

PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITIQUE

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In the fall of 2022, the philosophy department at Loyola University Chicago hosted a conference around the theme “Phenomenology and Critique” in association with Marquette University. On November 4, 2022, there was an atmosphere of bustle as people started to fill the room. It was one of the first large in-person events organized by the philosophy department at Loyola since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcomed the return to hosting conferences with both anticipation and caution, having made sure that the conference would be held in a hybrid format. We were especially delighted to welcome our two keynote speakers, both renowned phenomenologists spearheading the critical turn in phenomenology, affiliated with two Canadian universities: Professors Alia Al-Saji of McGill University, and Lisa Guenther of Queen’s University. The motivation for this conference was not only to collaborate with a neighboring Jesuit university—where phenomenology is also a strong interest of both faculty and students—but more importantly, to bring scholars from around the world together to talk about phenomenology and its critical potential, scholars who are representative of classical phenomenology and those who are now leaders of the critical phenomenological movement.

The topic of the conference and this special issue, “phenomenology and critique,” was intended to respond to a need for methodological clarification within phenomenology, particularly with respect to critical phenomenology. The “critical turn” that phenomenology is presently undergoing is an attempt for phenomenology to describe and analyze social and political phenomena, especially phenomena that pertain to oppressive structures of the social world such as sexism, white supremacy, and colonialism. This critical turn has been especially driven by debates concerning critical phenomenology. Critical phenomenology is commonly understood to be both a philosophical project that attempts to make visible and analyze certain oppressive structures that are latent in the everyday world of experience and a political practice—a struggle of emancipation from these oppressive structures. Its proponents claim this sort of endeavor necessitates a step beyond the scope and methodology of classical phenomenology, especially Husserlian phenomenology. Although some figures of classical phenomenology might offer methods

and insights into certain experiences relevant for the desired realm to be investigated, classical phenomenology cannot by its own methods achieve the desideratum critical phenomenologists are after. Consequently, some critical phenomenologists have opted to collaborate with other philosophical traditions such as critical theory, hermeneutics, decolonial theory, and post-structuralism, as well as other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

In response to these shifts, classical phenomenologists have issued a bevy of critiques of the emerging movement. They have determined that at least some of the aims of critical phenomenology can already be fulfilled within classical phenomenology, such as the description and analysis of complex socio-political phenomena. They have also insisted, for example, that description already involves normativity and can therefore be critical and that we should continue to use eidetic phenomenology, which critical phenomenology mostly rejects. They have also suggested that critical phenomenology does not understand phenomenology or critique correctly.

These philosophical questions and debates prompted us to organize the conference on phenomenology and critique at Loyola. We felt that if critical phenomenology was going to withstand the test of time and prove to be a movement that led to philosophical breakthroughs and brought about changes in our understanding, it had to clarify its own phenomenological grounds. The questions that needed to be posed were: what exactly makes critical phenomenology phenomenological? What makes it critical? And how can we understand its relationship to classical phenomenology? It also seemed clear to us that classical phenomenology could no longer ignore experiences of oppression. If phenomenology were to remain a relevant philosophical method, able to contend with the distinctive phenomena of our time, experiences of oppression needed to be grappled with and faced head on. Phenomenology had to develop tools for addressing experiences of gender, sexual, white supremacist, and colonial domination. How, then, could a primarily descriptive enterprise such as phenomenology advocate political change? Put differently, how could we theorize the articulation of phenomenological scholarship with political praxis and activism? In sum, the central tenet in convening the conference and in compiling this special issue was the commitment to questioning the meaning of “critical phenomenology”: to not take it for granted, but to ask fundamental questions about its methodology, its task, and its place in the broader phenomenological tradition. In particular, we wanted to ask what new theoretical tools the critical turn in phenomenology might require.

The papers in this special issue provide a range of perspectives on these interrogations. The uniting thread between them consists in their methodological focus, and in the authors’ attempts to thematize phenomenology’s appeal to critique, its justifications, presuppositions, and limits. These contributions thus are situated within the project of defining and arguing for a clear and original method for critical phenomenology.

First, Peter Antich’s “Mitigating Tensions between Phenomenology and Critique” proposes a mapping of four sites of tension between the projects of phenomenology and critique: (1) the eidetic character of phenomenology in contrast with the concrete character of critique; (2) phenomenology’s transcendental orientation in tension with the social and political orientation of critique; (3) the descriptive nature of phenomenology

counter to the normative aims of critique; and lastly, (4) phenomenology's "naïve" character against critique's commitment to exposing the shaping of phenomena by social forces and power relations. Antich suggests that these points of conflict can be mitigated: while the tensions between phenomenology and critique cannot merely be dismissed with a sweep of the hand, they are not entirely irreconcilable either. First, phenomenology's eidetic goal of discovering essences needs to be understood as a historically-situated enterprise where essential structures of experience can be contingent, yet invariant within the particular world we inhabit. Second, critical phenomenology requires a move from a transcendental register to a "quasi-transcendental" one, as proposed by Lisa Guenther. Thirdly, while phenomenology is traditionally considered a descriptive method and critique implies a normative orientation, Antich suggests that critical phenomenological projects need not necessarily articulate concrete prescriptions in order to count as critical. And finally, phenomenology's potentially naïve and presentist character can also be overcome: phenomenology begins with experience, but experience always requires careful interpretation, as well as the acknowledgment that it is necessarily partial and perspectival. Consequently, there is space for critical phenomenological projects which do not radically break with the phenomenological method but rather practice it in transformative ways.

In the second paper, "Towards a More Critical Phenomenology of Whiteness," Jesús Luzardo argues that a critical account of whiteness must consider not only the construction of whiteness as an ideal, but also its failures and contradictions. While critical phenomenologists tend to collapse whiteness and white subjects, a genuinely critical phenomenological account of whiteness needs to examine the complex relationship between white subjects and whiteness. The author first provides a brief overview of a foundational text for critical phenomenology, Frantz Fanon's engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*. To conceptualize whiteness, critical phenomenologists have mainly inverted Fanon's framework: from his account of Blackness as fragmented and objectified, they derive an account of whiteness as coherent, motile, and comfortable. Sara Ahmed's and Lisa Guenther's works both exemplify this tendency. Ahmed considers whiteness as an inherited sense of ease in one's inhabitation of space. Building on Cheryl Harris's work, Guenther differently regards whiteness as a kind of property relation through which white subjects invest in their whiteness. For both authors, the relation between white subjects and whiteness is almost exclusively capacitating. What becomes problematic is that such accounts cannot adequately address cases of white failure, where the promise of white privilege is forestalled. As Luzardo shows, scholars explain such cases by exporting contradictions in the experience of whiteness to other facets of identity, such as class, gender, or sexuality. Whiteness itself remains coherent and materially beneficial for subjects who embody it. Nonetheless, Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses do contain the seeds of a more critical phenomenological account of whiteness. Ahmed suggests, for instance, that the threat of expulsion from whiteness is not incidental but central to whiteness, and Guenther begins to theorize whiteness as a kind of parasite haunted by the anxiety of being revealed for what it is. Luzardo thus contends that resources to address whiteness both as a position of privilege and one permeated by contradiction can be found in the work of Fanon. We should refer to what Fanon explicitly says about

whiteness, that it is a relation in which both Black and white subjects find themselves alienated. As Fanon shows, whiteness alienates white subjects, since it is predicated on an internalized, subconscious negrophobia. It is an inherently unstable, structurally fraught position. For Luzardo, critical phenomenology can then continue to shed light on the unstable, contradictory relationship between whiteness and white subjects by articulating the subjective experiences generated through this contradictory relation.

The third paper by Jennifer Gaffney is entitled “A Praxis of Facticity for Critical Phenomenology.” It investigates critical phenomenology’s definition of political praxis, arguing for the relevance of the Heideggerian move to a hermeneutics of facticity, subsequently rethought by Hannah Arendt. What the author contends is that the grounds of critical phenomenology’s calls for action must be clarified: a phenomenological investigation into the conditions which make possible emancipatory political praxis is necessary. Supporting her argument with Mariana Ortega’s criticism of Guenther, Gaffney suggests that critical phenomenology needs to recognize the situatedness and fallibility of its own political demands. She proposes that resources for taking full account of this factual limitation of our political actions can be found in existential phenomenology rather than in transcendental Husserlian phenomenology, particularly in Martin Heidegger’s thought. Heidegger contended that to achieve understanding of our factual situation did not require us to become more distant from it but rather to face the inevitable, concrete situatedness of any inquiry. Thus, phenomenology should become a “hermeneutics of facticity.” As Gaffney shows, this Heideggerian notion is further developed by Arendt into a “praxis of facticity.” Arendt reminds us that it is never guaranteed our political acts will not reinforce and perpetuate oppressive structures, even as we strive to overturn them. Though we can never escape from this factual limitation, it should not lead to political apathy: instead, critical phenomenology’s task must be to investigate phenomenologically its own factual limits, the conditions which structure and make possible our calls to political action.

The fourth paper, Steffen Herrmann’s article, “Horizons of Critique,” thinks transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology alongside one another to show that each kind of phenomenology is compatible with political critique. The author starts by outlining the three kinds of consciousness horizon intentionality as defined by Husserl, namely the internal horizon, external horizon, and life horizon. He shows, through the example of the racist algorithmic effects of AI used by the police in the United States, that transcendental analysis of consciousness’s horizons of intentionality can be a means of critique. In a different vein, critical phenomenology can be used to expose the phenomenologist’s “horizon of givenness,” the background assumptions which the phenomenologist takes for granted even as they suspend their natural attitude. By uncovering structures implicit within the mundane horizon of givenness, such as white supremacy, critical phenomenology makes them available for critique as well as for political action. Lastly, the author leans on Arendt and argues that political phenomenology leads to the task of keeping the field of democracy open to foster conversation and debate between different political horizons of givenness. Political phenomenology seeks to contrast different, incompatible political horizons, to keep the conflicts between them alive, and to

examine what political options are available to us within our conditions. In sum, each strand of phenomenology can then become compatible with politicization.

The fifth paper, “From Description to Transformation: A Deconstructivist Investigation of a Phenomenological Method,” puts in dialogue deconstructivist approaches to language with phenomenology’s method of description. In the paper, Leyla Sophie Gleissner argues that critical phenomenology must treat language not only as a tool for pure description, but it must also acknowledge language’s transformative capacity. The author first begins by problematizing Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the world is available to us for direct description, prior to any linguistic mediation. As the author suggests, critical phenomenologists have attempted to overcome this view of naïve description shared by classical phenomenologists. They have called into question our ability to describe experience in pure terms and have shown that perception always takes place in the context of socially constituted differences. For Gleissner, these theoretical developments in critical phenomenology call for a shift in how we define the task of description. What she proposes, building on Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, is that for description to be used as a phenomenological tool for social critique, language needs to be recognized in its polysemous and inextricably social character. The author notes that Derrida’s view of language is further extended in Butler’s work on modes of “address”; there, Butler highlights language’s role in shaping subjectivities as well as language’s capacity to perpetuate violence. Language not only constructs subjects and our relationship to the world; it also *undoes* us by referring to social structures and power relations which transcend our grasp on the world. Ultimately, Gleissner contends that taking language seriously as a mode of address has important implications for phenomenological description: we must always consider the conditions under which we describe our experiences, reflect on what our descriptions might enable, and on which voices they may foreclose.