

Editorial: Thresholds and Power

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Are academic journals catalysts of hegemonic power or of democratic openness? I pose this question categorically to make the point clear, and the point is mainly self-reflective in nature: How do we, the editors, reviewers and authors of P&P, deal with the power entailed in editing and publishing? This is not to say that we consider ourselves to be more influential than other journals in phenomenology around the world. What I intend to say is that because we as a journal receive papers from phenomenological researchers of all kinds, and “speak” regularly to readers—some of whom contact us about what we write—we exercise influence. The critical, reflective question as to how we understand the power of publication, or whether we consider our influence to be justified, is not just a rhetorical one.

At the threshold, the in between inside or outside, an “accept” or “reject” decision on a submission, the question is of pertinence not only to the editors but also to our reviewers, authors and readers. Of course, publishing in itself includes the attempt to have “impact”—as widespread concern about impact factors clearly indicates. Regardless of influence or impact factor, however, P&P seeks to provide a channel of communication for authors whose work we, as a community of reviewers, editors and readers, find worthy of publication. The dilemma of power though, seems unavoidable in scholarly publication. And it is twofold. As a journal we are by definition bound to publish. That is what journals do. By publishing some papers and rejecting others we undertake a required separation of what is published and what is passed over, again a practice that our P&P community does and is expected to do. As is stated in our guidelines for peer reviewers, we are seeking to include papers that, as van Manen (1997, pp. 151-153) describes, are:

- Oriented: showing “an awareness of the relation between content and form, speaking and acting, text and textuality.”
- Strong: To “use our orientation as a resource for producing... understandings, interpretations, and formulations, and strengthen this resource in the very practice of this research or theorizing.”
- Rich: “A rich and thick description is concrete, exploring a phenomenon in all its experiential ramifications...engag[ing] us, involv[ing] us, and requir[ing] a response from us.”
- Deep: “reaching for something beyond, restoring a forgotten or broken wholeness by recollecting something lost, past, or eroded, and by reconciling it in our experience of the present with a vision of what should be.”

Now I reach my second point, and in my view, the most important dilemma we encounter as a journal: How do we relate to our own power when it is challenged by a submission that we do not understand, that cannot be readily reconciled to the criteria outlined above? Sometimes, not often, but occasionally we receive a paper that is different—original, perhaps outstanding or brilliant—but we do not know for certain. We are not able to judge. Perhaps we are not equal to the challenge that the submission, in its originality, presents to us. How then do we relate to that paper? Of course we might see aspects of its outstanding quality and send it to an extremely qualified reviewer. These papers, however, are not the papers I have in mind. We are able to appraise these papers, at least to a certain degree. The criteria suggested above can be applied—

at least more or less. What I think of are the papers that are better than us, in a way that we are not able to see. Those who think differently, outside our experiential and professional spheres. We may not see their brilliance. We might spend too little time reading and pondering their quality, and to be able to respond to their address.

You (and I) might think that in our time of rapid publication-for-profit (both professional and corporate) the huge amount of publications in journals include few really outstanding papers. We acknowledge that we publish, at least in one sense, because our authors are professionally dependent on publication of their work, and that it seems scholars are expected to write more and faster than ever. Perhaps this is true. However, it makes the problem of power to discern good from bad even more pertinent, and it challenges our ability as editors and peer reviewers to know when we deem a submission sufficient or not.

How do we encounter submissions that challenge our self understanding and our professional self-assurance by being different and by going beyond our own insights and knowledge? Do we try to understand such a paper by working with it—and with peer review feedback—again and again? Do we read and discuss it in the editorial team, with our peer reviewers and with the author—its implications, potential, consequences? Or are we tempted to put it aside as a text in which we do not want to become involved? What I am trying to come to terms with is an attitude towards what is so different that it does not fit our categories. Our integrity as an academic journal is challenged by these papers, and we know it. Texts that peer reviewers as well as editors perhaps do not feel good about because our phenomenological professionalism is put at stake. What do we do with these texts? How do we in those situations responsibly exercise our power to define, include and exclude?

In his little book *Disagreement* (1999) Jacques Ranciere talks about the “identity between understanding and understanding” and of “the gap between two accepted meanings of ‘to understand’” (p. 44). His aim is to discuss the rationality of disagreement in political settings, including of course common and potentially democratic aspects. The basis of a disagreement is the idea that disagreement is a misalignment of understanding. Close to disagreement is the power of definition of positions and of who is privileged to speak and be understood. Ranciere’s point is that in situations of disagreement where different understandings are at stake, the one in power can define who is “speaking [and who] is just making noise” (p. 50). Those holding power can ultimately make texts visible or invisible in publication in a particular forum and can determine whose language is excluded and whose language is “common language” (p. 50). The understandable language for us may become the common language, while a language that may ultimately be regarded as “wrong” is outside of our sphere of interest and perhaps also of our understanding. Ranciere’s point is that democratic disagreement presupposes that speaking beings are equal and that their common basis is the acknowledgment that “there is an understanding within understanding” (p. 49)—one to which even very sharply divergent perspectives can be traced back. Although Ranciere is speaking of political conflict, his argument is strikingly relevant to the encounter between diverse views and understandings in academic publishing. A core point then is what Ranciere might mean by the expression: “an understanding within understanding.” We must humbly seek this point of convergence, this point where we uncover an understanding within understanding.

David Seamon writes: “Like host and guest, an author and reader or a speaker and listener potentially meet via a threshold of understanding” (Seamon, 2016, p. 55). Seamon rephrases Bernd Jager’s thought of a bridging action that shapes experiential thresholds that at the same time divide and bind human beings, and separate and join worlds of difference (Jager 2009, p.10; cited in Seamon 2016, pp. 54-55). To read and reflect on phenomenological papers is to find oneself at the threshold of understanding and not understanding—a *not yet*. As a reader I am not at the inside yet, but rather not quite at the outside. But I evaluate, compare, judge, and

tentatively form my opinion, and may ultimately disagree. I understand something and on the basis of my understanding I affect the chance of this particular submission in P&P. Reading a submission and in particular the submissions that provoke and challenge our self-understandings as phenomenologists, could place us in a position where our certitudes are at stake. This has the potential to allow me to cross over from the familiar terrain of my world, and to tentatively gain access to the world of the Other—the author. The admission, though is that trying to cross this threshold may lead to misrecognition and misunderstanding at least as easily as to authentic appreciation.

References

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