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A PRAXIS OF FACTICITY FOR CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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The emergent field of critical phenomenology is perhaps best characterized by two interrelated aims: first, to rethink phenomenology as a method of social critique and, second, to envision new possibilities for political action, activism, and emancipatory praxis in response to this. There has been much debate about the first tendril of this project, leading scholars to interrogate the scope and phenomenological basis of its critical method.[1] This has proven indispensable for establishing critical phenomenology as a philosophical endeavor that offers a rigorous and distinctive approach to social critique. My aim is to suggest that the same methodological rigor, clarification, and grounding must now be given to the second tendril of this project—namely, its call for action, activism, and emancipatory praxis.

Lisa Guenther describes this second tendril as "the most important for critical phenomenology" (2021, 17). Critical phenomenology, she argues, does not simply describe structures of oppression but also offers "a way of approaching political activism" (2020, 15). While Guenther most explicitly connects critical phenomenology to transformative political praxis, she is one among many who suggest that critical phenomenology must go beyond mere description to intervene in oppressive quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism.[2] The purpose of this paper is neither to deny the urgency of the calls to action that Guenther and others issue nor to question whether critical phenomenology has relevance to the sphere of action. Yet, I maintain that if critical phenomenology is to offer a distinctive approach to praxis, then it must undertake phenomenological inquiry into the conditions that make transformative political action possible in the first place. By developing the scope, limits,

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[1] See Gayle Salamon (2020), Johanna Oksala (2023), and Lisa Guenther (2021).

[2] See Martina Ferrari (2020), Duane Davis (2020), Gail Weiss et al. (2020), and Mérédith Laferté-Coutu (2021).

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and responsibilities of action that such an analysis entails, critical phenomenology can do more than merely issue calls to dismantle oppressive structures. It can also establish a unique method for understanding these calls and tempering the impulse to issue them uncritically.

In an effort to ground critical phenomenology's method of social critique more rigorously, Johanna Oksala (2023) has emphasized the methodological import of Edmund Husserl's *epoché*, turning to Simone de Beauvoir to show how his reduction can be modified and appropriated to this end. I wish to do something similar in the context of critical phenomenology's calls to action. Yet, rather than drawing on transcendental phenomenology, I maintain that the resources for grounding these calls are better found in existential phenomenology and, specifically, in Martin Heidegger's factical turn in phenomenology. With this, I argue that Hannah Arendt's critical appropriation of Heidegger's notion of facticity in the context of political action offers a decisive example of how this factical turn can inform a rigorously critical and distinctly phenomenological method of praxis.

In his early formulation of the project of fundamental ontology, Heidegger turns to the notion of facticity to show that when we look inward to understand the structures of experience, we do not find a conscious subject whose transcendental characteristics can be discerned in abstraction from its involvement in the world. Instead, we find only that we exist in a factically limited and situated context and that this existence, no less than our inquiry into it, is always already prefigured by the world in which we find ourselves (Heidegger 2010, 11, 56–57). Many in critical phenomenology have drawn on related insights in existential phenomenology to problematize Husserl's *epoché*.[3] Yet, what is most significant about Heidegger's analysis is not that it questions the *epoché* but that it shifts the task of phenomenology altogether. Heidegger is led by his discovery of facticity to insist that phenomenology should be guided not by an attempt to think of ways to escape or mitigate these factical limits, but by an effort to attend phenomenologically to the fact that this is something we can never do. Phenomenology, he thinks, thus gives way to a "hermeneutics of facticity" that consists not in finding a way out of one's factical limits and the interpretive circle it creates, but rather in unending interpretation that enables one "to get into [the circle] in the right way" (148).

While Arendt is among the most incisive critics of Heidegger, her analysis of political action nevertheless takes seriously this foundational phenomenological insight. Whereas Heidegger shifts the task of phenomenology toward a hermeneutics of facticity, I argue that Arendt develops what might be described as a praxis of facticity that critical phenomenology is well positioned to adopt. To demonstrate this, I consider her account of the irreversibility and unpredictability of human action in *The Human Condition*, as well as her analysis of what it means, in light of this, to understand and resist oppressive political structures like totalitarianism in "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)." Arendt, like Guenther, recognizes the urgency of action in the face of systemic oppression. Yet, her analysis indicates that if critical phenomenology's calls to action are to remain properly phenomenological and not merely ideological, its method must attend to the fact that while it may be necessary to act, human action is irredeemably vulnerable to reinforcing, extending, and recreating the very structures that it seeks to abolish. For Arendt, then, the task is not to get out of this predicament but to think praxis in terms of our responsibility to confront it directly in political life.

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[3] See Alia Al-Saji (2014), Guenther (2021), and Mariana Ortega (2022).

While Guenther and others take seriously this insight in the context of social critique, its implications for issuing calls to action have yet to be fully articulated. As Mariana Ortega (2022) has argued, this omission is problematic as it risks obscuring the situatedness of political praxis and imposing a logic of purity on oppressed and marginalized groups. For Ortega, what is missing from these accounts is a notion of "critical criticality" that attends to the ways in which even the most critical projects and political aims remain vulnerable to extending oppressive logics (24–25). By considering how Arendt utilizes the factical turn in phenomenology to initiate her inquiry into transformative political praxis, my aim is to offer an important nuance to the calls to action in critical phenomenology that is responsive to this concern.

I. THE PRAXICAL TURN IN CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Critical phenomenology is distinguished by its openness to a variety of methodologies and traditions, and as an emergent field, it would be overly reductive to suggest that it could be defined along singular, unified lines. Mérédith Laferté-Coutu explains, however, that while there continues to be much debate about what critical phenomenology is, "a consensus has nevertheless emerged: this 'critical turn' involves a commitment to something more than description, namely, to a practice with specific, situated ends" (2021, 89). The critical turn in phenomenology is therefore often and increasingly understood as a praxical turn, giving rise to the question of what it means to issue calls to action from within a critical phenomenological framework (90; Weiss et al. 2020, xiv).

As Laferté-Coutu notes, two divergent perspectives have emerged in response to this question. The first is epitomized by Lisa Guenther who insists that critical phenomenology should become a transformative political praxis. The second comes into view in the work of Alia Al-Saji, who casts suspicion on the transformative potential of liberatory praxis. Guenther, for her part, takes critical phenomenology to distinguish itself from classical phenomenology by focusing not merely on the transcendental structures of experience but also on what she describes as quasi-transcendental structures—structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism, which, though historically contingent, nevertheless shape the meaning and materiality of experience in particular lifeworlds (2021, 12). Guenther maintains, however, that the mere identification and description of these quasi-transcendental structures is not enough. Instead, she says:

> 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. In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it. (Guenther 2020, 16)

Guenther thus interprets critical phenomenology as a political praxis that works to transform and abolish oppressive quasi-transcendental structures. While Al-Saji agrees with Guenther that structures like white supremacy demand liberatory praxis, she disagrees that critical phenomenology should be guided by the belief that this praxis can transform the world (Laferté-Coutu 2021, 89–90). Al-Saji follows Frantz Fanon's analysis of the aporetic structure of liberation, resisting the call to make critical phenomenology a transformative praxis and arguing instead for a "phenomenology of racialized affect that proposes to dwell on, even touch, as Fanon writes, the wounds of colonialism" (90).[4]

Both perspectives offer important insights on the extent to which it is possible to intervene in the quasi-transcendental structures that critical phenomenology interrogates through its method of social critique. Yet, before considering whether liberatory praxis is transformative or aporetic, a more fundamental phenomenological question nevertheless remains unanswered. This question concerns the conditions under which these calls to action, activism, and transformative praxis become possible in the first place. Without answering this question, it remains unclear how critical phenomenology can become a distinctive method of political praxis in its own right and not just a method of social critique that assumes its praxical turn.

Significant work has already been done to address a parallel concern in the context of critical phenomenology's method of social critique. Oksala, for instance, has argued that while critical phenomenology should be defined by its philosophical method of critique and not merely by the topics it covers, it has not done enough to ground this method. In Oksala's view, critical phenomenologists have tended to set aside too quickly Husserl's phenomenological reduction, leaving the field without a "credible philosophical method for investigating *how* the social world fundamentally constitutes experience" (2023, 140; emphasis in original).[5] She maintains that while it may be necessary to challenge the universal and essentialist assumptions of Husserl's eidetic reduction, the *epoché* remains an indispensable methodological step for critical phenomenology. By initiating a radical break with naïve realism, the *epoché* resists naturalist assumptions about phenomena like race and gender while exposing the "historical, intersubjective, and perspectival nature of all experience" (140). Oksala then turns to Beauvoir to show how this methodological step can be deployed in the service of social critique. She explains that the phenomenological reduction is a precondition of Beauvoir's critique of femininity insofar as it remains grounded in the idea that "the intersubjective conditions constitutive of experience can never be rendered totally transparent and explicit. . . . This means accepting the always fragmentary, fallible, and preliminary character of any social critique concerning ourselves" (Oksala 2023, 144). Oksala thus insists that if critical phenomenology allows the reduction to initiate its methodological process, it can establish itself as a rigorous method of radical social critique.

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[4] Al-Saji's argument against Guenther appears in her unpublished lecture courses from the 2019 *Collegium Phaenomenologicum*, which is what Laferté-Coutu is referencing to distinguish their perspectives. For Al-Saji's phenomenology of racialized affect, see Al-Saji (2014).

[5] Oksala further problematizes these rejections for overlooking Husserl's later writings on intersubjectivity (2023, 140–41). See also Guenther (2013).

Whereas this kind of methodological inquiry has proven indispensable for grounding the critical turn in phenomenology, it is now necessary to do the same in the context of its praxical turn. Yet, rather than drawing on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the resources for grounding critical phenomenology's method of praxis are perhaps better found in existential phenomenology and, specifically, in the factical turn in phenomenology as it is initiated by Heidegger and appropriated in the context of political action by Arendt.[6] Significantly, Arendt's appropriation of this factical turn takes seriously in the context of action an insight already present in critical phenomenology—namely, that social critique is a situated and interested interrogation of power that is always already implicated in the very structures it interrogates (Guenther 2021, 11–12). Yet, as central as this insight is for defining its method of social critique, it tends either to be left behind in the context of action or treated as evidence that it is necessary to go beyond phenomenology to think the possibilities for emancipatory praxis.

We see this, for instance, in Guenther's (2021) essay, "Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology," where she recognizes the centrality of this insight in the context of social critique without fully articulating its implications for political praxis. Here, Guenther argues that critical phenomenology's method of social critique must be directed toward one's own critical concepts as much as it is the quasi-transcendental structures it identifies as oppressive. In her view, critical phenomenology is best understood as "a practice of *immanent critique*," whereby one is moved to think critically by a particular relation to what is given as well as the history in which one is implicated (14; emphasis in original). This, however, does not mean that critical phenomenology merely attends to particular contexts and situations. Beyond this, it must proceed from the assumption that "there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance." Guenther thus insists that the method of social critique in critical phenomenology also requires self-critique, remaining open to its own horizonal limits in order to unlearn and transform sedimented habits of thought and being. She calls this "problematization," which does not simply critique and prescribe solutions to unjust structures but also critically engages "the very terms with which one formulates a question" (15). In the context of the prison industrial complex, for example, Guenther argues that problematization means more than the finite goal of shutting down carceral institutions. It also demands inquiry into the broader social and historical conditions that make such institutions possible in the first place.

Yet, while Guenther is clear that social critique requires problematization, she is less clear about what this means for issuing calls to action. Upon offering this analysis, Guenther turns quickly to praxis, stating that it is necessary to "dismantle the carceral, capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist logics that form the prison state's conditions of emergence" (Guenther 2021, 18). She then calls for a "praxis of freedom" that is "rooted in community organizing . . . explicitly oriented towards resistance, resurgence, emancipation, liberation, or some other way of trying to get (a little more) free" (17). To be sure, Guenther insists here and elsewhere that such a praxis must remain critical and imaginative, open to alternative possibilities for resistance, and responsive to the needs of particular communities (2013, 254–56). Yet, she does not undertake inquiry into the conditions that make transformative political praxis possible, nor does she consider what it means to issue calls to action if, by her own lights, there is no "outside" to one's social and historical situation and no pure objective perspective from which to issue these calls.[7]

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[6] For more the relation of Heidegger's early writings to questions of praxis, see Steven Crowell (2013, 261–81).

Critical phenomenology is well positioned to address these questions and distinguish its approach to praxis accordingly. Without answering them, however, the field remains vulnerable to the criticism Mariana Ortega (2022) has raised regarding the dangers of obscuring the situatedness and fallibility of even the most well-intentioned political aims. Ortega raises this criticism in response to Guenther's (2022) essay "Abolish the World as We Know It." In this essay, Guenther draws on Denise Ferreira da Silva's abolitionist refusal of critique to argue that critical phenomenology should become an abolitionist praxis. In order to do this, however, Guenther suggests that critical phenomenology may have to abolish its own method of critique and perhaps even phenomenology itself. Following da Silva, Guenther rejects methods of critique rooted in the Kantian tradition that presuppose a universal, self-determining subject who reflects on and affirms its own ahistorical transcendental structure in the shape of "the world as we know it" (2022, 30). Guenther argues that da Silva's abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics, which issues a call to think beyond critique and perhaps even abolish it, is instructive for critical phenomenology insofar as its own indebtedness to the Kantian tradition of critique risks extending and reinforcing the world as we know it. Guenther thus asks: "What would it take for a praxis of phenomenology to become *abolitionist*, beyond and against the Kantian tradition of critique that phenomenology has inherited" (32; emphasis in original)? To this, she responds that critique must become a praxis that not only acknowledges the limits of the world as we know it but also refuses these limits by "traversing and transgressing the boundaries of space-time, flouting the law of necessitas, and signifying 'in the raw,' beyond the mediation of transcendental a priori categories" (38).

While da Silva's abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics is undoubtedly compelling, Ortega highlights a danger that arises from presuming that it is possible to refuse or overcome these limits in the way that Guenther suggests. This approach, Ortega explains, risks "[covering] up the complexity and multiplicity of experience, and a resurgent methodological abstraction from the very conditions that wound racialized beings and uphold dominant being's existence" (2022, 25). While Guenther acknowledges that certain quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy cannot be bracketed entirely,

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[77] Guenther comes close to doing this when she turns to Jarett Zigon's (2017) critical hermeneutics. Yet, she only emphasizes the way in which this contributes to opening horizons of possibility for political praxis (Guenther 2021, 19). She does not consider what it means for praxis that there is no objective perspective from which to issue calls to action.

Ortega turns to María Lugones to show that Guenther nevertheless remains vulnerable to reinscribing a logic of purity into her critical phenomenology of race by failing to "elaborate on the ways in which the bracketing is different for selves that are differently situated in the structure of white supremacy" (Ortega 2022, 23). That is, Ortega says: "To ask a marginalized, oppressed person of color to carry out such a suspension amounts to asking her to suspend her own body, which carries the wounds of coloniality as well as her history" (22). Ortega then turns to Guenther's discussion in "Abolish the World," arguing that while she welcomes Guenther's move toward the aesthetic, the same concern arises in the context of her approach to praxis. Ortega asks:

> How does critical phenomenology transform into an "abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics"? The question of the "who" returns again. Who is to perform this praxis? What affective tonality does it depend on? And . . . for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do critical phenomenology of race? (24–25)

What is missing from Guenther's account, Ortega thinks, is a practice of "critical criticality" that acknowledges how a logic of purity may remain present no matter how staunchly one refuses the limits of the world as we know it. Ortega says:

> In the face of the intransigency of the logic of purity, even within critical phenomenological projects, I call for the nurturing of an attitude and practice of *critical criticality* that takes seriously the possibility that even already critical and self-critical projects may contain traces of purity that need to be discovered and assessed in light of methodological commitments, explanatory aims, and praxical, political aims. (25; emphasis in original)

Guenther's own analysis of the situated nature of social critique raises the question of whether it is possible simply to refuse the situation, inheritance, and tradition to which one is beholden. Even in challenging the Kantian method of critique, Guenther seems to reaffirm the very method she seeks to abolish, a method which may very well extend the structures of oppression that constitute the world as we know it. So, given Ortega's criticism, perhaps the question is not about how critical phenomenology can escape, bracket off, or refuse these limits—a move that may be closer to Husserl than Guenther would like to admit—but about developing a method of praxis that confronts the fact that this is something we can never do.

Ortega is led from her analysis to say that "a critical impure phenomenological approach might suggest a movement to postphenomenology," and she, like da Silva, makes a compelling case for why a move beyond phenomenology may be necessary (2022, 25). Yet, if critical phenomenologists wish to develop an approach to praxis that remains rooted in a rigorous phenomenological framework, there are resources to do this without relinquishing their own insights into the situatedness of social critique. In what follows, I argue that Heidegger's factical turn in phenomenology has underappreciated methodological import in this regard insofar as it refuses the presumption that there will come a day when critical criticality is no longer necessary. Arendt's critical appropriation of this factical turn in the context of political action demonstrates how this can initiate a methodological process for issuing calls to action that are oriented by, rather than evasive of, the intransigency of these logics of purity.

II. HEIDEGGER'S FACTICAL TURN IN PHENOMENOLOGY

While there is much to be said about the development of Heidegger's notion of facticity throughout his corpus, my aim is merely to outline the basic structure of his early formulation of this concept, as it is here that he most directly connects the problem of facticity to the aims of phenomenological inquiry.[8] Heidegger's factical turn stems from his attempt to critically reconsider Husserl's phenomenological reduction, a critical reconsideration that many, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) to Dan Zahavi (2017), have challenged as overly reductive of Husserl's project, especially in light of his later writings on intersubjectivity.[9] What is most important for our purposes, however, is not whether Heidegger succeeds in overcoming Husserl but how this factical turn repositions the task and critical weight of phenomenological inquiry.

Though Heidegger agrees with Husserl that the modern sciences have failed to account for the ground of their knowledge, his ontological rather than epistemological orientation leads him to suggest that the conditions for the possibility of scientific inquiry run deeper than the structures of consciousness, the transcendental ego, and its eidetic structures (Crowell 2013, 67–68). Instead, he believes that they are rooted in existence itself, and, specifically, in the structures that comprise human existence or Dasein. For Heidegger, then, the task of phenomenology is to understand these structures of existence, structures which have their basis in what he calls facticity (*Faktizität*).

Facticity, as Heidegger conceives of it in his early writings, refers to the fact that Dasein's existence is fundamentally constituted in and through the world, or the social and historical nexus of meaning, in which it finds itself (2010, 11, 56–57). There is nothing prior to or more original than this factically situated existence as this takes shape in Dasein's care (*Sorge*) or concern for the things and others with which it is involved. As Heidegger explains in his 1922 essay, "Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation," facticity is so fundamental that the very effort to step outside of factical life in order to achieve a clearer and more objective perspective on the world is conditioned by Dasein's pre-thematic understanding

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[87] For more on Heidegger's development of the concept of facticity between 1917 and the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, see Scott Campbell (2012; 2013), Leslie MacAvoy (2013), and John Kress (2006). For more on Heidegger's later move away from his hermeneutics of facticity, see Thomas Sheehan (2019; 2011).

[97] Though Merleau-Ponty is often paired with Heidegger in this regard, Zahavi notes how strange this is given that Merleau-Ponty himself did not take Heidegger to do more in *Being and Time* than "[explicate] . . . Husserl's notion of the lifeworld" (2017, 54; Merleau-Ponty 2012, xxi). For a defense of Heidegger's critical engagement with Husserl, see Crowell (2013).

of itself as burdened by its existence and the factical situation that constitutes it (Heidegger 2009, 38). That is, he says: "Factical life has a character of Being such that it finds itself difficult to bear. The most unmistakable manifestation of this is factical life's tendency toward making things easy for itself" (41). Even when we try to avoid it, facticity nevertheless remains conditioning of every attempt we make to understand ourselves and the world and is therefore the most proper object of phenomenological inquiry (40).

For Heidegger, this means that phenomenology must shift the emphasis of its methodological approach. As Steven Crowell explains:

> The understanding of being that makes ontological inquiry possible is not first of all a matter of what takes place in an individual mind but is, rather, an intelligibility that resides in the shared ontological practices prevalent at a particular historical moment . . . For Husserl, this entailed unacceptable relativism; for Heidegger, it is a necessary consequence of the fact that Dasein is "care" (*Sorge*) before it is reason. (2013, 68)

Heidegger maintains that phenomenology should not proceed as if it could abstract from this factical situation. Instead, it should become "a philosophical hermeneutic of facticity" that offers an "explicit interpretation of factical life" as this comes into view through Dasein's concrete involvement in the world (2009, 54). This, however, does not simply mean that phenomenology should inquire into concrete and situated experiences. Beyond this, phenomenology itself must begin from the assumption that even its own inquiry is beholden to these factical limits. In other words, Heidegger contends that phenomenology must "[make] its own beginning within its factical situation, doing so within an already given particular interestedness of factical life that first sustains the philosophical hermeneutic itself and that can never be completely eradicated" (54). He thus insists that phenomenology should not be guided by an attempt to escape or mitigate these factical limits, but should instead attend phenomenologically to the fact that this is something we can never do.

Heidegger gives further contour to the implications of his notion of facticity for phenomenological inquiry in his 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time*. Here, he makes explicit Dasein's existential constitution as being-in-the-world, clarifying how Dasein's involvement in its particular social and historical context conditions every understanding, inquiry, and interpretation it undertakes. Prior to any scientific or theoretical knowledge, Dasein already understands itself and its world even if this understanding has not yet come into view in a clear way. When things do become clear and intelligible, it is not because Dasein has achieved an objective perspective on the world that is no longer obscured by its factical situation. On the contrary, Heidegger says: "When something is understood but still veiled, it becomes unveiled [*Enthüllung*] by an act of appropriation that is always done under the guidance of a perspective which fixes that with regard to which what has been understood is to be interpreted" (2010, 145). That things come to appear in their significance is a function not of having successfully bracketed off one's natural attitude but of already having the world and being involved in it in a certain way. He says:

> The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception . . . every interpretation operates within the fore-structure which we characterized. Every interpretation which is to contribute some understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted. (Heidegger 2010, 146–47)

In other words, as James Risser explains: "Interpretive explication takes place in relation to the antecedent forehaving, with the way in which life has been taken hold of in advance" (2000, 75).

Heidegger concedes that this poses a serious problem for achieving objectivity in the sciences. Scientific inquiry rests on the assumption that what counts as proof or evidence "must not already presuppose what its task is to found." He thus asks: "If interpretation always already has to operate within what is understood and nurture itself from this, how should it then produce scientific results without going in a circle" (2010, 147)? For the scientists, this interpretive circle appears vicious, violating the most elementary rules of logic and foreclosing the possibility of any kind of objective perspective on the objects of scientific inquiry. Heidegger maintains, however, that phenomenology should not follow the sciences in assuming that it is necessary to avoid this circle. Instead, it should question the assumption that this circle is vicious and ask why we seek to avoid it in the first place. He says:

> *To see the vitiosum in this circle and to look for ways to avoid it, even to "feel" that it is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up.* It is not a matter of assimilating understanding and interpretation to a particular ideal of knowledge . . . Rather, the fulfillment of the fundamental conditions of possible interpretation lies *in not failing to recognize* beforehand the essential conditions of what is being done. (148; emphasis in original)

Rather than attempting to achieve even greater distance from this circle, Heidegger argues that phenomenological inquiry must instead take its point of departure from it. In other words: "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way" (148). With this, he reiterates his claim that phenomenology must become a hermeneutics of facticity that confronts directly the concrete situatedness of all inquiry, understanding, and interpretation. By locating facticity at the center of his analysis, Heidegger thus shifts the methodological weight of phenomenological inquiry, suggesting that it must not give into the naïve assumption that it is possible to escape the situatedness of factical life. Instead, it should initiate a methodological process that remains vigilant of the intransigency of these factical limits no less than the biases and prejudices that they entail.

Of course, we might wonder what, if anything, this has to do with developing a method of praxis in critical phenomenology. Afterall, Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity has proven most influential for fields like philosophical hermeneutics, which focus principally on matters of knowledge, truth, and interpretation.[10] Moreover, Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism may caution against adopting any part of his project for the purposes of developing a method of praxis in critical phenomenology.[11] Yet, as Crowell argues, it is precisely because Heidegger refuses the possibility of a pre-social subject and centers his analysis on factical life that he opens the door to questions of action (2013, 262). Significantly, Arendt takes seriously the practical and political potential of Heidegger's analysis. Though she does not believe that he fully realizes this potential in *Being and Time*, she nevertheless allows the methodological import of his factical turn to guide her inquiry into transformative political action. In so doing, Arendt offers an analysis that attends to the situatedness of experience in the ways that Ortega suggests critical phenomenology must do, while suggesting an approach to praxis that remains vigilant of what this means for issuing calls to action.

III. ARENDT'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS

Much has been said about the influence of Heidegger on Arendt's thought, no less than the myriad ways in which she critically engages his existential analytic of Dasein.[12] Yet, while some have considered how Arendt challenges and modifies Heidegger's conception of facticity, few have emphasized the methodological significance of his factical turn for orienting her approach to political action.[13] Arendt may be interpreted in *The Human Condition*, and especially in her analysis of natality and plurality, as undertaking phenomenological inquiry into the conditions under which the kind of transformative action that Guenther calls for becomes possible.[14] Yet, by turning to Arendt's account of the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action, we find that the possibility for transformative political action cannot be thought apart from the factical limits of human existence, limits which render even the most just and emancipatory political aims vulnerable to recreating the oppressive structures they seek to dismantle. Rather than presuming that action can overcome these limits, Arendt instead offers what might be described as a praxis of facticity that proceeds from the assumption that this is something we can never do. For Arendt, then, the task is not to avoid or mitigate these limits but rather to envision a praxis that confronts them directly in political life.

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[10] See Günter Figal (2010); James Risser (2012), Gert-Jan Van der Heiden (2019), and Theodore George (2020).

[11] I would argue, however, that Heidegger's political commitments, no less than the hubris with which he enacted them, only serves to further emphasize importance of developing a method of praxis that remains attentive to the factical limits of existence and the fallibility this entails. See Richard Wolin (2016) and Andrew J. Mitchell and Peter Trawny (2017).

[12] See, for instance, Dana Villa (1995), Jacques Taminiaux (1997), Seyla Benhabib (2003), Peg Birmingham (2006), Roger Berkowitz (2018), Sophie Loidolt (2018), and Kimberly Maslin (2020). Arendt (1994) offers her most direct challenge to the political dangers that she perceives in Heidegger's project in "What is Existential Philosophy?"

[13] Veronica Vasterling (2011) and Loidolt (2018, 77–82) are notable exceptions, though even they focus primarily on how hermeneutic phenomenology shapes Arendt's view of understanding rather than action itself.

[14] While Arendt takes all action to have transformative potential by virtue of being born of natality and plurality, this does not mean that politics itself is always emancipatory and transformative. Instead, as Andrew Schaap (2021) notes, Arendt often treats the political as a limit on the boundlessness of action. Whereas Schaap believes this is important for preserving the political against extreme violence, radical democrats like Sheldon Wolin and Jacques Ranciére argue that it reflects Arendt's conservativism and unwillingness to associate political action with the abolition of social inequality.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt conceives of natality and plurality as the fundamental conditions of human existence, conditions which themselves make possible transformative political action. Together, these concepts displace Heidegger's emphasis on death and the self, illustrating that each newcomer who enters the world is at once irreducibly singular while, at the same time, irrevocably embedded within the fabric of communal life. Natality, Arendt argues, marks our native capacity for new beginnings and constitutes the source of our freedom (1998, 9). In turning to natality, Arendt wishes to show that the distinguishing feature of human existence resides not in our sameness, but rather in the irreducible singularity that is bestowed upon us by the fact of our birth (Birmingham 2006, 12). She writes: "Each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before" (Arendt 1998, 178). Yet, in keying this irreducible singularity to the relationality of birth rather than the radical separation of death, Arendt maintains that it is impossible to think this singular uniqueness apart from the relations that constitute it. In being born anew, we are also born into a world with others on whom we depend for our singularity. Human existence is therefore marked not just by natality, but also by plurality, or "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (7).

Though the human conditions of natality and plurality are implicit in every human activity, Arendt argues that they come to appear most fully through speech and action in the space of politics. "In acting and speaking," she says, "men show who they are . . . make their appearance in the human world . . . The disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is . . . is implicit in everything somebody says and does" (179). Through action, we enact our natality by initiating something new in the world that has never before been seen and that could never have been predicted. Through speech, we enact our plurality by distinguishing ourselves among others, announcing who we are, what we have done, and what we intend to do. Speech and action thus enable human beings to appear to one another not as interchangeable entities governed by the necessary life processes, but as radically unique and capable of acting against "the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability" (178).

Arendt, like Guenther, thus conceives of political action as a transformative, world changing activity that has the power to intervene in structures that might otherwise appear natural, inevitable, and necessary. Yet, by undertaking rigorous phenomenological inquiry into human action itself, Arendt goes a step further than Guenther, demonstrating that the very conditions that make possible transformative political action are also what render it vulnerable to fallibility, and misjudgment. This comes into view in Arendt's analysis of the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action.

Arendt maintains that because action is conditioned by natality, it is inherently boundless and unpredictable. No artificial boundary can contain it and no external metric can determine or predict its outcome. She says: "While the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset its . . . inherent unpredictability" (1998, 191). Furthermore, because action is conditioned by plurality, one never acts from a universal, disinterested perspective. Instead, the actor is always already immersed in a world that prefigures her perspective, limiting her ability to see clearly enough to guarantee that the consequences of her action will match her intentions. Not only this, but the actor is also surrounded by others who are equally unique and unpredictable. Hence, while she may have clarity about the aims of her action, the actor can never know for certain how others will interpret and respond to her initiatives. And yet, because action bears directly on the realm of human affairs, even its unintended consequences are irreversible. To act is to intervene directly in the world as we know it. Whether this proves beneficial or disastrous, the action itself can never be undone.

This inherent unpredictability and irreversibility thus gives rise to the ultimate predicament of human action. Arendt says:

> That deeds possess such an enormous capacity for endurance . . . could be a matter of pride if men were able to bear its burden, the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability . . . That this is impossible, men have always known. They have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it. (1998, 233)

In light of this, it is not difficult to see why one might be inclined either to ignore this predicament upon pursuing emancipatory action or give up on action as capable of realizing just and emancipatory ends. As Arendt concedes: "All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom" (233). Yet, Arendt does not yield to this temptation but instead makes a move that runs parallel to Heidegger's call to make phenomenology a hermeneutics of facticity. Rather than assuming that this predicament is vicious, treating it as something to be avoided, she suggests that it is necessary to think the possibilities for praxis from out of it. As Sophie Loidolt explains:

> Arendt thereby *pluralizes* and *politicizes* her phenomenologically acquired hermeneutics . . . Arendt's appeal to experience just as much as Heidegger's forbids a methodical apprehension from "outside" . . . and instead demands an elucidation from "inside" experience itself. (2018, 79; emphasis in original)

In this, Arendt offers what might be described as a praxis of facticity that is oriented not by an attempt to get out of this predicament but by an effort to take responsibility for it in the context of political life.

IV. ARENDT'S PRAXIS OF FACTICITY

Though Arendt develops this insight in a number of registers, in the essay "Understanding and Politics" her analysis of what it means to understand and intervene in oppressive political structures like totalitarianism offers a particularly relevant example for critical phenomenology.[15] In this essay, Arendt (1994) argues that because totalitarianism exceeds traditional metrics and categories of explanation, we cannot fight it by beginning from the assumption that we already know what it is. Instead, this fight depends on coupling action with what she calls "understanding." Understanding, Arendt explains, is distinct from scientific knowledge or correct information because it does not yield unequivocal results or clear paths to action. Rather, she says, it is "an unending activity by which in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world" (308).

The need for understanding arises from the conditions that comprise human existence. What she calls natality and plurality in *The Human Condition* she characterizes here in terms of being born strangers. As Arendt explains: "Every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he is born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger" (1994, 308). For Arendt, this "bearing with strangers" is not a contingent feature of human existence or something from which we can choose to abstain. Rather, as Phillip Hansen says, "[i]t is an essential element of our existence as plural beings—a refusal to bear with strangers is a refusal of plurality" (2004, 10). Insofar as we are unable to abstain from this factical situation, understanding is essential, "[making] it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and [making] it possible for them to bear with us" (Arendt 1994, 322).

In view of this, Arendt argues that understanding is not opposed to human action but indispensable for it. This, she thinks, is because understanding is the only form of cognition that can bear the burden of action's unpredictability and irreversibility, a burden which itself is born of the very conditions that make human action possible—namely, natality and plurality (322). That is, she says: "If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action" (321). Insofar as political atrocities like totalitarianism are themselves products of the unpredictability of human action, they tend to exceed traditional metrics and categories of explanation. Understanding does not explain this away, but instead remains open to the factical limits of our knowledge, creating a space to think anew about what has happened and what to do. Understanding can also bear the burden of the irreversibility of human action because it is not the same as forgiveness. Whereas forgiveness attempts the impossible—namely, to undo what has been done—understanding confronts head on “what irrevocably happened” and what “unavoidably exists” (322). Hence, she says, “To understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all” (Arendt 1994, 308).

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[15] Whereas Arendt turns to promising and forgiveness to address the unpredictability and irreversibility of action in *The Human Condition*, it is noteworthy that she finds neither useful for understanding and resisting totalitarianism in "Understanding and Politics."

To be sure, Arendt, like Guenther, recognizes the urgency of action in the face of structural oppression. Yet, by taking seriously the factical turn in phenomenology in order to clarify the conditions under which transformative praxis becomes possible, Arendt’s approach to action remains grounded in the idea that no action—regardless of how just, emancipatory, or well-intentioned—is immune to reinforcing these structures. This, however, does not forestall action. Rather, through her account of understanding, Arendt offers a mechanism for remaining open to this fact while allowing it to inform praxis itself. She explains:

> Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this first if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival. Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world (***crystallizing elements found in that world, since totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon***), the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for. (310; emphasis added)

For Arendt, the task of understanding does not end once we have identified oppressive structures and issued calls to dismantle them. Rather, because human action is always unpredictable and irreversible, the task of understanding remains unending.

Arendt, like Heidegger, admits that this creates something of a circle. While action may seek emancipatory and transformative ends, these ends can never be guaranteed, and, regardless of the outcomes, its effects can never be reversed. Yet, she suggests that it would be a mistake to interpret this circle as vicious and develop approaches to action that try to escape it. Such gestures, she thinks, are not only futile but also risk reducing political phenomena in ways that artificially limit the possibilities for emancipatory praxis in the face of political atrocity. For this reason, she says: “The activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight . . . it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart” (1994, 310).

Arendt explains that when action remains tethered to understanding, it “will not shy away from the circle but, on the contrary, will be aware that any other results would be so far removed from action, of which understanding is only the other side, that they could not possibly be true; nor will the process itself avoid the circle the logicians call ‘vicious’” (322). This, she argues, is crucial for a praxis that takes seriously the situatedness of one’s calls to action, while also engaging in the unending critical criticality that this situatedness requires.

Arendt therefore provides a basis for a method of praxis that does not attempt to escape this situation, but that instead remains keyed to a concern for envisioning possibilities for action, activism, and emancipatory praxis from out of it.

V. CRITICAL CRITICALITY AND UNDERSTANDING

It would be a mistake to suggest that Arendt's praxis of facticity offers the final word on how critical phenomenology should approach its calls to dismantle oppressive, quasi-transcendental structures. Afterall, as Andrew Schaap (2021) has noted, Arendt places strict and potentially problematic limitations on the political sphere, and Kathryn Sophia Belle (2014) has famously highlighted the ways in which this can exclude from the political forms of resistance that oppose oppressive structures like anti-Black racism. Yet, as problematic as these limitations may be, Arendt's political appropriation of the factical turn in phenomenology nevertheless remains useful for considering how critical phenomenologists might make explicit in the context of action the implications of their own insights into the situated and intersubjective constitution of experience. A praxis of facticity demands inquiry into the ways in which even the most well-intentioned calls to action remain beholden to their own factical limits, limits which themselves implicate us in the very structures that transformative political action seeks to abolish. This is necessary because it is not as if white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, the genocide of indigenous people, climate catastrophe, or the rise of far-right populism have been imported from the moon. Rather, as Arendt suggests, they are crystalized elements found in our world, which means that the process of understanding is also, and perhaps even primarily, a process of self-understanding. Here, self-understanding does not mean turning inward to focus on oneself. Instead, it is akin to what Ortega means when she insists on asking the question of the who: who can undertake a reduction of colonial structures and who should undertake an abolitionist praxis in the face of this? A praxis of facticity proceeds from these questions rather than abstracting from them. By coupling action with understanding, a praxis of facticity not only provides a methodological basis to consider how distinct but interrelated factical situations may yield distinct but interrelated possibilities for praxis. It also challenges the assumption that we already have the correct categories and metrics for interpreting quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and capitalism. By working against the temptation to reduce the situation, no less than the people in it, a praxis of facticity thus provides a basis to open new possibilities for emancipatory praxis and coalition that more reductive approaches foreclose. In so doing, it offers a way to integrate into a method of praxis the critical criticality that Ortega recommends, conceiving of action not as an afterthought but as a responsibility.

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