META: RESEARCH IN HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY
VOL. XVII, NO. 2 / DECEMBER 2025: 227-234, ISSN 2067-3655, www.metajournal.org

Phenomenology of Body and Soul in Pregnancy and Early Motherhood

Tanja Staehler
University of Sussex

Susi Ferrarello, *The Phenomenology of Pregnancy and Early Motherhood: Ethical, Social, and Psychological Perspectives*, Routledge, 2025, 184 p.

Keywords: phenomenology, pregnancy, early motherhood, ethics, Susi Ferrarello

Susi Ferrarello's book stands out in several ways. It is extremely well written and a real joy to read – which certainly does not hold true for every philosophical book. In order to give evidence of how well written it is, there will be numerous citations throughout this review. Furthermore, it is methodologically coherent and convincing. The author takes a phenomenological approach which proves very well suited for the topic under discussion. Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience and thus well equipped to explore the experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood. It is also a method capable of working with the accounts of others, as Ferrarello shows in detail. Moreover, phenomenology is a method that connects well to other disciplines, such as psychology. The solid methodological grounding and the various connections are strengthened by the ways in which Ferrarello turns to the founders of phenomenology, especially Edmund Husserl. She presents Husserl's ideas and concepts in clear and comprehensible terms, which is not an easy feat, and enriches his work by connections to those authors who are to my mind

best suited for current expansions of the phenomenological project, such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler.

The book also stands out by tackling a rather unusual topic – a topic that might sound marginal to some people. But as Ferrarello points out rightfully: "Motherhood is not a whim but a fundamental aspect of our humanity. As humans, we should learn how to make space for each other in our society" (xii). It is indeed crucial for our humanity to acknowledge that even though not all of us will be mothers, all of us have experienced versions of motherhood when we grew up. We owe it to each other to thematise this aspect of our existence and to see to it, as society, that mothers are supported and their voices being heard.

This is the case even more so because it is impossible to properly imagine motherhood before experiencing it. As Ferrarello explains, it was only when she underwent these experiences herself and saw her challenging they were that she felt a "sense of guilt toward all the women—friends, students, colleagues and relatives—who became mothers before me. I did not understand the magnitude of the transition they were undergoing. […] I recognize that the significance of such an event is comparable to a metaphorical death, given the profound psychological and physical transformation it entails" (4). To understand the magnitude of the transition, this book is crucial. It is only on the basis of such an understanding that we can give others the space to reinvent themselves after the event.

The book contains about thirty pages of stories from mothers from quite diverse backgrounds who underwent a wealth of different experiences. These stories are woven into the book as Ferrarello proceeds. They constitute helpful evidence for her interpretations as well as a treasure of material for further research. I would like to cite from the story of Maren Wehrle, a fellow phenomenologist, who captures some of the challenges of the childbirth situation in a particularly articulate fashion: "Things are being done with you, and decisions over your body are being made, at times without being communicated or explained to you. In the best case, this is because it is urgent and you yourself cannot speak or

communicate properly anymore (because of the pain); in the worst case, you feel like a statistic in your own birth, observing it as if from a distance, and suffering on your own (but probably not in silence). There is nothing scarier if nurses or doctors suddenly act as if in panic and you neither know what happens nor can do anything yourself" (20/21). This account shows how crucial it is that healthcare professionals in this special situation communicate clearly and in a reassuring fashion. It also shows that coming out of this limit situation and attending to the infant, which is itself a difficult challenge, depends majorly on the contributions of healthcare professionals; and as society, we should improve their working conditions. The author's own story is also part of the book, and it is a moving story, as well as insightful in its reflections on cultural contexts. My hope is that you will seek an opportunity to read these stories for yourself.

After the stories, the book attends to the first trimester of pregnancy as a particularly challenging period. It is challenging because the experience is altogether new, it is in many cases especially difficult due to morning sickness, and there is a general tendency to not yet communicate to others about the pregnancy due to the high risk of miscarriage at this stage. But without proper communication, the difficult feelings of alienation and objectification cannot be thematised, which again confirms the significance of Ferrarello's book: "The feelings of alienation, resulting from this objectifying process, take women's agency away from their bodies, leading to a depressive state, which is dangerous for the mother, her partner and her new family. […] I will focus on these three relevant emotional problems (alienation, objectification and loss of identity), especially as they set their roots in the first trimester of pregnancy, and I propose to use phenomenology as a mindful approach that can help the woman to be present to herself in the here-and-now if these problems arise and before medical interventions become necessary" (36). It becomes obvious that Ferrarello builds on phenomenology to suggest solutions, and the combination of phenomenology and mindfulness strikes me as a particular fruitful one. More on the theoretical background of this fruitful combination can be found

in a volume co-edited by Ferrarello (with Hadjiannou) entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Mindfulness*.

One of many strengths of Ferrarello's book lies in the way in which the author remains entirely honest about the challenges of the situation and the emotional rollercoaster it entails while always retaining the kind of optimism that emerges when we reflect on difficult situations and learn our lessons from them: "Feeling scared, inadequate and confused are more complex and yet common emotions that might become part of the new system of habitualities" (45). The lessons that we learn from motherhood are lessons that we can bring to bear on many aspects of human experience. But thorough reflection is indeed needed to establish such a system of habitualities and to be able to enact this system in light of new challenges, be they parenting teenagers, caring for elderly parents, challenges at work or encountering sickness.

Susi Ferrarello then turns to breastfeeding as another challenging yet instructive embodied experience. She points out rightfully that if one adds up the hours spent breastfeeding, especially also at night, it turns out to be equivalent to a full-time job, and a difficult one! It is a mistake to assume that breastfeeding comes to us naturally: "Yet, to use Jean-Luc Nancy: 'Nowhere does 'Nature' occur in a 'natural' state. Human beings have not always been there; but when they arrive the nature within them humanizes itself—that is, displaces itself in a new way' (2011, pp. 43–44)." Our distance from nature is not something that we can avoid, as it has always already happened. When we learn to be more in sync with our bodies and those of others, this learning process is a cognitive one and does not immediately get embodied, let alone habitualised; yet this is again an area in which phenomenology proves a fruitful approach.

Psychological challenges for the mother after giving birth are plentiful: "When milk production becomes an obsession for the new mother, her connection with her body suffers. Reduced to a mere technique, breastfeeding ceases to be about bonding and getting to know each other; it becomes mainly about how much milk this now alienated body can produce" (62). With respect to breastfeeding as well, it really

helps to share stories to encourage each other – Ferrarello calls them 'gossip' in a deliberately cheeky yet helpful fashion which is warranted by the etymology of 'gossip'. When breastfeeding has been learned and becomes comfortable as an intercorporeal activity, it is rewarding on so many levels: "Breastfeeding as a way of life is a comprehensive approach that celebrates the profound connection between mother and baby, recognizing its significance beyond mere nutrition. It encompasses emotional bonding, physical health, mutual growth, resilience in facing challenges, seamless integration into daily life and awareness of cultural and social dimensions" (63). It indeed becomes an activity that will be missed when the baby has been weaned off, as the calming effect cannot be easily replaced.

One of the main emphases in this book concerns the way in which the experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood invite and necessitate a challenging transformation on the part of the mother: "During this unique stage of life, a woman must stretch her logic to perceive herself as at least three different beings: the person she has always known, the new person taking on the role of mother and the being growing inside her" (73). These different levels are indeed difficult to process, and it is well justified that Ferrarello focuses mostly on the mother: it is still tempting to believe that becoming a mother happens naturally for a mother whereas the father who has not experienced pregnancy as such would be the one struggling to adapt to the new role after birth. But as this book shows in multiple ways, it is far from a smooth transition for the mother.

Therefore, Ferrarello turns to Husserl's phenomenology to disentangle the changes and challenges. Husserl's philosophy is notoriously difficult, and his writing style is a deterrent hard to overcome. The best way to make sense of Husserl's difficult concepts is to elucidate them through examples, and this is something which Ferrarello manages to accomplish masterfully. Concepts such as habit, association and motivation all relate to each other: "Indeed, habits serve as a primitive form of 'association' that drives the lower layer of emotions to solidify raw experiences into a foundational character that shapes the core of our motivational life" (75). Such foundational connections are otherwise usually discussed from a

psychoanalytic perspective which only some people would be sympathetic to. Ferrarello stays true to the phenomenological perspective throughout, thus allowing us to follow every step. Disentangling the different levels involved in our actions and decisions might not be able to give us answers about our unconscious motivations, but it gives us plenty of fruitful material to understand ourselves better, which strikes me as much more important.

While phenomenology is sometimes criticised for its commitment to 'mere' description, Ferrarello shows how it can be brought to bear on a number of important dilemmas. Breastfeeding means that the bodies of mother and baby are part of one circle, which is relevant where gassy food items are concerned: "The mother's body might need iron and feel the desire to eat lentil soup, but her reflective subject understands that fulfilling this need could be harmful to her primary goal, which is the peaceful survival of her baby. Clearly, being constantly alert to such decisions creates overstimulation that can be very draining for a new mother" (79). While this is only one example, it already involves too many dimensions and unknowns to find a fully satisfying solution. What appear to be small decisions can easily become overwhelming due to the constancy of decision-making as well as the complete lack of verbal communication from the infant.

All these dilemmas and the constant responsibility create additional challenges for the new mother who is already too sleep-deprived to reflect on the transformation which the role of mother means for herself. It is very helpful that Susi Ferrarello undertakes exactly this much needed reflection – and offers helpful advice: "The main proposal from this interpretation of the motivational layers of this lived experience is for the woman to take an interest in her own life without forcing the understanding of the motivational force. Additionally, she should exert her willpower (resolve, fiat and action) as much as possible, even in small actions. The combination of both efforts would contribute to the creation of a core set of habits that reinforces both lower and higher motivational forces, from which a renewed identity will emerge" (89). The phenomenological emphasis on habits and

on different layers of motivation allows understanding how active self-interest and exertion of willpower are the opposite of selfishness.

Throughout the book, there is a refreshing and much needed emphasis on the experience of the mother and what the new experience means for her: "According to this new perspective, the primary caregiver, in this case the mother, seems, to use Heideggerian terms, to have been thrown again in the world. From here, she can choose whether to look at what this thrownness teaches her or not" (115/116). Taking such lessons on board is important for the entire family, as Ferrarello explain with respect to the philosophically always challenging topic of temporality: "The woman needs to come out of the instantaneity of the event in order to see herself stretching in time, no matter how restricted this stretch might be. Being able to find her present would help her to find her presence in the new intersubjective being she re-presents" (117). The connection to mindfulness shines forth again; yet for a proper explanation of these connections and their implications, I need to refer you to the final chapter of the book with the strong heading: "Women who come back: Reconnecting with one's resources, space and time".

The only point in Ferrarello's book that I at least initially disagreed with is her closing remark: "As a closing remark, I would like to stress the importance of refraining from imposing or deducing the paradigm for any ethical structure from this complex lived experience. Using this embodied bond as a model for an ethical behavior might add more pressure on the complexity of this experience, spoiling the genuinity of the emerging sensory-motor identity between the two" (117). I understand that Ferrarello's main concern here is to not impose the pressure of being a role model on new mothers who are navigating a very difficult situation which is regularly underestimated in its challenges and complexity. Ferrarello draws on Judith Butler to explain that gender roles are certainly also involved in this difficulty: "I believe that romanticizing this fact of nature would enhance the problem of performative gender (Butler, 1988) and conforming to norms that are unfit for our personal growth" (118). Yet I wonder

whether these important experiences could not nevertheless function as a paradigm – not by imposing the responsibility of being a role model on the mothers themselves, but by reflecting philosophically on the lessons that can be learned. One such lesson could be to reconceive of our social bonds and realise, in the words of Judith Butler, that "the reconsideration of social bonds as based in embodied forms of interdependency gives us a framework for understanding a version of social equality that does not rely on the reproduction of individualism" (*The Ethics of Nonviolence*, 21). In developing such ideas of embodied interdependency, Butler takes inspiration from Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas presents pregnancy as a kind of paradigm for existence in general as pregnancy means having the other person literally under one's skin whereas we generally notice that the Other metaphorically gets under our skin. I agree with Ferrarello that we should not impose the responsibility of serving as a paradigm on pregnant women and new mothers. But I do believe that there are valuable tasks for phenomenologists in drawing such lessons. This could allow opening phenomenology up towards ethical frameworks based on embodied and gendered experience.

There are several other interesting topics and discussion in this book, for example, regarding the temporality of pregnancy and early motherhood, 'expanded consciousness', and many lessons from the fabulous stories provided by mothers which Ferrarello connects to the folk tale 'Sealskin, Soulskin'. I have enjoyed reading this book more than any other academic book in as long as I can remember – due to its clear, articulate, engaging writing style, methodological cohesion, ability to unpack complexity, and fascinating topics. I suggest you see for yourselves whether you are inclined to agree.

Address:
Tanja Staehler
Professor of European Philosophy
University of Sussex
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN
Email: t.staehler@sussex.ac.uk