

MITIGATING TENSIONS BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITIQUE

PETER A. ANTICH
Dominican University New York

How exactly should we measure the distance between phenomenology and critique? Can there be a “critical phenomenology”? Can there be a “phenomenological critique”? This is not to ask whether phenomenological methods and insights can be valuable for critique, nor whether critique can enrich phenomenology—I assume the answer to both of these is affirmative—but whether a properly phenomenological project can be critical. This paper will work within this question space. I will consider four major areas of tension between the basic commitments of these two traditions. My position is that these tensions are not merely illusory. As we will see, it is a matter of fact that there have been tensions between phenomenology and critique in these very regards, but they are also mitigable. In each case, I will argue that there is room for a method properly termed “critical phenomenology,” i.e., a critical project that really is phenomenological.

What do I mean by “phenomenology” and “critique”? As with any philosophical tradition, definition is to some extent artificial. As a matter of historical fact, there is no univocal articulation of phenomenology. The matter is even more vexed in the case of critique, which does not comprise a single movement. By “critique,” I refer to a set of lineages engaged in projects of social critique, encompassing not only critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, but also thinkers like Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon, and fields of study such as feminist philosophy, critical race studies, or critical disability studies. Rather than firm definitions, then, it would perhaps be more precise to say that we have certain continuities of tropes, styles, or concerns animating each tradition. But if we want to give to critical phenomenology a definite sense, we will need to do better than this. We need to discern certain contours within each tradition by which their compatibility can be determined.

I will start by noting three defining (though again, not univocally articulated) features of phenomenology. First, phenomenology is a *descriptive* discipline.¹ What it describes are

¹ See Husserl’s claim that phenomenology is “a purely descriptive discipline, exploring the field of transcendently pure consciousness by pure intuition” (1982, 136).

structures of experience, i.e., of phenomena or what appears to us. According to Edmund Husserl, this descriptive project is guided by two reductions: the phenomenological and the eidetic (1982, xix–xxi).² In virtue of the phenomenological reduction, phenomenology is, second, a *transcendental* inquiry, by which I mean, loosely, that it is concerned not so much with worldly realities *per se* as with the structures of experience according to which those worldly realities appear to us. Third, in virtue of the eidetic reduction, phenomenology's description is *eidetic*: it aims to yield *essences* of experience; it is interested in *universal* and *necessary* structures. Phenomenology presumes that, for each domain of experience, certain structures will necessarily occur wherever that domain is present. Where there is visual experience, for example, certain structures of visual experience will obtain. To a provisional approximation, then, phenomenology amounts to a descriptive, transcendental, and eidetic investigation of experience.

Again, I take “critique” in a broad sense, encompassing a wide variety of projects that differ considerably in their methodologies and orientations. Nevertheless, I think projects such as those referred to above are united by various features. Take as a starting point Foucault's articulation of a “philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves” (1996, 416). Such an ethos involves the description and analysis of the ways in which meanings (such as “white,” “able-bodied,” “woman”), through which we encounter ourselves and the world around us, are historically situated in social and political contexts. In this sense, critique is concerned not with the description of trans-historical structures that condition all human experience, but with the analysis of historically situated social and political structures. Unlike the structures described by phenomenology, these structures, precisely because they are historically specific, are *not* universal and necessary. Indeed, critique will often be skeptical of claims to articulate trans-historical essences since our access to such putative structures will itself be socially and politically conditioned. More, critique's description of the historical construction of meanings is distinctly normative. Max Horkheimer, for example, claims that the aim of the critical attitude is no less than “man's emancipation from slavery” (1972, 246).³ Even if we needn't characterize every critical project in these exact terms, at least the practice of critique does not simply describe social structures; it identifies their social and political contingency and normative polarization. In other words, it problematizes them.⁴ Provisionally, then, I'll say that critique problematizes

² Very basically, the phenomenological reduction requires us, by suspending our unreflective acceptance of the reality of the world, to attend to the way in which the phenomenon of reality is constituted in our experience. The eidetic reduction requires us, through the free variation of a phenomenon's characteristics, to attend to its essential structure rather than to its contingent, concrete differentia.

³ See the Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory's claim that “critical theory is interested in why human society has (in its eyes) failed to live up to the promise of enlightenment and become what it is today, unequal, unjust, and largely uncaring” (Buchanan 2010). Or James Bohman's (2005) claim that, for Horkheimer, critical theory, “must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.”

⁴ Foucault, for example, writes that critique asks: “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (1996, 416).

the historically situated and socially and politically conditioned structures by which we encounter our world.

These provisional definitions yield obvious tensions between the two traditions. I will consider four of these that I see as basic concerns in the literature: first, the eidetic character of phenomenology as opposed to the historically situated character of critique; second, the transcendental orientation of phenomenology as opposed to the social and political orientation of critique; third, the descriptive nature of phenomenology as opposed to the normative orientation of critique; and fourth, the possibly “naïve” character of phenomenology with respect to the shaping of phenomena by social forces.⁵ In each case, I will not try to show that there is *no* space between phenomenology and critique; rather, I suggest that these tensions can—and should—be mitigated in such a way as to make room for a critical phenomenology. But, as we will see, there are many ways to spell out each of these basic characteristics, and whether the two projects are compatible depends largely on how exactly we do this. As many critical phenomenologists have done, I will turn to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty for what I take to be the most acute articulation of phenomenology and the one most amenable to critique.

To be clear, though, my aim is not to assimilate critical phenomenology to what is often called “classical phenomenology”—which we might define as a particular though amorphous lineage of phenomenology running from Husserl to, say, Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty—nor is my aim to demonstrate the critical *bona fides* of this classical phenomenological lineage. While I think it’s helpful to draw attention to the critical heritage of classical phenomenology,⁶ such projects can elide the important differences in style, orientation, and results of contemporary critical phenomenology. Instead, my relatively narrow aim here is to show that *there is indeed* room for a properly phenomenological project that is also critical. In what follows, I take up each of these four tensions in turn. In each case, I will argue that the tensions between phenomenology and critique are not insuperable, and that we do not need to jettison phenomenology’s core commitments in order to engage in critique.

⁵ There are other areas of tension we might consider. For instance, Lisa Guenther suggests that classical phenomenology privileges subjectivity over intersubjectivity in a manner that a critical project could not accept (2013, xiii). As Johanna Oksala points out, though, Husserl’s mature thought identifies the transcendental role of intersubjectivity in just the way a critical phenomenology would seem to require (2022, 3–4). Or consider Theodor Adorno’s (2015) claims in *Against Epistemology* that Husserl’s phenomenology as a bourgeois philosophy is overly interested in epistemological questions.

⁶ See, for example, David Carr (2022), Lanei Rodemeyer (2022), and Dan Zahavi and Sophie Loidolt (2022). I am suspicious of a step that sometimes gets made in this genre from a) phenomenology being critical in the sense of criticizing certain theoretical assumptions, such as realism, materialism, and physicalism, or the natural attitude, to b) phenomenology being critical in the same sense that critical phenomenology is. While critiques of the former type are, I think, useful for (perhaps even intimately connected with) those of the latter type, they are also importantly different: critical phenomenology criticizes something much more like the hierarchical social structures that organize the ways in which we make sense of the world.

I. THE EIDETIC REDUCTION

First, there appears to be a tension between phenomenology's commitment to the eidetic reduction and critique's engagement with contingent historical structures. As Husserl puts it in the introduction to *Ideas I*, one of the key differences between psychology and phenomenology is that the latter is not a science of matters of fact, but of essences; it is an "eidetic science," and so methodologically, it involves an "eidetic reduction" (1982, xx). Husserl claims that through imaginative variation, we can bring about an eidetic intuition that does not depend on any matter of fact to deliver universal and necessary structures of consciousness (xx, §3–4).⁷

But critique does not seem to describe eidetic structures in this manner. Critique engages with concrete historical structures, which are not necessary features of experience: by the very fact that these structures form within a particular historical juncture, not only *could* they not obtain, but they in fact *have* not obtained. For example, we would be hard pressed to construe Foucault's work on penal systems in *Discipline and Punish* as eidetic description. Likewise, Johanna Oksala points out how the eidetic reduction fails in the case of gender: "If any first-person description by a woman is understood as a phenomenological account and then generalized by turning it into a description of eidetic female embodiment, we end up with a female body that is essentialized" (2016, 99). This is a problematic outcome given that "the way in which we classify bodies into types, give them value and meaning depends on historically and culturally specific practices" (101).

There are various ways we might try to deal with this tension between the eidetic and the concrete.⁸ First, we might argue that critique does involve the description of essential structures. For example, when Fanon describes a "historical-racial schema," he is describing a structure common to diverse experiences of oppression (2008, 91). Of course, the history that informs historical-racial schemata will differ substantially, but this should not lead us to deny that historical-racial schemata underly bodily schemata for a wide variety of experiences of oppression. To my mind, critique can involve description of such common structures along with elucidation of the particular forms they take in concrete historical situations. Consider Lisa Guenther's (2013) analysis of solitary confinement. She shows both how this experience is substantially differentiated socially (e.g., along lines of race), and how it manifests a coherent structure, one that consistently violates certain norms of "animal ontology"—even nonhuman animal ontology (127). Of course, solitary confinement as a form of punishment is a contingent historical event, one that shifts in its

meanings and arrangements over time, but where it occurs, it manifests certain common (though differently manifested) phenomenal structures.

To be clear, it would not do to object here that not all people experience solitary confinement or historico-racial schematization. This is because universal and necessary

⁷ In imaginative variation, the features of a phenomenon are altered in imagination in order to discern its essential structures.

⁸ See Julia Jansen's distinction between multiple senses of pure description (2022, 47–48).

phenomenological structures need not be experienced by all persons. For example, certain structures of visual apprehension (e.g., the relation between color and shape, or visual simultaneity at distance) are plausibly not experienced by some people who are blind, but we would not conclude that they are therefore merely arbitrary or contingent. Rather, “universal and necessary” means that wherever a particular domain of experience occurs, it is structured by certain contours of experience.

A second option would be to follow Merleau-Ponty’s claim that phenomenology is a philosophy that “places essences back within existence” (2012, lxx). In other words, while phenomenology is concerned with essential structures, it discerns these necessary features of experience precisely by tracing their manifestation within diverse contingent particulars. A rich description of necessary structures will not, then, be oblivious to particulars, but will gain its evidence precisely through engagement with them. As Bonnie Mann puts it, a phenomenological project like Simone de Beauvoir’s in *The Second Sex*, “does not so much succeed at separating the general features of human existence from their contingent, empirical formations, as one begins to note how they are entangled” (2018, 57). In this case, while the projects of phenomenology and critique may be oblique, the former is plausibly enmeshed with the latter.

One might insist against these points that, as Foucault says, critique analyzes ensembles of power and knowledge *not* “as universals to which history, with its particular circumstances, would add a number of modifications,” and that what it recovers,

are not incarnations of an essence, or individualization of a species, but rather, pure singularities: the singularity of madness in the Western world, the absolute singularity of sexuality, the absolute singularity of our moral-legal system of punishment. (2007, 62–63)

While it is true that with such historical systems we are not dealing with atemporal essences, neither are we dealing with particulars; rather, we are analyzing generalized structures that govern the appearance of particulars. What we might try to do here, then—though this option is not without difficulty—is to think of certain essences as historically situated. Either there are certain essences that pertain only to particular time periods *or* certain essences can themselves undergo historical transformation.⁹ On this approach, a particular historical situation might involve certain invariant experiential structures. While such historically situated eidetic structures would not be globally necessary features of experience, they might be necessary local to a historical phase. And there is plausibility to this suggestion; again, critique is not history or biography—it is not interested in particular

⁹ See Guenther’s consideration of a historical a priori (2021, 11). While on its face the term appears oxymoronic, we should consider that many thinkers have attempted to articulate such a sphere of investigation. For his part, Merleau-Ponty does speak of a “historical a priori,” consistent “within a given phase . . . provided that the equilibrium of forces allows the same forms to remain” (2012, 90; emphasis in original). See also M.C. Dillon (1987). Husserl (1970), too, speaks of an historical a priori (e.g., in “The Origin of Geometry”), as does Foucault (1972), though these would take us in other directions. For more on this point, see James Dodd (2016).

events, but in general structures that develop and manifest within particular events. We might think of these general, characteristic structures as historically situated essences.

But even if there were localized essences, could phenomenology be interested in them? While Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work is not focused on such local eidetic reductions, I think there is a sense in which he opens a space for this kind of inquiry. Far more deeply, he wants to challenge the very relation between the contingent and the necessary in experience. For him, a priori structures of experience are themselves founded on the contingent fact of inhabiting the world that we do. As he puts it, for example:

The unity of the senses, which was taken as an *a priori* truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world. The diversity of the senses, which was taken as an *a posteriori* given, including the concrete form that it takes in the human subject, appears as necessary to that world, that is, to the only world that we could think of with any importance; the diversity of the senses thus becomes an *a priori* truth. (2012, 266)

We are no longer speaking of an entirely abstract, atemporal a priori then, but an a priori given the particular world that is given to us within experience.¹⁰ Now, this is still quite far from talking about essential structures of experience local to a historical era, but we might think of it as pointing to the “deep history” or “deep time” that engenders the essential structures of the kind of world we inhabit as the kinds of bodies we are. Or, at the least, if Merleau-Ponty is right in this regard, it undermines the tension between the eidetic character of phenomenology and the contingent character of critique.¹¹

II. TRANSCENDENTAL STRUCTURES

Second, it's unclear whether critique is compatible with a transcendental philosophy like phenomenology. Phenomenology aims to describe the structures of experience within

¹⁰ See the claim by the editors of the inaugural issue of *Puncta*: “if the ‘essences’ of phenomena are revealed as being ‘impure,’ structured by socio-political institutions . . . 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” (Ferrari et al. 2018, 3).

¹¹ In this vein, Gayle Salamon has even suggested that phenomenology's conception of essences is in fact especially appropriate for the description of social phenomena like gender: phenomenology requires us to “possibilize” essences, in the sense of being open to continual revisions to them, such that we have not so much a “fixed idea of a fixed essence” but essence as “an open unity” (2018a, 46).

which worldly realities appear, i.e., transcendental structures. But critique seems at odds with such a project. Consider Foucault's claim that criticism is not

practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental. (1996, 113)

From a phenomenological perspective, then, critique might be conceived as simply describing historical aspects of reality constituted *according to* transcendental structures: the two projects appear oblique to one another.

Now, certainly critique does not *need* to operate in a transcendental register. But, perhaps it can do so. Guenther (2019), for instance, contends that critical phenomenology describes “quasi-transcendental” structures, i.e., structures of the social world which shape the emergence of meaning within our experience. According to Guenther, structures like patriarchy or white supremacy “are not a priori in the sense of being absolutely prior to experience and operating the same way regardless of context, but they do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience” (12). These contingent structures are not objects seen but “*ways of seeing*” or of “*making the world*”; they “generate the norms of the lifeworld and the natural attitude of those who inhabit them” (12; emphasis in original). Such a critical project would not seek to disclose conditions of all possible experience (and so would not be transcendental in a Kantian sense), but it *would* disclose the ways in which our experiences are conditioned by meaningful structures, and in this sense is “quasi-transcendental.”¹²

One might worry that this approach involves a kind of materialism or realism which is incompatible with phenomenology, one in which the social world exerts a causal efficacy over experience. However, we do not need to understand the relation between the social world and experience in these terms. This is the point of Merleau-Ponty's long footnote on historical materialism in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he argues:

there is never a purely economic causality because the economy is not a closed system and because it is part of the total and concrete existence of society. But an existential conception of history does not strip economic situations of their power of *motivation*. (2012, 176; emphasis in original)

That is, the social world does not exert a causal efficacy over experience, since it exerts its influence precisely by being taken up in experience. Consciousness and world here exist in a reciprocal relation of sense-making: the social world shapes the way I give the world

¹² Depending on how we understand “transcendental,” it's not clear we even need the “quasi-” here. For instance, if we take Oksala's definition of the “transcendental” as based on the recognition that “reality cannot be understood independent of the historical and cultural community of experiencing subjects” Guenther's addition of “quasi” could be considered redundant (2016, 5).

meaning precisely in terms of the way I give it meaning. Thus, while not determinative, the social and historical world is central to the factual situation that our experience takes up. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The external becomes internal and the internal becomes external precisely because economics is not a closed world and because all motivations intersect at the center of history, and no part of our existence can ever be wholly transcended. (2012, 177)

Is a “quasi-transcendental” project like critical phenomenology compatible with a transcendental one like phenomenology? As Guenther (2021) puts it, critical phenomenology differs from classical phenomenology insofar as the former needs an archive, and not just first-personal reflection. Studying this archive of “statements, events, and expressions that are not directly accessible in the first-person, but only through the mediation of language, writing, images, documents, artifacts, and so forth,” allows the critical phenomenologist to study the “sedimented structures of a situation that they inhabit, but which they cannot access through personal memory or perception alone” (12).¹³ This distinction between classical and critical phenomenology is, however, not so straightforward. The archive is not irrelevant for classical phenomenology: just consider the way Merleau-Ponty (2012) draws on archives of psychology (e.g., the patient Schneider) to illuminate essential features of embodied experience. As he puts it: “The situation of the patient whom I question appears to me within my own situation and, in this phenomenon with two centers, I learn to know myself as much as I learn to know the other person” (353). Now, it may be that critical phenomenology *depends on* the archive in a way that classical phenomenology does not; however, it does not necessarily follow that this recourse to the archive radically modifies the transcendental character of the inquiry.

III. DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE

Third, put crudely, we might take the project of phenomenology to be descriptive, while the project of critique is normative.¹⁴ Martin Heidegger (2008), for example, famously claims that his account of authenticity is not a moralistic account.¹⁵ In contrast, Fred Rush (2004) points out that critical theory “is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate

¹³ See Foucault’s characterization of the archive: “we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive” (1972, 128). Again, see Dodd (2016) for more on this point.

¹⁴ Though I will not take up this suggestion here, Jansen (2022) persuasively argues that phenomenology should not be merely descriptive, but that when properly executed, phenomenological description is also critical.

¹⁵ “In relation to these phenomena . . . our own Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of any everyday Dasein” (Heidegger, 2008, 210–11).

social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality)” (Rush 2004, 9).

This distinction between the two projects is difficult to work out in a compelling manner. For critique, too, is a descriptive project insofar as it describes the normative dimensions of social arrangements. And phenomenological descriptions, for their part, have normative dimensions. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, for example, draws our attention to the emergence of normative structures within perceptual experience (such as the experience of optimal and sub-optimal viewing conditions) (2012, 312–18). Various other phenomenologists have further described moral normativity within our experience, e.g., de Beauvoir gives a compelling account of the normative tensions that arise through our experiences of others in a social world.¹⁶

A more promising way to articulate the tension would be to define the difference between the projects according to the difference between description and prescription: on this account, phenomenology merely illuminates how things are, while critique identifies how we should act. However, it is not clear that this is a good description of critique. Of course, critique may have as its *motive* the realization of a world in which things are as they should be, but generally speaking, critique, like phenomenology, takes as its subject how things are: it identifies the complex structures undergirding the patterns of the social world, which evade a superficial glance.¹⁷ Guenther argues compellingly that “critique calls for collective action,” and that critical phenomenology requires reflection not just on what an experience is like but on “what [it] would . . . take to transform the situation” (2021, 7, 12). Would, then, a phenomenological inquiry on a structure like ableism, for example, cease to be critical if it failed to identify actions we can take to transform the situation of the disabled vis-à-vis ableism?¹⁸ This is doubtful as such a project would still yield a normative analysis of social structures even if it refrained from outlining definite prescriptions.

Thus, I think we should distinguish the motive of inquiry from its content. We might suggest, then, that critical projects are motivated by the goal of social change, although this does not entail that every critical project prescribes action items. Such a conception

¹⁶ On this point, see Oksala (2022, 145).

¹⁷ On the other hand, it might also be more accurate to say that critique is less descriptive than explanatory (think of genealogical projects, for example); in contrast, a long legacy suggests that phenomenology is descriptive rather than explanatory. Here, too, while much of critique is explanatory, I doubt that all critique must be explanatory. On the other hand, phenomenology can provide descriptions of a number of things we might, in some sense, call explanatory, e.g., phenomenology can describe the way in which certain attitudes and habits become sedimented and then exert an influence over how the social world is constituted.

¹⁸ See Loidolt’s (2022) account of critique. Now, the kind of inquiry I just mentioned might fail as an ethical endeavor. Guenther (2022) has pointed out how critique can harmfully become an end in itself, but not, I think, as a critical phenomenological endeavor. Mérédith Laferté-Coutu cites Alia Al-Saji’s *Collegium Phaenomenologicum* lectures as suggesting that “no practical program or hopes of ‘changing the world’ should guide critical phenomenology” (2021, 90).

of critical phenomenology is articulated by Bonnie Mann, who proposes that critical or feminist phenomenology

admits its own active, ethical motivations. It seeks not just to describe the world in other words, but to change it—particularly to intervene in those power relations that have sedimented into conditions of injustice. Beauvoir takes as her object of concern, not sexual difference as such, as if there were such a thing, but sexual difference as it is constituted through injustice. (2018, 55)

Here, critical phenomenology really does seek to change the world, but it does so precisely *by* analyzing the way in which injustice constitutes our social world, rather than by yielding prescriptions. Or, consider the case of someone who pursued a critical phenomenological project purely out of the motive of, say, curiosity about the human condition. Such a case would be troubling, but I do not think it would be troubling because of a methodological failure.¹⁹

Guenther’s view is nuanced. She describes critical phenomenology insofar as it is a political practice as “a struggle for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world, while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others” (2019, 15). In contrast, critique is “more interested in responses and response-ability than in definitive answers or solutions. . . . Its aim is not to put an issue to rest, but rather to (re)open horizons of indeterminacy, possibility, and becoming-otherwise” (2021, 9). On the one hand, I do not think it is too much of a stretch to say that phenomenological practice (even of the “classical” sort) is a struggle for a parallel kind of change, namely the removal of theoretical clichés that obscure the rich and ambiguous character of our experience. And theoretical baggage that privileges certain experiences while marginalizing others very much does fall within the category of cliché that obscures the character of experience. One could, with some justice, interpret these projects as of a piece. But on the other hand, Guenther writes:

As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. (2019, 16)

This kind of normativity does strike me as distinct from the core of the phenomenological project (and something for which phenomenology lacks a method), though a very natural

¹⁹ In other words, I think what makes this phenomenologist problematic is not a failure to properly enact phenomenological method, but something more like a failure of human empathy. Of course, this latter failure may very well obscure certain phenomena, but this obscurity is not what most bothers us about this case.

and compelling outcome of phenomenological results.²⁰ But again, I doubt that a project really does require this kind of concrete strategizing in order to count as critical.²¹

This brings us quite close to a third way of articulating a potential critical shortcoming of phenomenology. Alia Al-Saji (2022) has argued that critical phenomenology should not pursue mere description or observation—which risks splaying out, for instance, colonized subjectivity before phenomenological vision—but instead should pursue something like touching or dwelling-with wounds, such as the wounds of colonialism.²² Is this kind of “dwelling-with” phenomenological? Certainly, I think traditional descriptions of phenomenology would be inadequate to it. We can easily imagine the ways in which an affect like wonder (which has often been linked to the phenomenological reduction) could seriously fail to register the wounds of colonialism. But this should encourage us to expand the affective registers in which phenomenology is pursued. There may be features of experience to which wonder is not particularly well-attuned.²³ On the other hand, much depends on how we think about what it takes to dwell-with. At its best, phenomenology is often a labor of allowing attentive space and time to be taken by a matter, and this is, in some ways, what we might want dwelling-with to do.

Let’s try a final way of articulating the tension between description and normativity. Rather than prescriptive, perhaps critique is diagnostic (i.e., rather identifying prescriptions for action, perhaps it merely identifies and explicates the underlying conditions that in which normative failures are rooted). If this is right, then I do think we have a tension between classical and critical phenomenology. Diagnosis is a normative project, but even

²⁰ Here, we should emphasize just how tightly entwined phenomenology can be in a project of suggesting solutions. To give a crude example, if phenomenology shows that racism perpetuates itself through perceptual modalities, then shifting back and forth between phenomenological description of the various modes in which perceptual sense is made and critical prescriptions for transforming perception would be a very natural, almost inevitable, approach. Nevertheless, description and prescription are distinct registers within this kind of project, and it would confuse matters simply to conflate them.

²¹ One might also think of critical phenomenology as a compound method, including phenomenological methodologies as well as a variety of other methodologies (e.g., Marxism, Foucauldian genealogy, etc.), which make it possible for critical phenomenology to formulate concrete recommendations. This, I take it, is part of the point of Guenther’s claim that critical phenomenology is a “hybrid method” (2021, 8). By definition, such a compound method is not strictly phenomenological. If this is what we mean by critical phenomenology, then my claim is better framed as follows: a critical project need not be prescriptive, and so there is room for a project that is both genuinely phenomenological and genuinely critical.

²² It would be interesting to compare this to Ocean Vuong’s remark: “I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged and shed, that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it” (2019, 62). In contrast, his mother’s massaging a customer’s phantom limb has the effect of “revealing what’s not there, the way a conductor’s movements make the music somehow more real” (83). I wonder if we could think here that there are some wounds which cannot be revealed through mere description, and which can only be revealed through something like dwelling-with. However, it may be the case that for Al-Saji that we must move past the very desire to reveal.

²³ Note that Anthony Steinbock has argued that phenomenological reflection can be incited by a discernment of the heart (2022, 166). This may be an avenue by which to connect description and dwelling-with, as long as we are careful not to elide all differences between the two.

when phenomenology describes experienced norms, such description is not obviously aimed at diagnosing normative shortcomings.

Once again, though, matters are not quite so clear cut. For phenomenologists do, at times, adopt projects that might well be described in diagnostic terms. For example, Husserl's (1970) project in *Crisis* can be considered diagnostic insofar as it identifies the phenomenological and historical roots of a certain problematic situation, namely our relationship to knowledge and rationality. Indeed, this project could even be considered therapeutic as it aims to correct misunderstandings that have led to this problematic relationship. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty often describes phenomenology as a transformative encounter with our experience. He writes: "It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality" (1964, 24). I doubt that these projects can be classified simply as descriptive as opposed to normative.

IV. PRESENTISM

Fourth, as Gayle Salamon (2018b) points out, critique could, with some justice, accuse phenomenology of being presentist: phenomenology takes experience or appearance as its starting point; however, critique points out the various ways in which appearance is shaped by social and political forces. We might worry that, far from providing access to transcendental structures of experience, phenomenology merely lays claim to universality for the subjective and contingent features of the phenomenologist's own culturally situated experience. Mann (2018), for example, shows how phenomenological analyses of shame as an abstract, eidetic feature of human experience, are naïve about the role of gender in experiences of shame. Further, Oksala points out that precisely for this reason, the universalizing step of the eidetic reduction will appear problematic for critical phenomenology (2022, 141).

While I share this concern about presentism, I think there are ways of assuaging it. First, phenomenology does not have to handle experience naïvely. That phenomenology takes appearance as its starting point does not mean it attaches ultimate authority to any particular set of experiences. Indeed, part of the point of the eidetic reduction is to resist attaching inflated importance to any particular experience. Here, particular experiences are treated as *exemplars* that serve as bases for imaginative variation.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty points out that our capacity for imaginative variation is not unlimited but is itself situated within a particular personal and historical frame such that we cannot expect variation to yield perfectly universal and necessary structures. As he puts it:

A pure essence which would not be at all contaminated and confused with the facts could result only from an attempt at total variation. It would require a spectator himself without secrets, without latency, if we are to

be certain that nothing be surreptitiously introduced into it . . . Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration . . . My incontestable power to give myself leeway (*prendre du champs*), to disengage the possible from the real, does not go as far as to dominate all the implications of the spectacle and to make of the real a simple variant of the possible. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 111–12)²⁴

Merleau-Ponty is not rejecting eidetic variation as a phenomenological method. Rather, he is noting its limitations and situation within a larger philosophical project.²⁵ Doing so allows us to be critical about eidetic variation itself and notice that it is something that phenomenology can do more or less well. Phenomenology that mistakes a contingent cultural arrangement for an essential feature of human experience—a phenomenology that, perhaps, describes a body schema while overlooking the polarization of this schema by a “historical-racial schema”—has fallen short not merely from the perspective of critique, but precisely as phenomenology. Husserl, too, makes remarks that indicate the potential limitations of our imaginations for eidetic variation, for example, when he notes the value of history, art, and poetry for eidetic research.²⁶ I do not think one could attach value to this kind of archive if one naïvely thought of the imagination as straightaway delivering universals. While phenomenology does indeed face the threat of presentism, it does not do so naïvely, but is explicitly meant to be self-critical in this regard. I think we should take Merleau-Ponty’s critique of eidetic variation, and insistence on a kind of “hyper-reflection” (which would reflect on the very methods of reflection), at least partly in this vein.

Thus, we need to be careful with how we understand the claim that phenomenology starts with experience. For, further, phenomenology allows that experience requires interpretation.²⁷ Often the character of experience is opaque to us, and the naïve way of

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty is also explicit that ideation is culturally limited as well:

There is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography. Not that it is confined there and inaccessible for the others, but because, like that of nature, the space or time of culture is not surveyable from above, and because the communication from one constituted culture to another occurs through the wild region wherein they all have originated. (115; emphasis in original)

²⁵ This larger philosophical project requires moving beyond eidetic variation. Merleau-Ponty writes:

There is no guarantee that the whole of experience can be expressed in essential invariants, that certain beings—for example, the being of time—do not in principle elude this fixation and do not require from the start, if they are to be able to be thought by us, the consideration of the fact, the dimension of facticity and the hyper-reflection, which would then become, at least in regard to them, not a superior degree at the ultimate level of philosophy, but philosophy itself. (46)

²⁶ “Extraordinary profit can be drawn from the offerings of history, in even more abundant measure from those of art, and especially from poetry, which are to be sure imaginary but which . . . tower high above the products of our own imagination” (Husserl 1982, 160).

²⁷ This is not to deny the methodological priority of experience: correct interpretation is ultimately a matter of precisely expressing the character of experience.

understanding experience, which enjoys a superficial “obviousness,” expresses a contingent “common sense” interpretation. Part of the labor of phenomenology is to describe experience carefully and precisely and in a way that expresses its character beyond the obvious or cliché. To say that phenomenology starts with appearance should not, then, be taken to mean that it starts with the “obvious,” but that it takes up experience carefully. Here, too, phenomenology can be more or less successful in breaking through cliché to describe experience precisely on its own terms, and so, in this sense as well, runs the risk of presentism. But, again, the point is that a phenomenological investigation blinkered by contemporaneous interpretations fails precisely as phenomenology. And for that matter, critique, too, can be burdened by ideological conceits.

Merleau-Ponty (2012) raises this point in his analysis of hallucination. He emphasizes that neither through their language nor through my own experience can one coincide with the experience of a patient suffering hallucinations. But neither, he argues, should I imagine that my own consciousness can be reduced to the phenomenon in question. He writes:

What is given is not myself here and others over there, nor my present here and my past over there, nor healthy consciousness and its *cogito* here and the hallucinating consciousness over there—with the former being the sole judge of the latter and reducing it to its internal conjectures—rather, what is given is the doctor *with* the patient, me *with* another person, and my past *on the horizon of* my present. I distort my past by evoking it at present, but I can take these very deformations into account. They are indicated to me through the tension that subsists between the abolished past that I aim at and my arbitrary interpretations. I am mistaken about the other because I see him from my point of view, but I hear him object and finally I have the idea of another person as a center of perspectives. The situation of the patient whom I question appears to me within my own situation and, in this phenomenon with two centers, I learn to know myself as much as I learn to know the other person. (353; emphasis in original)²⁸

The phenomenologist must, on the one hand, take up the fact that their present perspective offers limited access to the situation onto which it opens. On the other hand, there is no question of the present being cut off from the past, or myself being cut off from the other, since the past is on the horizon of the present, and the other’s situation is disclosed “in this phenomenon with two centers.” My perspective is open to challenge from that on which it is a perspective: the phenomenologist’s task is to render this challenge acutely. As

²⁸ See Mann’s claim that the feminist phenomenologist “has to enter into the perspective of an other and allow it to work on her. She has to travel between the particularities of this shame, this life, this situation, and the generalities in a constant, oscillating motion. The phenomenon gives itself precisely in the intensified space between general features of human existence and radically particular specifications that are historically situated, bound up in material interests, ensconced in structures of injustice.” (2018, 71; emphases in original)

such, a phenomenology which does not take the perspectival limitations of the present into account has failed precisely as phenomenology.²⁹

V. OVERVIEW

I have tried to show that there are meaningful tensions separating phenomenology from critique. However, it makes a considerable difference how one understands phenomenology, and I have argued that on a nuanced understanding of phenomenology, there is room for a project that is both phenomenological and critical. This is not to say that there is nothing new in critical phenomenology, nor is it an attempt to appropriate the novel accomplishments of critical phenomenology on behalf of Husserl or some other figure—undoubtedly, there are significant tensions in results, methods, and orientations between critical and classical phenomenologists. My argument is rather that this new project does not *need* to break with the fundamental methodology of phenomenology. When Guenther contrasts a method that accords primacy to subjectivity with one that accords it to intersubjectivity, for example, I think we could take this to be a matter *not* of dividing phenomenology from critical phenomenology, but of sorting out what phenomenology itself is (2013, xiii). We should allow that articulating the latter has never been a straightforward matter, and I would suggest we can consider critical phenomenology as a novel, and perhaps transformative, articulation of phenomenology—albeit in a specific set of domains of phenomenological questioning, rather than as a non- or post-phenomenological method.

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²⁹ The difference between the two, then, might be that critique takes up the historical and cultural situatedness of its investigation explicitly, whereas phenomenology does not. But this need not be such a stark contrast. Phenomenology, in methodologically resisting received interpretations of experience, is implicitly critical of historical and cultural situatedness. Nor is it clear that phenomenology cannot take up this situatedness explicitly. Here, too, we can consider Merleau-Ponty’s advocacy of a kind of hyper-reflection that examines how the phenomenological reductions themselves arise within our experience.

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