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# Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny (eds.), "Feminist Philosophy of Mind"

Elisabeth Schilling

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**Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny (eds).** *Feminist Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford University Press 2022. 396 pp. \$43.99 USD (Paperback 9780190867621).

*Feminist Philosophy of Mind*, edited and compiled by Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny is the first of its kind, a collection of twenty essays which span decades from the 1980s through the present, and depart from representing the nature of the mind in the abstract. Instead, these essays aim to re-focus our attention on a mind-body relationship that is social and embodied, specifically in the context of categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Themes such as the self, emotion, trauma and embodiment reveal what rejecting essentialist and individualist reductions of the mind can offer. The book goes beyond the classic question of Cartesian dualism and considers what is politically at stake with it. Instead of starting with the mind, these essays claim we must start with the body, evoking the call of Simone de Beauvoir to consider ourselves in terms of being free or not, as perpetually and fundamentally embodied. Instead of remaining at the level of inquiring “What is Mind?” the authors of this compilation of classic and contemporary essays seek to open the conversation by asking, “Whose mind?” and “Whose body?” One can consider feminist philosophies of mind to consider an “embodied mindedness” that thinks, but also feels and desires, each of these “doings” as negotiations happening within contextualized environments.

The book has its chapters organized within five sections: 1. Mind and Gender&Race&, 2. Self and Selves, 3. Naturalism and Normativity, 4. Body and Mind, and 5. Memory and Emotion. The introduction by McWeeny and Maitra is dense and satisfying, detailing the origins of the book itself, the historical background of Philosophy of Mind and its feminist contributions, definitions, and section summaries. Each one of the essays is thought-provoking and essential to an initial understanding of what this sub-field can be, but a select few stood out as readings that I foresee becoming standards in graduate and undergraduate philosophy classes alike.

The first is Janine Jones’ ‘Disappearing Black People through Failures of White Empathy.’ This essay points to the difficulty that white persons have in terms of understanding Black persons, and argues that if they cannot understand, then they cannot empathize. Attempts of white people to empathize often cause harm, claims Jones, and so she suggests instead that ‘they try self-empathy, which may allow them, first, to understand the forms of racism they participate in, and second, to see why, for the most part, they cannot empathize with black people’ (98). This suggested form of



self-empathy requires the practice of ‘encounter[ing] a self they reject as being their own’ (98) and fostering empathy for the aspects of self that compromise a vision of the *good white self*. Essays such as these are essential to accepting the limitations of what is possible in terms of transcending differences while commencing on a working path forward that mitigates the harm that inevitably occurs with more naïve and presumptuous movements toward connection and harmony.

The second essay I refer readers to is Naomi Scheman’s ‘Against Physicalism.’ This is an older paper of Scheman’s, based on her early work in the 1980s. It intentionally appears toward the end of the book. Since naturalism and physicalism are often traditional places to start in studies on Philosophy of Mind, this essay might be a comfortable and familiar starting point for readers as it reveals how feminists begin to make sense and interpret mental phenomena in response to the traditional rhetoric and theories of mind studies. Scheman explains that while the privileging of mind in a dualist framework has been noted as problematic for feminists, physicalism is reductive and unsatisfying. Scheman opts for a relational interdependence, not only between the mind and body, but between particular minds as embedded within social and cultural contexts. Scheman writes, ‘Understanding our emotions, beliefs, attitudes, desires, intentions, and the like . . . is akin to understanding families, universities, wars, elections, economies, and religious schisms’ (240). Emotions and desires are not just *mine*, but connected to the communities in which I am engaged, culturally and historically.

The third essay to highlight for the college classroom would be Judith Butler’s ‘Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,’ first published in 1989. This is an important essay as it provides an example of feminist critique on the mind-body conversation by considering what can be redeemed in Merleau-Ponty’s classic existentialist 1945 text, which offers a liberating contextualized experience of one’s embodied, intentional, and constructed sexuality. Butler also explores what limitations nevertheless remain, how Merleau-Ponty undermines what he sets out to do. Butler applies an immanent critique to the text, claiming that Merleau-Ponty puts too much stock into the individual, natural and determined nature of one’s sexuality and leans heteronormative, all of which is in misalignment with his stated values and purpose. Butler observes that it is only the male body which has an existentialist existence-precedes-essence mode of being, while, ‘the female body is seemingly never a subject, but always denotes an always already fixed essence rather than an open existence’ (184). Therefore, the constructivist claim that he puts forth

concerning one's sexuality only applies to certain minds.

In terms of a critique, I would like to see, in the spirit of what the text does so well already--- gathering essays that speak to one another--- a more direct divergence from and debate of the perspectives it offers. The essays by Scheman and Paula Droege do just this and serve as an example of how there are a variety of feminist perspectives that do not always agree about what theoretical standpoints are most empowering or liberating. I would particularly like to see a response to Butler's essay. But this is an opportunity for scholars and professors selecting reading materials to supplement. In addition, I appreciate the inclusion of religion and spirituality in the last two essays, Vrinda Dalmiya's 'The Odd Case of a Bird-Mother: Relational Selfhood and a 'Method of Grief' with the references to Hinduism and Emily McRae's 'Equanimity and the Loving Eye: A Buddhist-Feminist Account of Loving Attention' and would like to see more inclusion of at least one other essay with such a focus. But McWeeny and Maitra anticipate and celebrate the expansion of conversations in this field, and a book can only be so many pages. It gives the perfect taste of what an anthology of feminist philosophical inquiry on mind-body can be, and accomplishes what we hope for all academic texts, the yearning for *more* of it.

Overall, *Feminist Philosophy of Mind* provides not only an introduction to a specifically feminist study of mind-body, but because of its interdisciplinary offerings and creation of new questions that speak to the phenomenologies of our evolving technological and global era, serves as an exciting starting place for any unit or course on the philosophical branch. Although I focus on the pedagogical use due to my personal background and career preoccupations, Maitra and McWeeny's book will prove to be essential text for philosophers and theorists in a variety of disciplines, and a pleasurable read for any academic.

**Elisabeth Schilling**, Pikes Peak State College