

Research Statement

Steven DeLay
Wake Forest University
stevendelay.com

<https://wfu.academia.edu/StevenDeLay>

My main area of research is in Post-Kantian European Philosophy, especially the existential and phenomenological traditions. My writing takes up issues associated with the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of art, moral psychology, and the history of philosophy, from the systematic perspective of phenomenology—currently, it focuses on the question of the self.

My phenomenological work connects with the analytic tradition. There is even significant overlap and room for mutual exploration. For instance, the exegetical work on Husserl directly intersects with the work of Wittgenstein: is the fundamental structure of reality governed by the linguistic rules of grammar, or is there a realm of sensible a priori material truths (Husserl)? Is experience conceptual (McDowell) or is it in some important respect non-conceptual (Romano and Dreyfus)? What essential connection, if any, governs the relationship between human mindedness and embodiment (Clark, Chalmers, and Noë, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Louis Chrétien, on the other)? What is the very role of philosophy itself as a discipline in light of the ascendance of the modern natural sciences? Can we have knowledge of God, and how is such knowledge possible, assuming we possess it (Plantinga and Jean-Yves Lacoste)? Is metaphysics, in some sense of the term, impossible and nonsensical (Carnap and logical positivism) or is it a genuine and even perhaps fundamental aspect of the philosophical project (Heidegger and Williamson)? Though analytic philosophy is not a central publishing focus of mine, I have teaching experience with it, having taught tutorials on it back in Oxford and for courses at Wake Forest.

The scope of my research is evident, I hope, in *Phenomenology in France*. After a survey focusing on Husserl and Heidegger, the book dedicates chapters to Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Claude Romano, and Emmanuel Falque. Taking stock of its promise in light of the legacy it has transformed, I conclude with a chapter exploring the field's relevance to theology and analytic philosophy, indicating what the future holds for phenomenology. As an example, I show how this phenomenological thought challenges boundaries between philosophy and theology, offering what I call a phenomenological deconstruction of the history of the concept of original sin. In the work as a whole, I thus present one of the first introductions of these French phenomenologists to an Anglophone audience, while simultaneously showing where phenomenology might (or even should) be headed next. In doing so, it addresses the issue of phenomenology's Cartesian and transcendental heritage, its relationship to hermeneutics, as well as its relationship to theology and analytic philosophy. Laying out this rich philosophical tapestry, the work concludes with a novel phenomenological thesis of my own: we are most defined as the selves that we are in a moral register of personal responsibility. In the context of the debate between Augustine and Pelagius, I argue, in a recognizably Kierkegaardian spirit, that we come to learn who we are—and what we are called to do in the time that leads to death—in the experience of being called to do what is right *coram Deo*. Hence, the self's eschatological register comes most into view in the domain of everyday moral decision, but not, as Kant suggested, in the merely asymptotic form of a

regulative ideal, but rather as a manifest spiritual reality in the experiential life of the one who loves to do what is right. Here, any academic or institutional division between philosophy and theology collapses under the weight of the things themselves. Following the recurring distinction of Jean-Yves Lacoste's *Expérience et absolu*, we thus might say that the truth is most epitomized in the figure of the fool for Christ, and not necessarily the scholar or the professor.

I am now turning my attention to a new book, *Coram Deo: Exercises in Interiority* (London: Rowman & Littlefield). What is it to live in the presence of God, to recognize that our most intimate mode of existence is not one of being-in-the-world? In six phenomenological studies surmounting the division between philosophy and theology, this book takes up that question, exploring in turn our relation to others, the world, and ourselves. Proposed chapters include (i) a methodological study of the relationship between phenomenology and theology (situated in terms of the concept of free will in the early patristics), (ii) a review of the problem of intersubjectivity in the phenomenological tradition (with particular emphasis on Michel Henry's material phenomenology), (iii) a review of the phenomenon of vanity in Marion and its implications for the Heideggerian philosophy of authenticity, (iv) an appraisal of the history of metaphysics' handling of the issue of immortality in Plato, Aquinas, and Descartes, (v) a critique of Nietzsche's Dionysianism, and (vi) a reconstruction of the history of the concept of conscience (Kant, Fichte, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the first chapter of the Gospel of John).

The second book, *Conscience*, will begin where the last chapter of *Coram Deo* leaves off. Conscience is central to human nature and our understanding of that nature. What is its source and function? Historically, it has been conceived in many ways, whether as an innate faculty responsible for our capacity to know right from wrong, as the voice of divine guidance, as an ontological hallmark of our individuality, or as the internalization of society's restrictive pressures and prejudices. That it has been the subject of this rich philosophical reception arouses many questions. What does the capacity to draw moral judgments reveal about our human condition? What does it mean to have our actions laid bare before God? What is involved in being social and political beings responsible to and for others? From Plato to Kant and Fichte, from Rousseau and Mill to Nietzsche and Freud, or from Heidegger to the Prophets and Apostles, this book traces the history of the concept of conscience, highlighting how the capacity to hear and follow its voice forms the heart of man.

Finally, the third, *Biblical Meditations*, is also gestating. Consisting of ten chapters, this book advances a critique of modern subjectivity through a phenomenological interpretation of biblical texts and works of art. The work takes its methodological cue from a thesis we owe most notably to Jean-Louis Chrétien's recent treatment of the modern novel and subjectivity in *Conscience et roman, I: la conscience au grand jour* and *Conscience et roman, II: la conscience à mi-voix*: for us today, the most intimate mode of self-existence is thought to be epitomized by the interior monologue of the self with itself, a relationship which in principle veils nothing from the intruding gaze of the author or reader. Nothing is hidden, for all is laid bare. Against this view that removes any hidden dimension from the searching gaze of others, the book highlights an interiority whose intimacy is due to our always already being exposed, not to a human gaze that knows the secrets of the heart, but to a word prior to any human observation: the Word of God. In analyzing this dimension of tenderness—a depths involving a “cardiognosie”

only God fully possesses, as Chrétien says—I call upon the paintings of Bellini, Rembrandt, Osbert, Ossawa Tanner, Pissarro, Caravaggio, Kandinsky, Poussin, Rodin, and Hopper among others.