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Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas, and Derrida (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

De Roo, Neal. *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas, and Derrida*. Fordham University Press, 2013. xvii + 212 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8232-4464-5. Reviewed by Aron Reppmann, Professor of Philosophy and Director of New Faculty Formation, Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois.

The phenomenological approach in philosophy, which originated with the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is characterized by its resistance toward any attempt at reducing the complexity of human experience in the world—philosophical reductions that stress either human subjectivity or the objectivity of the world as the ultimate root of our experience. Phenomenology's commitment to honoring the irreducible complexity of experience is already evident in what is often considered to be its basic structural insight, namely the "intentionality of consciousness." Intentionality is the idea that consciousness is always consciousness-*of* something, and, conversely, that anything is only experienced or encountered in its manifestation *for*-consciousness. Doing justice to the reality of experience, according to phenomenology, means not imposing a linear logic on it, but rather remaining attentive to the constitutive, ongoing interplay that is always at work within it.

In this book, Neal De Roo traces another instance of phenomenology's predilection for complex relations and inherent tensions, namely the significance of *futurity*, the way in which our experience of time is both anticipatory and undetermined because it is inherently open to the future, to what is to come. Although phenomenologists, beginning with Husserl himself, have offered analyses of time-consciousness (the interrelation of past, present, and future in our experience of time) as integral to consciousness as such, De Roo contends that "the true centrality of the future to the project of phenomenology has not yet been elaborated" (1). He argues, in fact, that intentionality and futurity are intrinsically linked: "The phenomenological claim of intentionality—that the constituting subject must be necessarily 'open' beyond itself and its own horizons—emerges only when futurity is considered essential to phenomenology" (3). The promise of this book is that it will treat a selection of authors and texts that are well-known to those familiar with phenomenology, but from a standpoint whose importance has previously been neglected. In doing so, De Roo hopes to unify the phenomenological project—to heal some of its internal dissensions—but not, of course, to sim-

ply resolve them, since a drive toward simple resolution would contradict phenomenology's commitment to honoring inherent complexities.

De Roo's expressed intention in this book is to be neither an historian nor a practitioner of phenomenology, but a sort of mechanic of phenomenology (this is my image, not his). He focuses on the structural commitments of phenomenological method and uses those structural insights to diagnose particular problems and to suggest possible repairs. He contends that attending to the different ways in which futurity functions in phenomenology will "show us something important about phenomenology and its operation" (6) and offers the promise of "build[ing] a bridge over the chasm that has developed between Husserlian phenomenology, on the one hand, and 'theological' phenomenology on the other" (2).

Even as he focuses structurally rather than historically, De Roo is a master storyteller. His treatments of the three philosophers on which the book focuses—Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)—are staged as an unfolding conceptual narrative, such that the possibilities and problems in Husserl's analyses of futurity lead directly to Levinas, and the possibilities and problems in Levinas' analyses of futurity in turn lead directly to Derrida.

Part I, "Futurity in the constitution of transcendental subjectivity," offers a sustained encounter with Husserl, exploring three different modes of futurity in Husserl's work—protention, expectation, and anticipation. These three modes correspond to three different levels of consciousness, ranging from the "absolute" and universal operation of consciousness-as-such to the particularities of an individual's consciousness. Throughout Part I, De Roo demonstrates his impressive ability as a mechanic of phenomenology. In chapter 1 he reaches beyond the limitations of Husserl's classic book on time-consciousness (*The Internal Consciousness of Time*), in which futurity is given short shrift as merely a kind of inverse of retention, to lesser-known, later writings that recognize a more distinctive and truly futural role for protention. In chapter 2 he

painstakingly establishes the three-level approach to organizing Husserl's understanding of futurity, which Husserl does not explicitly present as such but which, as De Roo demonstrates, makes good and clarifying sense of Husserl's various writings on this subject. In chapter 3, De Roo "[goes] beyond the letter of Husserl's texts" to round out the portrait of futurity's role in time-consciousness with an account of what we as particular subjects do in the "active directing of the egoic regard," which he calls "anticipation" (6).

For all his fine-grained analysis and appreciation of Husserl's treatments of futurity, De Roo ultimately finds those treatments limited by Husserl's tendency to treat time-consciousness primarily as an epistemological concern. Anticipating the ways in which Levinas and Derrida will re-found phenomenology in ethical and religious attunement, De Roo in chapter 3 begins to turn the analysis in that direction, particularly through his examination of an essay on hope by James K.A. Smith and through the anticipatory structure of making and accepting promises. This sets the stage for Part II, "Futurity and the 'openness' of the intentional subject," where the focus is on Levinas.

Where Part I introduced the inherent tension involved in a phenomenological account of futurity, Part II explores that tension by asking how this account affects the nature of subjectivity itself. Husserl emphasizes the way in which consciousness constitutes the world, while Levinas emphasizes the way in which consciousness is receptive of the world. Levinas' strikingly different approach "posit[s] ethics, not ontology or epistemology, as first philosophy." De Roo argues that Levinas' different starting-point "does not go beyond phenomenology so much as it moves within a broadly Husserlian phenomenology against a conception of phenomenology that would unduly narrow its scope" (7).

In Part II, De Roo traces Levinas' critical appropriation of Husserl, demonstrating in chapter 5 that Levinas' vision of the self as constituted by the other gives a special role both to the irretrievable past (what overcame me before I could ever take initiative) and to the future (which is inherently open and surprising, out of my control or ability to reliably predict). De Roo concludes that "[s]ubjectivity itself, then, is futural for Levinas" in a far more profound and inherently destabilizing way than it was for Husserl (85). But then in chapter 6, De Roo anticipates his later focus on Derrida by introducing the Derridean idea of "promise" as a concretization of futurity in responsibility for other people. With this, he indicates that Levinas' own account of futurity does not turn explic-

itly in this direction.

This key turning-point in the book is likely to be a point of contention between partisans of Levinas and those of Derrida. Those whose sympathies lie more with Derrida are likely to contend (as De Roo does) that Levinas has missed something that must not be avoided, while those whose sympathies lie more with Levinas are likely to wonder (as I do) whether his thinking is being subjected to a conception of "ethics" that misconstrues the significance of his work. This way of "saving" Levinas' insights may be viewed as something more of a betrayal (94-95).

Part III, "Futurity and intentionality—the promise of relationship," further explores a phenomenological account of futurity in its focus on Derrida. Derrida serves De Roo well for this exploration. A consistent motif here is the articulation of multiple inherent-tension dualities, and "double necessity" is one of De Roo's favorite conceptual devices—sometimes even multiple, mutually entailing double necessities, as when he outlines a "pair of essential dualities" (132). Chapter 7 shows how, like Levinas, Derrida finds an inherent tension built into the structure of phenomenology. But this tension—indicated by the Derridean term *différance* ("differing" as an always-ongoing, restlessly oscillating process of "deferring")—does not decide for either Husserl's or Levinas' version of phenomenological futurity. Instead, it holds onto both of them in "a 'unity' that preserves the difference of each pole in tension with each other" (8).

Here the idea of "promise" comes back in full force as the "central aspect" of Derrida's understanding of futurity, which is named "the messianic." As with Levinas, futurity or openness is not something subsequent to the subject but is what has constituted the subject itself. For Derrida "this promise is not made to us, but *is* us: We are promised by the other, and it is our responsibility . . . to respond to a call or promise that, in a certain sense, was made before we were on the scene" (127). De Roo argues that, for Derrida, the promise "is the very structure of the future" (128).

In chapter 9, the final expository portion of the book, De Roo secures the centrality of the theme of futurity for the phenomenological enterprise by indicating some important limits to or restrictions on what he has offered in the preceding couple of chapters. Here his account of the promise seems somewhat more Levinasian in tone, in the sense of emphasizing that the "ethics" on offer here is not oriented to the particular concerns with applying principles for good action (a commonplace conception of ethics), but rather is a highlighting of the "anticipatory aspect" to

every subjective act (139).

De Roo's concluding chapter, "The promissory discipline," takes final stock of what he has achieved in the book. He carefully and convincingly points out the ways in which his identification and amplification of futurity as central to phenomenology "opens phenomenology to a set of problems and questions that otherwise might seem to fall outside its scope." In terms of my earlier description, De Roo's insightful care as a "mechanic" of phenomenology especially shines in this concluding account. These final pages open the exciting prospect of broad cultural relevance for the work he has offered.

De Roo suggests that his interpretation of phenomenology as essentially promissory can open up "the claims of the various sciences" to see the ways in which they are "united together in the lives of individual people, who live in and as the promise of their respective traditions," as well as the ways in which "communities and institutions, and not just individuals, are called to live in, as, and up to the promise" (152). His closing assertion that "the phenomenological project is not only communal and intersubjective in its method...but also in its application and scope" makes this reader eager for the sequel in which these tantalizing suggestions could be developed more fully (152). I would expect, given the prominence in these closing remarks of references to "community" and "tradition," that this subsequent work would offer a more sustained dialogue with the hermeneutical wing of phenomenology represented by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whom De Roo mentions occasionally but did not have the space to treat at length.

Most readers of *Pro Rege* are likely to note with interest that Neal De Roo is a current faculty member

at Dordt College. Readers of De Roo's book who are familiar with the Reformational Christian philosophical tradition, which has exercised a profound shaping effect on Dordt's history, may want to keep that tradition in mind as they read his account of phenomenology's commitment to honoring the complexities and inherent tensions of human experience. Reformational philosophy, which was initiated by Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd at roughly the same time as Husserl was establishing phenomenology, is similarly committed to an anti-reductionist approach to complexity. While De Roo does not explicitly address the Reformational tradition, he does provide ample material for readers interested in considering the affinity between this tradition and phenomenology.

This is not a book for beginners, at least not beginners reading on their own. Phenomenology is intricate in its conceptuality, its terminology, and its controversies, and De Roo dives right in to the midst of it, assuming his readers' expertise and offering few handholds for those who do not already possess that expertise. That said, his voice is lively throughout, and his cheerful good humor winks out persistently. In the hands of a skilled teacher, this book would serve very well as a thematic centering text for a graduate or upper-level undergraduate seminar on phenomenology. The tight structure of the book's contents, along with its abundant endnotes (37 pages of small type), generous bibliography (13 pages), and carefully prepared index, would provide ample resources for students and professor to navigate both through and beyond the text. If Neal De Roo himself were to offer such a course as a seminar for colleagues in the discipline—such as a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar—I would be the first in line to sign up.

Klay, Phil. *Redeployment*. New York: Penguin, 2014. 304 pages, paperback. ISBN: 978-1-5942-0499-5. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA.

War stories usually take on the motif of initiation because no one, thank goodness, is ever prepared for watching friends—buddies—die and die fitfully; war stories are always about men and women whose lives and visions are changed by warfare, changed forever.

Experiencing the horror of war leaves those who are changed with memories as sharp as cut glass, stories you either tell or you do not. Many do not, but not talking about one's experiences often means those stories create a din within the echo chamber that one's mind and heart becomes. PTSD can result—at least that's the common wisdom.

The stories Phil Klay tells in *Redeployment*, a riveting collection of tales dug out of the recent Iraq War are not so much about not telling war stories. They're not about what veterans suffer for their silence. What Klay does so poignantly is explore the heartache one feels in telling them.

All vets, I suppose, are achingly conscious of the stories they have and can tell because they discover that some people really do want to know them, for reasons that are both noble and ignoble, for everything from soulful empathy to sick entertainment. Many do want to know.