

Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy & Gayle Salamon
(ed.) (2020), *50 Concepts for a Critical
Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern
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Asking ‘what *critical phenomenology* is’ must be understood as a deeply political question. It does not ponder on the phenomenological method itself as much as its critical aspect, since the developments included in this new field of research emerge from a century-old philosophical tradition with rigorous and methodical groundings. It asks about the recent turn, in the last two decades, taken by some philosophers in their first-person descriptive inquiries. In 2018, Gayle Salamon, co-editor of *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, published a paper partially answering the question: “when asking what a critical phenomenology is, we might maintain that it reflects on the structural conditions of its own emergence, and in this, it is following an imperative that is both critical in its reflexivity and phenomenological in its taking-up of the imperative to describe what it sees in order to see it anew¹.” Shortly after, citing Lisa Guenther (who also signs an article in *50 Concepts*), the article defines the method of critical phenomenology by emphasizing the complex social structures underlying most lived experiences: “By critical phenomenology I mean a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology’s claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to

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¹ Salamon, G. (2018), « What’s Critical About Critical Phenomenology? », *Puncta*, vol. 1, n° 1, p. 12.

intersubjectivity and the complex textures of social life².” This thesis, that Guenther elaborated in her important book *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, challenges many key positions of classical phenomenology – like the unified experience of lived temporality. The observation of a rupture in the perception of time in prisoners in solitary confinement supports the idea that social structures affect individual consciousness – whereas, traditionally, consciousness is thought of in terms of virtually invariable transcendental structures. Drawing on the observation that transcendental phenomenology is insufficiently sensitive to the contingent forces of history and social structures, critical phenomenology stresses the intersubjective aspects of experience.

In this context, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* presents a thorough selection of chapters and lays out the recent reinvestment of classical phenomenological concepts in other fields such as queer, gender and feminist studies, feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, and disability studies. Understood this way, this book undergoes a difficult project because it covers a very wide range of subjects, but succeeds in the sense that it is an intersectional investigation of how the world shapes lived experience – critical of the universal phenomenological subject of classical phenomenology, it focuses on racialized experience, feminist perspectives, and is critical of able-bodied normativity, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity as blind spots of many philosophical works on subjectivity.

In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, Duane H. Davis’ article *The Phenomenological Method* and Lisa Guenther’s article *Critical Phenomenology* stand as a conceptual introduction. They describe how the pure and transcendental aim of classical phenomenology is put aside to allow a *praxial* goal: “The ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it³.” It embraces a political dimension of social experience through the lens of lived first-person experience. Far from giving a clear and easy definition of what critical phenomenology is, they lay out the methods by which it is possible to invest phenomenological tools in

² Guenther, L. (2013), *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, p. xiii, cited in Salamon, G. (2018) « What’s Critical About Critical Phenomenology? », p. 9.

³ Weiss G. *et al.*, (2020), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, p. 16.

political issues. Critical phenomenology does not try to stay in the field of pure description but explicitly stays out of it by embracing the goal of investigating and unveiling social structures that shape lived experience. It explains the encounter of multiple fields of research in this anthology-like work: among the contributors, we find researchers with a background in phenomenology (such as Alia Al-Saji, Helen A. Fielding, Donald Landes, Ted Toadvine, Scott Marratto, Linda Martin Alcoff, Nancy J. Holland). Among them, many also work in critical race theory (Charles Mills, Axelle Carera, David Haekwon Kim, Emily S. Lee, George Yancy), and many others in feminist philosophy (Patricia Hill Collins, Jennifer McWeeny). It also mobilizes questions from disability, indigenous (Kyle Whyte) and queer studies (Robert McRuer, Sid Hansen, Talia Mae Bettcher). However, classifying these authors is a puzzle, almost an irrelevant task, because they all draw from multiple fields of research. In consequence, the articles, just like the background of the 52 contributors, can difficultly be reduced to a single category. In that way, many chapters echo one another, treating similar themes fundamental to phenomenology: the body, perception, temporality, and spatiality. This interdependence between chapters makes it difficult to organize the entries, which justifies the presentation of the chapters in alphabetical order. It allows a non-linear reading: starting with introductory entries in phenomenological method and critical phenomenology, the rest of the book can be read from any point. The articles stand on their own, are very intelligible, and are accessible partly because of their length (no more than a few pages long). They treat phenomenological concepts in very innovative ways, characterized by interdisciplinarity, but still rooted in classical works: many chapters refer to Sartre (Bad Faith), Husserl (Leib/Körper Distinction, Natural Attitude), Heidegger (The Ontological/Ontic Distinction, Being-Toward-Death, The They), Merleau-Ponty (The Flesh of the World, The Habit Body, Immanence-Transcendence, Perceptual Faith, Operative Intentionality), Bergson (Durée), and Levinas (The Face). Other articles also present original additions (Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, Mestiza Consciousness, Trans Phenomena, Racist Love): these point not only to the actualization of

phenomenological concepts but to a productive phenomenological reflection.

As the editors write in the introduction, the fifty concepts pave the way to a new kind of phenomenological practice; they “exemplify the continuing fecundity of attunement to lived experience and [...] also expand our understanding of phenomenology’s potential far beyond its classical horizons⁴”. They justify the innovative readings of the founding texts of phenomenology by saying that: “our intellectual landscape has now been significantly shaped by disciplines that did not exist when phenomenology’s foundational texts were being written. It is our conviction as phenomenologists that the diverse disciplinary perspectives offered by feminist theorists, critical race theorists, queer theorists, decolonial and indigenous scholars, disability studies scholars, and others are crucial for phenomenology’s future⁵” – and nothing less. In this context, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* is an important addition to this emerging field of research: it offers a broad and accessible review of central concepts – in other words, it is a fundamental piece of research with new developments. The main quality of this work is that it presents an actualization of classical phenomenological concepts and makes an excellent example of what it is to create concepts in philosophy with the desire to reflect our own experiences of the world. Critical phenomenology embraces the break with Husserlian tradition of pure description and transcendental ground: the future of phenomenology lies in its political and critical reinvestment. Subjectivity is by essence and always already intersubjective; as Davis writes, the transcendental ground is in relation with other subjectivities and is nested and intertwined with structures in the social world. By acknowledging the departure from pure description, phenomenology opens itself to what is called a “praxial” way. It recognizes the concrete effects that the contingency of social structures has on individual consciousness:

[A critical phenomenology] mobilizes phenomenological description in the service of a reflexive inquiry into how power relations structure experience as well as our ability to analyze that experience. [...] A critical phenomenology

⁴ Weiss G. et al., (2020), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, p. xiii.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

draws attention to the multiple ways in which power moves through our bodies and our lives. It is also an ameliorative phenomenology that seeks not only to describe but also repair the world, encouraging generosity, respect, and compassion for the diversity of our lived experiences.⁶

Even though the authors never give a clear definition of what critical phenomenology is, the book is precise on its method and goal. It is the object that stays somewhat undefined – as we can already seize, critical phenomenology is open-ended, applicable to a varied and broad spectrum of phenomena. But can we blame the book for a lack of definition? As we come to think of it, an open-ended field of research will not be defined by its object as much as its method and goal, which are extensively covered.

Bibliography

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⁶ Weiss G. *et al.*, (2020), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, p. 7.