

# 2 Critical Phenomenology

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Phenomenology is a philosophical practice of reflecting on the transcendental structures that make the lived experience of consciousness possible and meaningful. It begins by bracketing the natural attitude, or the naive assumption that the world exists apart from consciousness and “reducing” an everyday experience of the world to the basic structures that constitute its meaning and coherence. The purpose of this reduction is not to abstract from the complexity of ordinary experience but rather to lead back (*reducere*) from an uncritical absorption in the world toward a rigorous understanding of the conditions for the possibility of any world whatsoever. The most basic of these conditions is the transcendental ego; there is no experience, and hence no meaningful experience, without *someone* who does the experiencing. This “someone” is not a bare cogito or “I think”; it is, in its most basic formulation, a relation or orientation of the thinker to the thought. In other words, the cogito is always already a cogito *cogitatum*; I do not just think, I think *thoughts*, feel *feelings*, remember *memories*, and so forth.

This discovery has consequences for how we understand ourselves as subjects. If I am not just a bare cogito, but the relation or orientation of an intentional act (thinking) to an intentional object (thought), then even at the level of absolute individuality, I do not exist as an isolated point, but rather as a vector or arrow that gestures beyond itself in everything it thinks and does. If we take this dynamic orientation as our philosophical starting point, then a range of seemingly intractable problems dissolve. It becomes nonsensical to wonder how the cogito gets outside itself to connect to a world or whether “other minds” exist, because the act of thinking always already implies a range of thoughts, the open horizon of which defines the phenomenological concept of world. Rather than bumping our philosophical heads against the bell jar of solipsism, classical phenomenology gives us a language to articulate the relationships without which we could not be who we are or understand what we experience. It lights up the transcendental structures that we rely upon to make sense of things but which we

1 routinely fail to acknowledge. In other words, phenomenology points us in a critical  
2 direction.

3 But where classical phenomenology remains insufficiently critical is in failing to give  
4 an equally rigorous account of how contingent historical and social structures also shape  
5 our experience, not just empirically or in a piecemeal fashion, but in what we might  
6 call a quasi-transcendental way. These structures are not a priori in the sense of being  
7 absolutely prior to experience and operating the same way regardless of context, but  
8 they do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience.  
9 Structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity permeate, orga-  
10 nize, and reproduce the natural attitude in ways that go beyond any particular object  
11 of thought. These are not things to be seen but rather *ways of seeing*, and even ways of  
12 *making the world* that go unnoticed without a sustained practice of critical reflection.  
13 There is nothing necessary or permanent about these structures, and they don't even  
14 operate in stable, consistent ways across all contexts; even within a given historical con-  
15 text, differently positioned subjects are likely to have divergent relations to overlapping  
16 structures. And yet these structures generate the norms of the lifeworld and the natural  
17 attitude of those who inhabit them. We overlook them at our peril, even if our project is  
18 transcendental, because they are part of what we must bracket to get into the phenom-  
19 enological attitude.

20 The prospect of critical phenomenology<sup>1</sup> raises a number of questions: What, if any-  
21 thing, can phenomenology teach us about the lived experience of power and oppression  
22 and the role of quasi-transcendental social structures in shaping this experience? What  
23 would it take for phenomenology to become critical, not only of the naive assumption  
24 that the world exists apart from consciousness, but also of the naive assumption that  
25 one could give a rigorous account of consciousness without addressing the contingent  
26 social structures that normalize and naturalize power relations in any given world?  
27 And if phenomenology does become critical, what does it have to contribute to ongo-  
28 ing discourses and practices of social-political critique? Is critical phenomenology just  
29 catching up with these conversations, or can it open new and powerful directions for  
30 thought and action?  
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### 32 Traces of Critical Theory in Phenomenology

34 A crucial difference between classical and critical phenomenology is the degree to which  
35 intentionality is understood as the *orientation* of an intentional act (noesis) toward an  
36 intentional object (noema), where noesis constitutes noema without being reciprocally  
37 constituted by it, or as a *relation* in which feedback loops interweave noetic processes  
38 with a noematic field and vice versa. Husserl takes the former position, Merleau-Ponty  
39 the latter. Husserl's account of the absolute priority of noesis allows him to argue that  
40 consciousness is not just "a little *tag-end of the world*,"<sup>2</sup> or an object that is causally  
41 determined by forces outside of itself. But his transcendental idealism leads Husserl to  
42 make some rather unhelpful claims for the project of critical phenomenology, such as  
43 his thought experiment that even if a "universal plague" had destroyed every other sub-  
44 ject, leaving me utterly alone, I would still have access to "a unitarily coherent stratum  
45

of the phenomenon world” as “the correlate of continuously harmonious, continuing world-experience.”<sup>3</sup> As the experience of people in solitary confinement suggests, even a relatively short period of extreme isolation from others has a profound effect on one’s experience of the world as a “continuously harmonious” context for meaningful experience.<sup>4</sup> The capacity of material, historical changes in the world to affect not just *what* I perceive but *how* I perceive it, and even to erode my *capacity* to experience the world in a coherent, harmonious fashion, suggests that noesis is not absolutely prior to noema, but rather implicated in a complex reciprocity through which the world really can influence my capacity to perceive it.

The logic of “influence” here is not causal but conditional; to acknowledge the quasi-transcendental effect of the world on consciousness is not to reduce the latter to a tag-end of the former, but rather to acknowledge the concreteness of embodied Being-in-the-world as well as the agency of the world as an interhuman and more-than-human web of possibilities and tendencies. Merleau-Ponty’s account of the *relation* between noesis and noema, and his later account of the chiasmatic structure of intercorporeal Being-in-the-world, offers a more promising starting point for critical phenomenology because it acknowledges the weight of the world without treating it as an inexorable determinative force. In other words, Merleau-Ponty shows how the world shapes consciousness, without depriving consciousness of the agency to shape the world in return. I don’t think critical phenomenology can get off the ground without these two insights.

Once we have established a philosophical basis for acknowledging that contingent but persistent social structures influence our capacity to experience the world, not just in isolated instances but in a way that is deeply constitutive of who we are and how we make sense of things, we need to develop and refine a set of conceptual tools and methods for tracking this influence. Husserl’s concepts of transcendental intersubjectivity and the lifeworld are useful here, as are Heidegger’s account of mood, interpretation, and historicity and Merleau-Ponty’s account of operative intentionality, body schema, intercorporeality, and perceiving according to others.

For example, the body schema is a useful concept for critical phenomenology because it plays a constitutive role in the emergence of meaning, and yet it remains historically contingent and open to reconfiguration in a way that an *eidos*, or essence, is not. For Merleau-Ponty, the body schema is not just an image in my mind of what my body looks like; it is a dynamic organizational matrix or template, both for my proprioceptive sense of embodiment and for embodied action. When I reach for my laptop or negotiate a curb on my bicycle, I rely on my body schema to perform the action; for the most part, I don’t need conscious thought to do this. But I was not born typing on laptops; I had to learn, and the historical process of acquiring skills, incorporating technologies, and negotiating landscapes remains sedimented in my body schema as traces that are activated to various degrees. The body schema is not just a program that I run to accomplish tasks; it is a historical record of experience, context, emotion, taboos, and desires. As such, the body schema is an invaluable resource for critical phenomenology, not only as an archive of the natural attitude in particular lifeworlds, but also as the site of a dynamic process through which habits and norms are reconfigured.

In recent years, critical phenomenologists have developed, expanded, and reworked Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body schema to account for gendered and sexual

1 schemas (Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, Talia Mae Bettcher, Gayle Salamon),  
 2 racialized schemas (Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Sara Ahmed, George Yancy, Alia Al-  
 3 Saji), disability schemas (Kay Toombs, Lisa Diedrich, Havi Carel), and other aspects of  
 4 embodied lived experience.  
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## 6 Traces of Phenomenology in Critical Theory

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 9 Many thinkers write about experience. But what makes an account of experience  
 10 phenomenological? More specifically, what makes it a useful resource for critical phe-  
 11 nomenology? In her landmark essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde defines  
 12 poetry as “a revelatory distillation of experience”:  
 13

14 The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the  
 15 product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through  
 16 those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our  
 17 magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry  
 18 that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and form-  
 19 less, about to be birthed, but already felt.<sup>5</sup>  
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21 While Lorde does not identify her method as phenomenology, or even as philosophy,  
 22 her reflections on experience offer a powerful inspiration for critical phenomenology.  
 23 Her account of the “quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives” speaks to the con-  
 24 ditions of critical reflection, both in the sense of a condition of possibility and also in the  
 25 sense of an atmosphere or context that shapes what can be seen and how it is seen. For  
 26 Lorde, the practice of critical scrutiny is motivated by the feeling of something that mat-  
 27 ters to someone, and it is in following this feeling and struggling to name it that poetry  
 28 (and arguably philosophy) emerges. For Lorde, poetry is both a descriptive practice  
 29 of illuminating and articulating one’s experience and also a transformative practice of  
 30 changing the conditions under which one’s experience unfolds. The descriptive and  
 31 transformative dimensions of this practice reciprocally invoke one another; there is no  
 32 meaningful change without an interrogation of meaning, and yet the process of scruti-  
 33 nizing and naming one’s experience already begins to change its meaning. A poetically  
 34 expressed feeling is not the same as a nameless and formless one; when the quality of  
 35 light by which we scrutinize our lives becomes an object of reflection itself, its quality  
 36 has already started to change.

37 In phenomenological terms, we could think of this “quality of light” as the affec-  
 38 tive tonality or mood that both motivates and contours one’s meaningful experience  
 39 as an embodied Being-in-the-world. This affective tonality cannot be understood apart  
 40 from one’s social location in a specific historical lifeworld, and yet social location is not  
 41 reducible to a causal or determinative force. For example, an affective investment in  
 42 whiteness as property, whether conscious or unconscious, will bring a different quality  
 43 of light to one’s experience and generate a different understanding of the world, than a  
 44 Black, Indigenous, or Latinx investment in abolishing white supremacy. But the struc-  
 45 ture of whiteness as property is not an inexorable destiny condemning white people

to racism and absolving us of the responsibility to become otherwise. Rather, a critical phenomenology of whiteness inspired by Lorde's account of poetry would have to scrutinize the quality of light that illuminates the world from a white perspective and to name the feelings that motivate this perspective, with the hope of bringing about a change, not only in the structure of whiteness but in the shape of the world that white supremacy has built. This is poetry as illumination *and* transformation: a way of making otherwise inchoate but powerful feelings available for further scrutiny, not just as a process of individual introspection but as a collective practice of critical interrogation and social change. The emotional work of critical scrutiny is not just a matter of disinterested theoretical reflection; the meaning of our lives and the shape of our world depend upon this scrutiny, and it can be exhausting. There are many reasons to avoid or derail critical scrutiny, and yet the motivation to persist is also powerful, since the meaning and materiality of our lives is at stake.

There is much for an aspiring critical phenomenologist to learn from Lorde's account of poetry as "a revelatory distillation of experience." Lorde shares some core insights with classical phenomenology: namely, that experience is lived, that it presupposes a subject whose perspective matters, that this perspective is partial, and that it is both possible and necessary for a subject of experience to scrutinize or reflect on the meaning and motivation of its experience. But Lorde also moves beyond the descriptive agenda of classical phenomenology in ways that are instructive for critical phenomenology; reflection or critical scrutiny is not an end in itself for Lorde, but part of a process of moving from feeling to language to action, without leaving any of these moments behind.

### What Is Critical Phenomenology?

Critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of "restructuring the world" in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, critical phenomenology is both a way of doing philosophy and a way of approaching political activism.

As a philosophical practice, critical phenomenology suspends commonsense accounts of reality in order to map and describe the structures that make these accounts possible, to analyze the way they function, and to open up new possibilities for reimagining and reclaiming the commons. It is a way of pulling up traces of a history that is not quite or no longer there—that has been rubbed out or consigned to invisibility—but still shapes the emergence of meaning.

As a political practice, critical phenomenology is a struggle for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others. These structures exist on many levels: social, political, economic, psychological, epistemological, and even ontological. They are both "out there" in the world, in the documented patterns and examples of hetero-patriarchal racist domination, and they are also intrinsic to subjectivity and

intersubjectivity, shaping the way we perceive ourselves, others, and the world. In other words, they are both the patterns that we see when we study something like incarceration rates, and also the patterns *according to which* we see. 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.

In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it.

## Notes

1. My approach to critical phenomenology is unrelated to Max Velmans's concept of the same name in "Heterophenomenology versus Critical Phenomenology: A Dialogue with Dan Dennett," *Cogprints*, 2001, <http://cogprints.org/1795/>. However, it does bear a resemblance to Michael Marder's account of critical phenomenology in *phenomena-critique-logos: The Project of Critical Phenomenology* (London; Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), and to anthropologist Robert Desjarlais's method of critical phenomenology in "Movement, Stillness: On the Sensory World of a Shelter for the 'Homeless Mentally Ill,'" in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. D. Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 369–70.

2. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), 24.

3. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 93, 96.

4. I develop a critical phenomenology of solitary confinement in *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2013).

5. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2007), 37, 36.

6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 82.