
Political phenomenology is on the rise. In the past two decades, the phenomenological method has been increasingly applied to the field of political thought in two ways: on the one hand, in an effort to extend phenomenological observation to political phenomena, and on the other hand, to raise the political-theoretical potential of phenomenological authors, which has hitherto enjoyed more of a marginal existence.

Neal DeRoo’s new book deserves special attention in this line of research, since his attempt aims at a third option, namely a basic theoretical clarification of concepts by phenomenological means, in addition to the development of political phenomena or the re-reading of phenomenological classics. It claims no less than to identify experience itself – as the phenomenal core of phenomenological elucidation – as inherently political. This merits attention because, if successful, it would dispel the accusation that phenomenology is in substance an entirely apolitical philosophy and would only in passing “also” investigate political objects, for which, however, it would lack competence qua subjectivist one-sidedness. Moreover, the project relies on numerous preliminary works of older phenomenology as well as more recent phenomenological research to develop its argument. Since DeRoo is guided primarily by the classics Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, and to a lesser extent Levinas and Derrida (irritatingly, the anti-phenomenologist Deleuze is also included in the genealogy) as well as the contemporary work of Oksala and Heinämaa, the book reads over long stretches like an excellent systematization of phenomenological common sense on the political dimension of experience.

The guiding claim is that experience cannot be explained other than as expression, because only in this way will the connection between the world
and the subjective wholeness of experience be brought together. This is characteristic of experience insofar as one does not want to idealistically dematerialize or empirically truncate it – the traditional foils of the phenomenological endeavor since Husserl. Sense, experience, and expression as basic phenomenological concepts are – as chapters 1–3 show – closely connected and cannot be conceived in isolation from each other. At the heart of the concept of experience is a “phenomenological knot” (De Roo, 2022, p. 10) in which the three dimensions come together. “Expressivity is how experience works” (p. 13).

As shown with contributions from Husserl’s early Logical Investigations to Merleau-Ponty’s late lectures, expression, or better expressivity, needs not be understood as a subject’s performance of communicating something supposedly internal to the outside (“express an impression”). Rather, the relation is to be thought as a “triadic structure” (p. 36) in that “(1) something that expresses (2) the expressed in and through (3) the expression” (p. 36) always occurs only as a unity.

The subject is then no longer seen as the guarantor of the truth of what is expressed, but rather as the site of the constitution of the world. Following Merleau-Ponty’s idea of reversibility, the process of constitution proves to be reciprocal. The “subject’s ability to constitute a world is simply the expression of a deeper constitutive process that first constitutes the subject as expression” (De Roo, 2022, p. 48). Merleau-Ponty’s often ontologically ambiguous concept of flesh is here instructively rehabilitated from expression.

So far so familiar. The political dimension of the phenomenological concept of expression or experience (which are used almost synonymously) is now elaborated via the transcendentalism of expression. Expressivity is never just a matter of individual style. On the contrary, as Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of expression had shown, which DeRoo reconstructs here, “style” or “manner” is the name for the shape of an expression that opens a field of possibilities, but also limits it. “Field” is the name for a space of expressive possibilities that is contingent but not arbitrary. The space for experience is structured. And it is this structuredness that DeRoo calls “transcendental.” Transcendentality here is not to be understood as a Kantian “condition of possibility” but in terms of Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricism” (De Roo, 2022, p. 88) (this seems a useful term for the endeavor, even if Deleuze had quite different discussions in mind). Bourdieu would probably have called the two functions of transcendentalism “structuring structure” and “structured structure.” Here a proximity to the theory of practice becomes apparent that DeRoo does not name.

Political is the transcendental of our experience then because the field of experience is always structured by and with others. DeRoo thereby skips the classical problem of intersubjectivity and immediately moves on to communal
framings and orders of meaning that always play a role in the genesis of meaning. No field of meaning is generated, reproduced, and stabilized by a single subject alone. “The transcendental is necessarily political in both senses: it is politically constituted (it has a particular internal makeup) and politically constitutive (it is a force that constitutes its relata according to this makeup)” (De Roo, 2022, p. 108). First-person experiences are always already political because the carnal basis of our expression is always already interwoven with a world in which meaning is produced in communal framing.

For phenomenology, then, different tasks remain, depending on the level at which it turns to experience. For the transcendental, that is, the structure of our particular experience, is present in the “experiencing of our experience” (De Roo, 2022, p. 96). Methodologically, the reduction allows us to transition away from the individual experience to consider the structures of experience as enabling conditions. Methodologically, DeRoo is generous in this, in that he does not positively determine the two methodological tools of phenomenology – reduction and epoché – but only formulates them as negative criteria of demarcation, thus allowing many “heretics” to be incorporated: A “rejection of an empiricist or idealist view” is an “enactment of the epoché,” whereas the “enactment of the reduction” is granted if the approach “in some way relates to the expressive relation between self, world and flesh” (p. 132).

In the process, phenomenology ultimately proves not only capable of advancing to political objects, but also becomes itself political. More precisely, DeRoo even claims that phenomenology does not have to become political anyway because “phenomenology ... inherently (is) political” (De Roo, 2022, p. 179). If any experience is expression, and phenomenology is precisely the philosophy that can elucidate expressivity, then the how of this description makes a difference. The relationship between the empirical (the particular concrete experience) and the transcendental (the culturally formed structure of meaning of the particular field of meaning) can itself be expressed in different ways. The structuration has been given different names in history, and thus a different emphasis each time: “transcendental subjectivity in Husserl; the Being of beings in Heidegger; flesh in Merleau-Ponty; givenness in Marion; difference in Derrida; and so on” (p. 101, see also p. 104). In this sense, secondarily, the choice of the kind of phenomenology is also political, resulting in a “phenomenological politics” (p. 153) that is used to describe the political field of experience. “Culture is both constituted by the community (that it expresses) and constitutive of that community (as the alterations wrought by its expressions alter the community that is expressed)” (p. 155).

The whole book is of one piece, it contains a clear, plausible thesis and demonstrates the plausibility through step-by-step unfolding of its argument.
One feels one has read it all before, without always being able to say exactly where. In this respect, it is a merit of DeRoo's book to have summarized and synthesized the status quo of the phenomenological concept of experience after Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The tone and orientation of the book sound quite understandable when the author begins by positioning it quite modestly as a kind of defense of a minority position in need of explanation in the hegemonic field of philosophy in Anglo-American tradition (De Roo, 2022, p. 14). If it wanted to appear less modest, it could have sharpened its argument. Hardly any phenomenologically experienced reader would want to contradict the reconstruction. But it lacks a sharpness in at least two respects with which precisely certain experiences of the political could be caught up.

That phenomenology is always already political is a strong claim. And it is eminently plausible to make the concept of the political so basal that it also brings into view the social and cultural constitution of shared meaning, for which phenomenology does indeed offer a strong explication. The demonstration that experience and its expression always participates in shared experiences of others and is embedded in non-literal structures of meaning along with their limitations is undoubtedly a major achievement of phenomenology. But in terms of the broader field of theorizing in political philosophy, it lacks differentiation: DeRoo's phenomenology of expression only reaches the level of a social or cultural philosophy. One would have difficulties to figure out how DeRoo (2022) distinguishes between the political and the social or cultural when he defines the political as “a principal of communal orientation ... and a principle of communal action” (p. 136). “Politics” for DeRoo has only the sense of a “politics of description.” Although one can rightly insist that the political already begins in articulation and not only at the level of public conflicts, conflicts of interest, and legal issues, a politics that is content with this remains purely philosophical. Instead of just the “spiritual community” of Husserl (who really cannot be considered a political philosopher, p. 137) or the debate about “we-intentions” (p. 141), which only exist because analytic philosophy, unlike phenomenology, can only view intentions as primarily individualistic, DeRoo could have profiled the political via the concept of agonistic, for example. There are also points of contact to this in phenomenology (e.g., Lefort, Castoriadis, the early Laclau, the late Derrida).

The concept of experience would equally have benefited from further sharpening. DeRoo's focus is always on the holism of expression. Sufficiently many phenomenological approaches, on the other hand, have emphasized that there is an important “pathic” dimension to experience that may even be more fundamental. From Levinas and Derrida to Waldenfels and Marion. It is no wonder that the first two are only ever mentioned in passing, and then also
in such a way that one sometimes does not recognize them (De Roo, 2022, p. 173). There is then a fundamental difference in phenomenology between a holistic philosophy of expression (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) and a deconstructive theory of alterity (Levinas, Derrida), both of which cannot be made docile with the concept of “autopoiesis” (p. 173).

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