

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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The Collegium Phaenomenologicum has met in Umbria, Italy every summer since 1976; only COVID made it pause, and hopefully only temporarily. It has been a forum for deep and broad discussion of the phenomenological tradition; it has also been a place where that tradition has itself been broadened and deepened by generations of thinkers who came to study the classical texts and to do phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, over the course of three weeks in July, in three lecture courses, several talks by visiting faculty, twelve text seminars sessions, art workshops, and very many informal talks over dinner, on the terrace, and on long walks through the town of Città di Castello and beyond, the Collegium worked on the question of critical phenomenology.

Planning for the session on Critical Phenomenology began in the summer of 2016 and, in retrospect, it seems merely obvious that this should be the theme. The term had been appearing in monographs and journal articles, in graduate seminars and conference presentations, and in conversations here and there on the fringes of SPEG and other meetings. It had emerged in the conversations leading to the founding of this journal. It cropped up where researchers trained in the phenomenological tradition found themselves compelled to respond to phenomena that seemed far removed from the intentional objects that had featured as examples in the classical texts. Those exemplary lecterns and studies were never the most important thing, of course; they did their work as occasions for doing phenomenology, giving neophytes experience of how it was done and, along the way, equipping them with the skills needed for phenomenological practice. If the *logos* of the phenomenon is a method, then the choice of phenomenon would seem to be beside the point. A piece of furniture, a hand touching a hand, a mood, an instance of police violence—all could undergo the *epoché*, all could show themselves from themselves, and all could reveal transcendental structures. Why then describe some operations as *critical*? What would be the criteria for defining critical phenomenology?

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.collegiumphaenomenologicum.org>

The compelling objects were sometimes the political—and aesthetic—things that the Critical Theory tradition dealt with in terms of the historical dialectic: instances of oppression, injustice, discrimination, and alienation. But concern with the same things did not mean that phenomenologists took on the term *critical* as an attempt at a rapprochement between the traditions, but nor was there any sense that this was some sort of turf war: consciousness for phenomenologists, class consciousness for Left Hegelians. The *critical* in *Critical Phenomenology* is not simply lifted from *Critical Theory*, and, though the two traditions have abutted and cut across one another since the beginning of the twentieth century, trying to define one in terms of the other did not move the conversation far.

Perhaps, more plausibly, the word arrived from the direction of Critical Race Theory, Critical Indigenous Studies, and other fields where the critical turn meant wielding the concepts and practices of the discipline for new purposes. But in those cases, it has been a central task to dismantle the discipline itself. Race Theory at least since Arthur de Gobineau served as the intellectual justification of white supremacy; indigenous or Native American studies was a means of extracting a museum-quality archive from living, traumatized communities. The first and most continuous object of study for Critical Race Theory must be Race Theory itself, and the question of the use, abuse, evolution, and emancipatory possibilities of the very thought of race. Yet phenomenology does not present this sort of crisis of inheritance—Martin Heidegger's Nazism notwithstanding. The method never did calcify into a discipline and, despite Edmund Husserl's hopes, it did not become a school. Specifically, it could never be a self-asserting theoretical position. If critical phenomenology re-purposes the phenomenological tradition, it is not in order to redeem it but to put it to work in worldly ways.

In that case, it has been around for a long time. Frantz Fanon described Black experience with world-changing force; Simone de Beauvoir's description of the life of a woman generated a new language of resistance, and a feminist mode of practicing phenomenology that has led the way to today's critical practices. The plural is important. Some confine themselves to descriptions of first-person experience, in the classical mode. Others engage the testimony of others, or draw on the evidence of studies and artworks in a peri-phenomenological style. Some remain focused on the revelation of transcendental structures as the aim of phenomenological research, while others, wary of the power relations embedded in transcendental claims, think in terms of a quasi-transcendental move. Some turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty for differentiated embodiment, others to Henri Bergson or Husserl for a practice of hesitation.

All of which upsets the project of definition, and shows the error of looking for definitive criteria. At Collegium 2019, the question "What is critical phenomenology?" was asked every day, but every day the conversation had changed. Some felt that we should abandon "phenomenology" altogether given its complicated relationship with eternal essences; the postcolonial turn of contemporary philosophy ought to make us suspicious of any potential for hegemonic thinking, and the project of finding some universal logos of phenomena was outdated and dangerous. Others were committed to phenomenology if it could remain critical, but argued that settling on a specific definition of critical phenomenology would be counterproductive, amounting to a dangerous sort of gate-keeping that would only limit

the possibilities of thinking-otherwise before it could even get off the ground. Still others were more keen to get to work *doing* critical phenomenology, breathing fresh life into the old concepts of the epoché and intentional arc to articulate some facet of marginalized bodily experience. Instead of attempting to define critical phenomenology, these thinkers reasoned, why don't we just *do* it? This was a fruitful path, but the same questions would inevitably resurface after discussions of the specific form of bodily life under examination: But is this *really* phenomenology? If this is phenomenology, what makes it immune to the universalizing gestures of "traditional" phenomenology? If this is not phenomenology, then what is it? Is this critical? And, if so, critical of what?

Many began to wonder if they even knew what phenomenology was. To this end, some proposed trying out the limits of phenomenological inquiry as a productive first step towards doing phenomenology critically. To begin this inquiry, some pushed traditional thinkers—Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger—to their extreme, using these thinkers' own theoretical claims to dissect their ill-considered examples and candid interviews. Others argued for pushing these thinkers aside altogether, letting the spotlight shine on thinkers often left outside the traditional canon, narrowly understood: Edith Stein, Fanon, Beauvoir, and others. At that point, the question of method would emerge again. Can one think critically with these thinkers who were embedded in a framework that had been laid out by men who circled around lecterns and writing desks as their emblematic experiences, freely assumed access to the experiences of colonized others, participated in dangerous political parties, and sought universal, transcendental essences? Mustn't we reflect upon the very foundation of phenomenological inquiry—and, in some cases, reject it entirely or rethink it from the ground up—in order to even read these thinkers fairly and critically? Positions shifted and changed, and we returned to the drawing board time and again, seeking different avenues to the question of what we were doing when we did critical phenomenology.

The lecture courses would drop bread crumbs along our path. In the first week's course, led by Peg Birmingham and focused on Hannah Arendt, political questions and issues of historical perspective came to the fore. Peg Birmingham prompted discussions on what it means to think and act politically, and how these political experiences form spaces, generate worlds, and carry us forward. In the second week, Alia Al-Saji pressed on the most common reading of Fanon, which places him within a Husserlian, or sometimes Merleau-Pontian, framework. We all saw Fanon as if for the first time, attempting to grapple with the richness of his thought and the affective force of his writing on its own terms instead of trying to tease it apart using familiar concepts. Finally, in the third week, Matthias Fritsch asked us to question the lineage of phenomenology, returning to basic questions of deconstruction and critique: is Jacques Derrida a phenomenologist? Does he perform a critical phenomenology using Heidegger's work, or is he critical *of* Heidegger's thinking?

The courses, lectures, seminars and long evenings philosophizing over dinner and wine produced an atmosphere buzzing with curiosity and debate. A moment came when, all at once, everyone had a passionate stance on what phenomenology is and how it might be critical, but everyone also felt compelled to continue to play with the ideas and question their most deeply-held assumptions. A matrix of different strategies and arguments began

to weave in the course of the shared conversation, one without discernible end or beginning. A few points of agreement held it to the ground and in common—that phenomenology can be fruitful endeavor and that phenomenology ought to look forward to a more inclusive future. But what this might look like, how it ought to be done, and whether or not it was already being done remained up for discussion. In true phenomenological fashion, it felt as though the conversation had to, time and again, start again from the beginning.

Perhaps the ultimate lesson, then, is that we ought *not* settle on or settle for a definitive, exhaustive criterion for critical phenomenology, though we also mustn't give up the search. We should remain vigilant in reflecting upon our thinking, not in order to police the borders of phenomenology to ensure it remains healthily critical (or, indeed, pure and immutable), but in order to maintain good thinking and fresh perspectives. If we never consider what we are doing and what to call it, we risk falling into familiar patterns of thought or unwittingly treading on another's familiar territory. Yet if we cling to our discipline's goal as to a creed, we foreclose new opportunities for thinking—thinking harder, thinking better. The tensions that arise around method, the discipline's history, and how to grasp one's own epistemological position are all productive tensions. As Arendt puts it, what is important is to keep thought in motion. Academic fields can ossify into dusty artifacts of university life, outmoded technologies of knowledge with overreaching assumptions and troublesome blind spots. Conversations like these—the ones carried out at the Collegium, the ones carried on in this volume, the ones between disciplines and between the academy and the wider world—are what ensure that the dust is not allowed to settle. We welcome you to engage the works of this volume, written by both faculty and students who worked to define critical phenomenology at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum in 2019, to continue this shared task of unsettling and building together.