

## **EDITORS' INTRODUCTION**

### *REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST ISSUE*

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The institution of official platforms that call for, collect, and publish works in burgeoning fields of inquiry is a crucial step in the legitimization and promotion of research in those areas. For instance, the 1982 founding of *Hypatia* instituted a forum crucial for the shaping of the discipline of feminist philosophy itself, and also for those who research and teach in this field. While journals like *PhiloSOPHIA*, *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (IJFAB)*, *Radical Philosophy*, and, more recently, *Critical Philosophy of Race* and *Latina Critical Feminism* are contributing to the sedimentation of fields such as feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and Latina feminism etc., to this day there is not a platform explicitly devoted to the publication of pieces that engage the critical turn in phenomenology. Inspired by the institutional changes brought about by the establishment of these journals, we decided to found what we are now proud to call *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*.

The journey of its founding and the publication of its first issue required numerous conversations about the scope of the journal, its target audience, the kinds of publications that we hoped to solicit, and, perhaps most importantly, what we took “critical phenomenology” to be and to be doing. By founding this journal, we endorse and promote a specific kind of phenomenological inquiry or method: a method already being deployed by contemporary feminist thinkers like Lisa Guenther and Mariana Ortega. These scholars, inspired by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Frantz Fanon, and Gloria Anzaldúa among others, conceive of critical phenomenology as a process of inquiry that, grounded in the specificity of the phenomenon it seeks to describe, remains “on its way”—in terms of both its description of the phenomenon and its methodological presuppositions.

Given our indebtedness to feminist phenomenology and feminist phenomenologists, the reflection on the resonances between feminist phenomenology and critical phenomenology is essential to the delineation of the contours of the field of critical phenomenology. Our designation of the term critical phenomenology is not meant to mark a limit or an inadequacy in what is now widely recognized and accepted as feminist phenomenology proper, but rather, to suggest that feminist phenomenology and philosophies of social and political critique are already inherently implicated with

one another (this topic is taken up by Bonnie Mann in the article featured in this issue). Critical phenomenology understands that feminist phenomenology exists within broader structures of power that shape, condition, and determine experience. And all critical phenomenology is inherently—if not explicitly—feminist insofar as it attends to experiences of difference and differences in experience. The founding of *Puncta* is motivated by the hope that having a specific outlet for critical phenomenology will help to establish it as its own field, and to invite scholars to engage their phenomenological work in a way that attends to those differences.

Inspired by Roland Barthes' concept *punctum*, we take *Puncta* here to indicate critical phenomenology's continuity with and divergence from the traditions of both classical and feminist phenomenology. In the movement from *punctum* to *puncta*, we move from one point to many; we move from phenomenology to a phenomenological approach that continuously questions its own practices, methods, and assumptions, and is thus revealed as always already multiple.

In his phenomenological investigations of photographs, Barthes introduced the punctum and studium as two elements of an image that may grab the interest of a viewer. The studium refers to everything in the image that is average, cultural, that reveals itself to the viewer because of their participation in a shared body of knowledge. Through attendance to the studium, intellectual inquiries can exalt an image from bearing merely personal interest to a general interest through the image's instantiation as an indexical counterpart to a historical period. Phenomenology's attendance to the complex forces constitutive of lived experience makes it well-suited to reveal and critique the studium. While the studium situates the viewer comfortably in relation to the image, it is not what holds one's interest. Intellectual exercises and phenomenological inquiries that are self-satisfied with the studium still bear a sovereign, disinterested gaze over the objects of perception.

The punctum is a "sharp point" that disturbs or disrupts the studium. It is a small detail that draws us away from the image's acquired cultural significance and towards something else that exceeds the historical frame, namely, the singularity of the body that the image makes seen—the fragile, finite body of the referent. What is revealed in the detail is not strictly an object but a feeling—an affective connection to others that the natural attitude holds at a distance. It is no longer the case that this image is interesting on a merely intellectual level; it touches me by cutting and wounding me. This affective connection entails that the phenomenologist will, like the objects of their inquiry, be left exposed and transformed by the encounter.

*Puncta* reveal what is at stake in a critical phenomenology. When the phenomenologist is not another transcendental subject that gazes sovereignly over the objects of perception, but one that makes themselves exposed, that desires not merely to gaze but to be gazed at in turn and be transformed by what is seen, then that phenomenologist makes possible an encounter with the life that exceeds its historical context and cannot be reduced to the conditions of its existence. The punctum is, quite literally, the *point*—of a phenomenology that aims to be critical, that is, a phenomenology for which the call made infamous in Marx's thesis still resounds. The goal is not merely to describe the world, but to change it (and to be changed by it).

As the previous reflections indicate, the definition of critical phenomenology as a discipline in its own right remains one of the most difficult questions at stake in this intellectual inquiry, and is the topic of this inaugural issue. Stated broadly: If phenomenology is a descriptive practice, then critical phenomenology questions the conditions of the possibility of a phenomenological description and, in so doing, modifies the scope, content, and method of said description. Our objects of inquiry are always moving, and are never static. They are the institutions, structures, and social conditions which inform our daily lives. Critical phenomenology moves *with* these phenomena; understands that the structures of experience are *structured and experienced in a multitude of ways*, and we thus consider our project as calling on phenomenological analyses of race, gender, class, etc.

At a methodological level, critical phenomenology challenges the assumption that a “pure” phenomenological description (and the complete suspension of the natural attitude it requires) is possible and that phenomenological conclusions can be arrived at with certainty; it asks what the *epoché* or initial shift from the natural attitude consists in, and if or how the subject position of the phenomenologist is relevant to phenomenological description. Importantly, taking these issues seriously demands that critical phenomenology reconsiders the way it investigates and approaches the phenomena it seeks to describe; it invites the development of what Merleau-Ponty would call an *indirect* phenomenological description.

But if the “essences” of phenomena are revealed as being “impure,” structured by socio-political institutions, if phenomenological conclusions cannot be certain, or if the *epoché* does not completely suspend the values and assumptions of the natural attitude, then this broadens the scope of the conditions of the possibility of phenomenology: insofar as those conditions include particular social contexts, phenomenology ceases to be a strictly *a priori* and value-neutral discipline. Under these conditions, critical phenomenology concerns itself with the norms and values that shape both the natural attitude of the phenomenologist and the phenomena she seeks to describe, thereby taking on a normative dimension.

As critical phenomenologists, then, we question both phenomenology’s role as “pure” methodology, and the underlying assumptions of the methodology itself. We engage in a double critical matrix which seeks to engage phenomenology as a social and political *practice* over and against methodology, as well as engage in the consistent practice of questioning the assumptions and import of the method(s) themselves. In this sense, the task of critical phenomenology in elucidating these phenomena and its own approach to them is never finished. Critical phenomenology is an ongoing process of exposing the structures of structures, and of challenging exhaustive understanding through a commitment to tailor methodology to the shape-shifting objects of inquiry. In critiquing phenomenology, then, we can say that critical phenomenology takes up the task of social critique.

Despite its distinct elements—and analogously to its relation with feminist phenomenology—this conception of critical phenomenology does not constitute a historical break with phenomenology. Phenomenology has repeatedly questioned its own origin and possibility. It has also been questioned and challenged by others: Since we cannot

perform a complete suspension of the natural attitude, critics have argued, phenomenology as a discipline fails, falling into solipsism and subjectivism, which is to say that it never attains to a rigorous science. In other words, given the impossibility of a complete reduction, there can be no pure phenomenological description of experience as such.

However, listening to phenomenology itself, i.e., to its “failures,” teaches us that what is most important about the phenomenological method is that it can neither be reduced to a first-person view nor arrive at a purely descriptive account of reality. (These are some of the themes guiding Gayle Salamon’s essay featured in this issue.) Husserl himself seems to have come to the recognition that a phenomenological investigation cannot stop at static phenomenology, i.e., at a phenomenology that investigates the intentional structures of consciousness (e.g., temporality or noetic-noematic constitution). In fact, as Husserl suggests, static phenomenology serves as a leading clue to genetic phenomenology, which attempts to uncover the genesis of meaning and sense.

Unlike static phenomenology, genetic phenomenology is a phenomenology of *facticity*: the focus of its investigation are the types and typicalities that we experience in the lifeworld, and how these types or typicalities came/come to be. This is to say that genetic phenomenology seeks to make explicit the necessary structures that are constitutive of the institution of stylized persons, identities, etc. This is done via what Husserl calls the imaginative or eidetic method, a technique in which we imaginatively change or vary the different characteristics of a phenomenon that appears to us. Through doing this, Husserl argues, we can arrive at what is invariant, i.e., the eidetic structures of the phenomenon we study.

Through the distinction between static and genetic phenomenology, phenomenology reveals its own impossibility as a pure descriptive practice. In fact, we, as phenomenologists, can only perform the eidetic variation from within an intersubjective world. It is true that the goal of Husserl’s eidetic variation is to remove the object of our analysis “from all factualness [so that it becomes] the pure ‘*eidōs*’” (Husserl 1999, 70). However, the subject (the monad) who performs an eidetic variation has “a surrounding world, which is continuously ‘existing for [them]’” (Husserl 1999, 68). This means that the monad’s situatedness in an intersubjective world is crucial to genetic phenomenology. Intuiting essences via the eidetic reduction “depends on a freely and arbitrarily producible multiplicity of variants attaining coincidence, on an open infinity” (Husserl 1973, 342). But, we are only able to imaginatively vary a multiplicity of possibilities because they have been, prior to the eidetic analysis, given to us through our lived experience. That is, it is only through our bodily situatedness, our relation with others, and our cultural life-world that we can experience these possibilities as contingent, factual determinations of the objects that we are eidetically analyzing. Significantly, this means that the process by which we intuit an essence cannot be entirely abstracted from the particularities of concrete existence. Genetic phenomenology is inherently intersubjective: in performing an eidetic reduction, we cannot drop away and rise above the sedimented layers of our concrete life-world.

For us, the intersubjective and situated nature of phenomenology, in sum, the impossibility of a complete reduction, does not entail leaving behind phenomenology. Rather, it means that phenomenology carries with it a *responsibility*: phenomenology is, to quote Merleau-Ponty, “implicated in the movement [of Being] and does not view it from above” (1968, 90).

If we recognize this, i.e., the situatedness of genetic phenomenology, we realize that “phenomenology does not only describe essences, and in particular social essences, but participates in the ethical becoming of the social structures or essences that the phenomenologist describes” (Steinbock 1995, 14-15). Just as static phenomenology serves as a leading clue into genetic phenomenology, we suggest that genetic phenomenology—in both its failures and its insights—serves as a leading clue into a *critical phenomenology*. Critical phenomenology is thus continuous with the historical origins of phenomenology, but it is not *nascent* in Husserlian phenomenology. To make that claim would only reify a conception of phenomenology as allegiant to a Husserlian “foundation” which may not exist as a singular method. Critical phenomenology is defined by not taking for granted such a foundation. That said, a critical phenomenologist need not reject the Husserlian ideals of pure phenomenological description or a complete suspension of the natural attitude. Rather, for a defender of those ideals, critical phenomenology calls for a robust defense of these possibilities and thereby encourages debate on the proper scope and object of phenomenology and the methodological and political responsibilities of the phenomenologist. For those who believe that phenomenological description is never neutral and always situated or value-laden, critical phenomenology calls for a plausible alternative conception of the discipline. We hope that within this journal, through vigorous debate and a shared concern with the enabling conditions of phenomenology, such a conception may be formulated and found.



We are happy to feature four invited submissions by Lisa Guenther, Kym Maclaren, Bonnie Mann, and Gayle Salamon, all of whom respond to the questions motivating our inaugural issue. Both Salamon and Maclaren offer a response to the question “What is critical phenomenology?” by exploring the productive relationship between critical theory and phenomenology. Salamon does this by tracing the history of the term critical phenomenology. Maclaren further explores the productive relationship between critical theory and phenomenology en route to her analysis of intimacy. Focusing on the phenomena of shame and long-term solitary confinement, Mann and Guenther take up that question by *performing* the work of critical phenomenology. Mann also offers suggestions regarding critical or, as she calls it, feminist phenomenology’s relation to the tradition—both of classical phenomenology and feminist philosophy. Guenther shows how the work of critical phenomenology is already at play in the practices of resistance among prisoners in the Security Housing Unit of Pelican Bay State Prison in California.

Driving Salamon’s article “What’s Critical About Critical Phenomenology?” is the question “what does critical theory bring to phenomenological inquiry?” To answer this question, she traces the origin of the term “critical phenomenology” back to Donn Welton and Hugh Silverman’s 1987 text, *Critical and Dialectical Phenomenology*. Here, classical phenomenology is contrasted with critical phenomenology, which Salamon describes as “rooted in the classical tradition at the same time as it somehow moved beyond those boundaries, in terms of either content or method or discipline” (8). In conversation with Merleau-Ponty, Salamon points to how phenomenology in fact must be a *double* reflection that critically examines not only various kinds of knowledge, but also itself as critical practice. Simultaneously challenging a view of phenomenology as “too

trapped inside first-person perspective to be able to offer any purchase on ethical or political struggles” and that of critical theory as too structurally focused, too ‘high-altitude’ ... to be able to offer any insight into the intimate textures of lived experience,” Salamon shows us how phenomenology, at its best, was always critical—just as good critical theory has always been attuned to or at least motivated by personal experience (11).

Maclaren’s “Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom” continues to reflect on the relation between critical theory and phenomenology in its relation to freedom. Problematically, she suggests, critical theory is geared toward a version of emancipation that upholds a neoliberal, Cartesian model of agency, where freedom means freedom *from* the various institutions which are understood to be external to the subject. Phenomenology, too, is directed toward the subject’s freedom, but makes explicit that various institutions (both personal and socio-political) “transgress into our experience and constitute the very manner in which we perceive ... the possibilities we find available ... and the positions that we ... assume” (19). Maclaren fleshes this insight out via a critical phenomenology of intimacy. In concrete intimacy, she argues, partners are co-intentionalities constituting a shared reality, which is sustained by mutual transgressions, and sustains in turn the genuine becoming of both partners. What this means is that each of the partners is, in a real way, responsible for the other. Neither is fully free to be themselves but experiences a freedom that is grounded on a dispossession of themselves through the other’s transgressions.

Whereas Maclaren’s paper focuses more on our interpersonal relations, each of which gives us access to a site of transgressions more primordial than even the most natural of institutions, Mann’s “The Difference of Feminist Phenomenology: The Case of Shame” shifts critical phenomenology’s focus to the material institutions that structure both our experiences and the phenomenological tradition itself. Refusing to see feminist phenomenology as a mere application of traditional, “reverent” phenomenology, Mann argues that the practice of feminist phenomenology changes the very meaning of phenomenology itself.

Drawing out the methodology of Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenology, Mann details phenomenology’s feminist transformation. With Beauvoir, we come to understand the phenomenological *epoché* not as a complete bracketing of prejudices, but as a slow reorientation of our embodied consciousness that requires working through prejudices by actively taking up other perspectives. At the same time, phenomenology itself becomes an oscillating movement between the micro-level of intense concrete experiences and the macro-level of general experience. Mann argues that this movement brings us to “a consciousness burdened by material interests, experience shaped by situation, and “ontology entangled with ethical failure and political injustice” (57). Through the insightful analysis of shame that follows—in which Mann puts Beauvoir’s critical, feminist phenomenology to work—Mann proposes two modalities of shame defined by different temporal structures. Whereas unbounded shame closes off the future and undoes the self, ubiquitous shame pervades the lives of women and promises the possibility of a future redemption while always threatening to collapse into unbounded shame.

Just as Mann thematizes feminist phenomenology as process of orientation or oscillation, in “Unmaking and Remaking the World in Long-Term Solitary Confinement,” Guenther offers a vision of critical phenomenology as transformative prac-



tice. In her discussion of resistance practices among prisoners in the Security Housing Unit of Pelican Bay State Prison in California, Guenther analyses the “weaponized architecture of solitary confinement” that becomes an apparatus of torture by imposing isolation on inherently relational, sentient, and social beings. Drawing on Elaine Scarry, Guenther argues that this imposed isolation—insofar as “the world ... is a web of relations whose meaning is grounded in praxis and in Being-with Others—is an “unmaking of the world.” Through an improbable effort of communication through the concrete walls, the prisoners were able to force open a space of emerging solidarity and shape a sense of community, and an understanding of themselves as what Guenther calls a “prisoner class,” which became a tool for political engagement and resistance. That is, “[t]he embodied social practice of speaking across both the material barriers of institutionalized racism is already a ‘remaking of the world’ and a form of resistive architecture” (84). In the midst of these conditions, prisoners have transformed spaces of isolation into spaces of resistance. Resistant transformative practices are, Guenther suggests, “the work of critical phenomenology” (80).

Through their phenomenological interrogations of social institutions, lived experiences, and phenomenology itself, these articles shed light not only on the critical potential of phenomenology, but also on phenomenology’s demand for responsible critique. We hope that you, the reader, find in this inaugural issue resources for further thought and critique.

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