

BOOK REVIEW

THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF EXPERIENCE: EXPRESSION IN PHENOMENOLOGY BY NEAL DEROO (FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022)

MOLLY KELLY
Emory University

What distinguishes critical phenomenology from classical phenomenology, and can classical phenomenology be considered political in any robust sense? In her contribution to the *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* volume, for example, Lisa Guenther argues:

Critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of “restructuring the world” in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence. (2020, 15)

In moving “beyond” classical phenomenology, Guenther’s project is not a reparative one; rather, she questions whether critical phenomenology might serve as an abolitionist praxis, “even if that means abolishing itself in the process” (2022, 42).

In contrast to Guenther, other scholars maintain that classical phenomenology already provides tools and concepts necessary for critical political praxes. In *Home and Beyond*, Anthony Steinbock resists characterizations of phenomenology as merely being descriptive or reflective. He argues: “Because the phenomenologist is caught up in generativity . . . [p]henomenology becomes a *participation* in the sense development of an intersubjective historical structure that is in the process of generation as we describe it and as we bring it about” (1995, 268; emphasis in original). Through this concept of generativity, Steinbock describes generative phenomenology as “a critical reflection on the historicity of essence,” one that always already critically implicates the phenomenologist in the disclosure and unfolding of the world (268).

It is here that Neal DeRoo’s 2022 book, *The Political Logic of Experience: Expression in Phenomenology*, enters the scene. Like Steinbock, DeRoo not only maintains that a political reading of phenomenology is possible, but essential, as phenomenology is an

inherently political endeavor. While DeRoo is not the first to argue this, what makes his book so compelling is where he locates this political core: in the logic of expressivity. With technical skill and meticulous care, DeRoo forcefully demonstrates why a critical reading of expressivity is necessary for political thought: put simply, expressivity is the force that drives experience itself, and to miss the political core of expressivity is also to miss how an account of expressivity proves necessary for politics.

In responding to what is an ambitious and thoughtful book, I cannot hope to do justice to all of DeRoo's claims. I will, however, attempt to trace its central themes and arguments. In his introduction, we begin with a knot: at the core of experience, DeRoo argues, there lies a phenomenological knot of knowing, being, and doing. This knot is inherently expressive and experienced as an asymmetrical, generative unity. The central task of the book, then, is to "[clarify] the role expressivity plays in *how* we experience so that we can reveal the inherently political nature of experience and of phenomenology" (2022, 10–11; emphasis in original). Doing so, DeRoo claims, will help us "untangle the knot at the core of lived experience . . . by explaining how the knot is tied" (13).

The book is divided into six chapters, each explicating different relations of expressivity. Enacting the very sort of generativity DeRoo aims to describe, the chapters build upon (and ultimately, transform) each other. Chapter 1 begins with an exegesis of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and the distinction between indication and expression. Whereas indication merely "points" towards the reality of something else (e.g., smoke indicating a fire), expressions mean something: in other words, they comprise a phenomenal unity with that being expressed. The meaning of an expression is not experienced as separate from the "thing" it describes but is phenomenally one with it. For example, when reading the word "cat," I do not experience its meaning through a connected act of judgment. Rather, I "live through" the expression so as to "live in" its meaning. As DeRoo clarifies: "Here, meaning does not merely attach to a separately existing physical substrate or vehicle; rather, in expression, the meaning is phenomenally one with the expression that expresses it" (29). This, in turn, helps to explain the "how" of phenomenality. Returning to the knot, the ontological threads at the heart of experience (i.e., the "being" of the expressed) cannot be separated from the epistemic ones (the "knowing" of the expression) or the practical ones (the "doing," or the expressing).

While DeRoo thus takes Husserlian expression as his starting point, he does not do so uncritically. Following Jacques Derrida's (2011) famous critique in *Voice and Phenomenon*, DeRoo remains skeptical of the expressed-expression dyad that Husserl provides and questions how and where expressing functions, or how we ought to explain the relation of expressivity. Additionally, he questions what role the subject plays in this relationship, denouncing Husserl's implicit assumption that expression is "a particular kind of act purposefully performed by subjects" (DeRoo 2022, 30). To address these concerns, DeRoo turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on mutual asymmetry and his notion of "flesh" to develop a threefold account of expressivity, or an expressed-expression-expressing triad. Inspired by Steinbock's work, DeRoo introduces a generative account of expressivity that "transcends and precedes the constitutive power of the subject" (40). Here, we begin to see the political force of DeRoo's project: expressivity is not the work of a single subject but

articulates how the subject comes to be constituted in and through facticity—not despite it. This is not to reduce expressivity to historicism, however. Rather, DeRoo’s framework demonstrates how our experiences of the world are at once constituted in and through the generative force of expressivity while also transforming it in turn.

From this foundation, chapter 2 explores the expressive relationship between subject and body. If the subject is best understood as an unfolding of the generative force of expressivity, so, too, might we question how the subject is expressively constituted in and through sense. Riffing on Sara Heinämaa’s work, DeRoo calls for a reconceptualization of *Leib* and lived bodies as “material-spiritual expressions of the particular world(s) we occupy” (2022, 48). In other words, expressivity compels us to move beyond a dualistic notion of the sensuous-spiritual toward an expressive understanding of spirituality as flesh. Qua flesh, this material-spiritual unity “is primordial, before the distinction and division between physical and psychical, between exterior world and interior mental life” (53). This then ties into chapter three’s focus on the relationship between sense and sensings, or “*Empfindnisse*,” which DeRoo notes is “a portmanteau of *Empfindung*, sensation, and *Erlebnisse*, lived experiences” (57). *Empfindnisse* are not a mode or faculty of sense controlled by the subject. Rather, DeRoo describes sensings as supra-subjective: “we are constituted within a sense that is simultaneously within us and exceeds us” (67). Reading together the works of Alia Al-Saji and Karen Barad, he explains why this matters for understanding the political. As a process that is not “controlled by the subject,” sensings confirm “that the subject is always already taken up in a larger context that is not merely epistemological, but political, supra-subjective, historical, and so forth” (70). Sensings thus productively destabilize the boundary between epistemology and ontology, such that the knot of phenomenality “is always already the intertwining of being and meaning” (76).

DeRoo explicates the expressive relationship between the transcendental and the empirical in chapter 4, and between subjectivity and objectivity in chapter 5. Chapter 4 will prove particularly interesting for critical phenomenologists. Guenther argues that phenomenology requires an analysis of the quasi-transcendental structures of power and oppression, and DeRoo’s discussion of the transcendental function of empirical conditions provides rich tools with which to do so. Through the phenomenal logic of expressivity, DeRoo describes the transcendental “not as the (logical) conditions of possibility of empirical experience, but as the parallel (sense-bestowing, ‘sensing,’ etc.) axis, dimension, or level expressed in and through that empirical experience” (95). The transcendental is not a difference of content, then, but a difference of axis, highlighting the topological elements of DeRoo’s thinking once more. Given this relationship between the transcendental and the empirical, he argues that “any transcendental analysis must necessarily account for the political context of the empirical conditions in which the transcendental is operative.” He thus concludes: “[t]his is just to say that transcendental phenomenology is always, necessarily, critical phenomenology, and that critique is a fundamental aspect of transcendental phenomenology” (108). Here, however, important questions arise: what, exactly, is meant by “critique,” and is critique sufficient for bringing about the liberatory and abolitionist ends that many critical phenomenologists desire?

Chapter 5 elaborates on a notion of the subject as a function performed within the expressive unity of flesh (DeRoo 2022, 119). Echoing notes of the Shannon Sullivan vs. Silvia Stoller *Hypatia* debate,¹ DeRoo works to carefully clarify the nature of intentionality in this chapter. Against a reading of intentionality as being projective or objectifying, he writes: “Phenomenology, by contrast, does *not* posit an X as the correlated object of consciousness: consciousness is consciousness of . . . but not consciousness of X” (122; emphasis in original). Intentionality is thus understood as a mode of engagement not with a particular object, but with “a particular (differential) relation that generates self and world as expressions” (122). Using the transcendental-empirical account of expressivity developed in chapter 4, he argues that the intentional subject is thus a “nexus of located subjective functions” (127). In doing so, DeRoo’s writing takes on an almost topological tenor, one that reminded me greatly of Martin Nitsche’s work in transitive-topological phenomenology. For example, in *Methodical Precedence of Intertwining*, Nitsche argues that Husserlian intentionality is best understood as a form of interpretation, or as a passive/active process of re-localization wherein phenomena are re-localized within ever-changing fields of meaning (2018, 23). Reading DeRoo’s work with Nitsche’s, then, we can see how the intentional subject re-localizes (and is re-localized through) a nexus of expressive functions.

In light of the transcendental-empirical analysis in chapter 4, in what follows, I return to this review’s introduction to consider the status of critique in DeRoo’s work. In a recent article, “Abolish the World as We Know it,” Guenther outlines two primary forms of critique. The first is reparative, and seeks to “salvage, fix, or ‘improve’ something, motivated by the hope or belief it could become a better version of itself” (2022, 28–29). The second is abolitionist. As Guenther explains: “here, one engages in critique in order to bring about the end or collapse of a structure that one believes to be inherently problematic and beyond repair.” Guenther uses the example of an abolitionist critique of slavery, wherein the goal is not to make slavery more just or less harmful, but to end the practice “in all its forms” (29). Returning to DeRoo’s book, if critique is a fundamental part of transcendental phenomenology, what is the work that critique aims to accomplish here? Is it reparative, abolitionist, or something else entirely? And if we accept that transcendental phenomenology is always already critical, what sorts of praxis does it lead us toward?

In posing these questions, I do not mean to suggest that DeRoo’s use of “critique” is an oversight. Rather, by reading DeRoo and Guenther together, critical phenomenologists can dig deeper into the forms of “work” that DeRoo’s text might call for. In chapter 6, for example, DeRoo begins to provide us with tentative answers to these questions. There, he explores the expressive relationship between the transcendental-empirical and the political,

¹ Here, I am referencing Sullivan’s argument that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of projective intentionality is not useful to feminist projects. In “Feminism and Phenomenology: A Reply to Silvia Stoller,” Sullivan writes: “[t]he problem with projective intentionality as a description of human experience, as I argued in my earlier paper, is that it tends to construe one’s being-in-the-world as an activity of projecting one’s intentions, values, and meanings onto objects and others in one’s world” (2000, 184). Stoller disagrees with Sullivan’s reading, arguing that Merleau-Pontian intentionality is not the unidirectional projection of a single subject, but is a situated and participatory process (2000, 179). Like Stoller, then, DeRoo’s work resists characterizations of Husserlian intentionality as being unidirectional and solipsistic.

or between community and culture. Turning to Husserl's lifeworld, DeRoo explicates the concept's peculiar double meaning: it describes both the transcendental ground of all meaning and its individual actualizations in particular worlds by particular communities (2022, 139). Utilizing DeRoo's concept of the knot, we can understand this transcendental ground not as a collection of individual "I's," but as a kind of primordial knotting, or as a transcendental "we" that precedes voluntary social groupings. Such an understanding has important consequences for politics. As DeRoo clarifies: "Politics is therefore not primarily about the voluntary acts of subjects within the polis, but about the politeia that constitute both the polis and the people who are its constituent parts" (145).

This discussion of politics leads DeRoo to a thoughtful critique of universal human rights discourse that could be fruitfully paired with Dean Spade's (2015) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. DeRoo's critique of universal human rights is not necessarily reparative. Instead, DeRoo uses transcendental phenomenology to demonstrate how human rights discourse may be inherently problematic and irrevocably tied to colonial logics, thereby encouraging readers to think beyond the democratic legal framework of "rights" toward other forms of work, perhaps including Spade's call for "alternative methods of meeting human needs and organizing political participation" (2015, 49).

In relativizing subjectivity and questioning the desirability of universal human rights, however, DeRoo is careful to note that phenomenology must not devolve into relativism. To address this concern, he writes: "we need a philosophical field or subdiscipline whose task is to articulate precisely how communities, societal institutions, and the like are constitutive of individual persons, not purely transcendentially or purely empirically (as may, e.g., be done in sociology), but in a transcendental empirical fashion" (2022, 149). DeRoo does not appeal to transnational/anti-imperialist feminist ethics here, but there are fruitful resources in these works that further bolster this line of argument. In *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*, for example, Serene J. Khader explores how we might develop an anti-imperialist feminist ethic that refuses the colonial logics of Western feminism. She explains: "Anti-imperialist feminists in our time can neither retreat into the local nor refuse to make moral and political judgments. The way forward can only be to articulate a normative position that criticizes gender injustice without prescribing imperialism" (2019, 2). Like DeRoo's work, then, anti-imperialist feminist ethics would support transcendental-empirical analyses of power without hypostatizing particular communities or succumbing to missionary politics.

To conclude, we return to the knot once more. In his final chapter, DeRoo writes: "the phenomenological knot at the core of human experience is always tying, untying, and retying the strands of knowing, being, and doing in and as phenomenality itself" (2022, 173). Having sufficiently articulated these dimensions, DeRoo reiterates his earlier claim that "phenomenology provides us a unique way of untying that knot by articulating differentiations that are initially experienced as a unity" (159). To describe this work as an "untangling," however, risks misrepresenting the critical insights that DeRoo's account provides. Namely, that the phenomenological knot at the core of experience cannot be understood as a combination of distinct threads capable of ever being fully untangled.

DeRoo himself acknowledges this sort of risk in his discussion of “[t]he double bind of expressivity’s linguistic expression” (2022, 170). He writes that phenomenologists working to articulate expressivity’s phenomenal logic are faced with two choices:

Either articulate claims clearly, in which case, they will not be adequate to the expressive claims they want to make; or, articulate those expressive claims adequately via nonpredicative language, which . . . often means poetically, through means of literature or even the purposeful use of nonsense, in which case they will not be recognized as philosophically serious. (170–71)

Responding to this double bind, DeRoo’s book attempts to carve out a third path through his critically transformative reading (or rereading) of expression. Following this third path, we could perhaps say that DeRoo’s “knot” is Borromean: made of topologically linked elements that may be articulated but never separated. While this language may likewise prove insufficient, DeRoo’s book teaches us it is nevertheless imperative that we try. And I would venture to say that *The Political Logic of Experience* not only tries, but ultimately, succeeds in articulating the epistemological, ontological, practical, and political dynamics that inextricably unite experience and politics.

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