Book Reviews

David Detmer (2013)


Introductory books are usually our students’ first encounter with our field of study. If there is any truth to the cliche that “one never gets a chance to make another first impression,” we should always prioritize reviews of introductory books in our academic journals. One significant new introductory book is David Detmer’s (2013) *Phenomenology Explained: From Experience to Insight*, published by Open Court Books. The audience for most introductory books on phenomenology are advanced undergraduate students in philosophy. So, assigning such texts to students in other disciplines, such as, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, etc., does not come without its pedagogical complications. More often than not, these texts start with the assumption that the student is familiar with the history of philosophy, fundamental arguments between different schools of thought and basic knowledge of the philosophical cannon. Thus, for today’s undergraduate social science students, these introductory texts are often met with dismay, not because the content is too difficult, but because the style of writing and disciplinary focus is far removed from the “packaged” and highly homogenized textbooks commonly used in the social sciences—particularly mainstream psychology.

Recently, this journal reviewed Shaun Gallagher’s (2012) (Wertz, JPP, Vol 45:1) and Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero’s (2015) (Broomé, JPP, Vol 47:1) introductory texts on phenomenology. Both of these introductions reflected the authors’ interests making phenomenological philosophy relevant to analytic philosophers and natural scientists. This leaning, however, can be done to the neglect of students from other disciplines within the humanities, social sciences or human service professions. So while Gallagher’s and Käufer and Chemero’s introductory books are useful for courses relating to the cognitive sciences, neuropsychology and laboratory psychology,
David Detmer’s book is a far better fit for applied clinical and social science students (e.g., sociology, social work, education, social psychiatry, counseling and clinical psychology etc.) who are encountering phenomenology for the first time. Overall, what really works with Detmer’s book in relation to the social sciences is that it does not just contrast phenomenology with naturalism but also with postmodernism—a movement mostly ignored by the other introductions.

Detmer’s book expertly covers the essential themes in Husserl. In fact, this text could have been entitled, *Husserl Explained*. He organizes the book in the following way: The first part is called Early Husserl, the second part Middle Husserl, and the third Late Husserl. He then has a chapter on ethics and also a chapter on polemics. In addition, he leaves 22 pages at the end to a brief chapter entitled successors (including short summaries of the work by Sartre, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Scheler). Perhaps without intending it, Detmer succeeds in illuminating Husserl’s position as a sound philosophical ground to the social sciences—other than that of naturalism. Showing us how easy it is to lose our reason and to fall prey to *doxa* within the social realm, Detmer writes: “On this view, ‘truth’ is ‘socially constructed’ or ‘culturally relative,’ and we can have no hope of achieving objective truth—beliefs that we know, on the basis of a rational assessment of evidence, to express the way things really are.” (p. 14). Overall, students majoring in sociology, cultural studies, political science, anthropology, social work, social psychiatry, and especially applied psychology, could benefit greatly from Detmer’s introduction.

Detmer offers careful clarifications that unravels the simplistic and extreme forms of social constructionism that students too quickly assume as a response to essentialism. Even though it becomes clear from the very start that Detmer is strongly critical of postmodern inquiry, his emphasis on the contrast between phenomenology and postmodern inquiry is an extremely helpful way to engage today’s social science students who are trying to understand Husserlian phenomenology for the first time. Setting up how Husserl’s approach to *reason* relates to social and political emancipation, Detmer writes,

In any case, another way, and an equally controversial one, in which Husserl’s thought qualifies as radical, concerns his understanding of reason. One popular stance is to defend the “Enlightenment” conception of reason, which is, roughly, the view that the kind of thinking that is used in the natural sciences should be extended to every human practice and area of inquiry, in part because doing so would have emancipatory effects (for example, by leading to the overthrowing of authoritarian politics and...