 1997). From there, “The developing fetus is constantly touched by its environment, the placenta, the umbilical cord, amniotic fluid, and the uterine surface and touches its body passively or actively as self-initiated movements develop.” (Marx & Nagy, 2017, p. 83). From 26 weeks the pre-infant increased movement rates, and develops a form of body schema (Lymer, 2011; Lymer, 2016): “Hand-to-face interaction appears early on

²⁴ See the notion of “inter-affectivity” and its link to intercorporeality as described by Thomas Fuchs (Fuchs, 2016).

(Myowa-Yamakoshi & Takeshita, 2006) and the aim of such movements are becoming goal-oriented (Trevvarthen, 1985), that is intentionally initiated by 22 weeks of gestation (Zoia et al. 2007).” (Marx & Nagy, 2017, p. 83). Early on, touching becomes the means of exploring themselves and their surroundings: the pre-infant touches themselves, but they also touch/are touched by all the elements that constitute their environment. Placenta, umbilical cord, amniotic fluid, and uterine surface are not only the place of their first explorations, their growth and nurturing – there is also the role of the maternal body. Since the (fetal) body is not only *Körper*, but also *Leib*, the gestating subject may respond to fetal movements by re-adjusting her actual bodily position, or by simply acknowledging the presence of another self within her bodily boundaries in emotionally composite and differentiated ways. Even though a large body of research shows empirical evidence of the importance of touch to healthy development and growth of child – especially in cases such as premature neonates, for whom in many countries the “kangaroo care” is a standard practice (Feldman & Eidelman, 2003) – little attention has been paid to gestational touch. Nonetheless, in a 2017 study, Marx and Nagy argue that:

The mother is a special source of somatosensory stimulation during fetal development. It is plausible to assume that mothers’ touch of the abdomen during pregnancy affects the fetus directly via external tactile stimulation exerted by the pressure of the hands via the abdomen and via internal maternal muscle and accompanying body movements. Mothers automatically engage in tactile stimulation of their abdomen, ‘rubbing their bellies’ in order to feel, to calm, to stimulate, or to interact with the fetus. This abdominal stimulation exerts a slight pressure, and as a result, the abdomen, including the uterine environment move and thus, passively stimulate and touch the fetus. (Marx & Nagy, 2017, p. 84).

In their research, it has been observed that fetuses increased their movements (with arm, mouth and head movements) when the maternal subject touched the abdomen compared when she did nothing in a control condition. Maternal touch, therefore, triggers fetal responses that actively help them to develop their sense of spatiality. Touch, in this condition, helps to reinforce the intertwined and mutual distinction between maternal subject and fetal one.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I put forth a theoretical framework for accounting for the gestational experience through Eidetic and Generative Phenomenology, and I offered a new account of the essential structures of fetal-maternal encounters in terms of incorporation, affective body schema, and reciprocal touch.

Within the methodological section (§1), I proposed to employ phenomenological concepts that, in Feminist Phenomenology debate, are – except for a few sporadic exceptions – absent. In doing so, I suggested a more radical way to overcome the singular/universal issue, by formulating a further view in the feminist debate on essentialism. In this part, I indicated a theoretical framework that enables to conceptualize the gestational experience as personal *and* universal: in every particular expression, the essential structures emerge as the set of limits and constraints that defines the *identity* of pregnancy itself. In this vein, I invoke the necessity to push further the argument, in order to sketch an eidetic of pregnancy pointing to authentic inclusivity of the variety of gestational experiences.

Phenomenological – eidetic, feminist, and generative – intertwined gazes show that both gestating subject and pre-infant have different levels on mutual interactions and that these complex experiences characterize the gestational process on a bodily level. Acknowledging the bare fact that every subject has been a pre-infant allows also a deeper comprehension of the relevance of the experience of pregnancy on social, ethical, moral, cultural, political, and juridical levels.

In the theoretical section (§2), I applied this methodological framework to three different paths of analyzing the gestational experience. Hence, I defended the thesis that reciprocal intertwinings of affectivity, touch and motility shape inter-corporeal and intersubjective relationships during the gestational process. In stressing the fact that every human being takes part in an experience of pregnancy, I presented this experience as a pre-condition of human development.

If it is impossible to conceive the world and human being without birth and death (Husserl, 2001), it seems to me that it is equally impossible to conceive the world and human being without generation and pregnancy. Indeed, gestational experience has a strong heuristic potentiality, in

exhibiting the co-constitution of many levels of bodily experience, *already* and *primarily* within an intersubjective horizon.

In addressing these structures of gestational process, I showed also that the experience of pregnancy essentially shapes the self/other distinction, and that there is a continuity between our pre- and post-natal lives, which is primarily expressed through the embodied nature of the self. This means that the notion of embodied selfhood is originally constituted in the gestational process, wherein everyone has experienced being carried by the gestating subject. Moreover, from my analysis, it emerges that being embodied subjects means unequivocally developing *in utero* through an affective and relational space of subjective co-constitution.

This implies that the constitution of the self passes through a mutual adjustment and *in fieri* dialogue with another self and that this happens even before the “coming into being” traditionally represented by the childbirth. On sensory-motor level, pre-infant models their movements around gestating subject’s movements pattern, and conversely maternal schema emerges as a dynamic response to fetal movements. This “choreographic”, reciprocal, and in-becoming co-constitution invests the totality of bodily subjective emergence and reinforces the self/other distinction. It is also relevant that we are not dealing with a general, neutral, undefined, unidentifiable “other self” – on the contrary, the other who firstly elicits and actively calls pre-infants into being is the gestating subject, as our first ever interlocutor.

The particular kind of engagement in the gestational “radical embodiment” opens up to a very rich array of possible emotional and psychological responses, as well as existential situations for the gestating subject. For instance, the fetal incorporated could be felt like a stranger, an alien, a parasite. Or, on the contrary, the gestating subject might feel a sense of participation with the growing life of the “other”, and could also enjoy the taking care that her body provides through nurturing and carrying the pre-infant. Within the broad range of qualitative variations of the experience, the essential feature that remains and resists is the unique kind of mutual incorporation – even if the affective reciprocity could be latent, rejected, or unexpressed, as it happens for instance in the case of pregnancy denial.

The analysis of “coupled” body schema and touch point equally to the intertwined distinction between gestating subject and pre-infant. A further inquiry is needed in articulating this research line, in particular through

differentiation between the various “stages” of pregnancy. A temporal perspective is required for mapping how different moments of the gestational process entail specific kinds of motor and affective responses. In fact, it could seem to be inaccurate to not distinguish carefully the various (complex, nonlinear, emerging) temporalities of pregnancy, that entails specific variations of the experiential structures, as well as different kinds of interaction between gestating subject and pre-infant.

The use of the classical concept of body schema discloses a peculiar feature of gestational experience, namely the paradoxical position of the gestating subject, who is at the same time a bodily self implied in the process and the internal-external environment (on which depends the paradox) of the pre-infant. The nonlinear correlation between subject and environment becomes, in gestational case, much more tangible and concrete than in post-uterine life, wherein human beings move and interact with persons, objects, animals, institutions, landscapes, and so on, but in any case they do not establish a structural and functional necessary correlation with the ‘inner space’ of another *Körper* and *Leib* – which is exactly what happens in gestational process.

Thus, this conclusion may shed light on some foreseen conceptual points in the project of constituting a phenomenology of pregnancy. In particular, the attention to the sensory-motor and affective aspects of the gestational process allows considering the experience meaningful *per se*, and not exclusively as a “condition” or “status” that precedes or prepares the childbirth and, eventually, the motherhood. Likewise, my analysis goes in the direction of reframing the idea of pregnancy as a passive process, where simply a woman carries a baby.

To sum up, I state that these theoretical paths could profitably pitch into the wider debate of embodiment, in thinking the sexualized body philosophically as the very origin of every possible subject, not only in an empirical perspective but – and this is exactly the point that still needs to be discussed – in an essential one.

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