

Research Statement

Steven DeLay
Wake Forest University
stevendelay.com

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

My work is inspired by the tradition of post-Kantian European philosophy, especially existentialism and phenomenology. My writing takes up issues associated with the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of art, moral psychology, and the history of philosophy—currently, it focuses on the question of the self. Particularly, I am interested in what it means to be created in the *imago Dei*.

The scope of my research is evident, I hope, in *Phenomenology in France: A Philosophical and Theological Introduction* (Routledge: 2019). 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.

Presently I am working on a book due to appear next year, *Before God: Exercises in Subjectivity* (Rowman & Littlefield). Its eight chapters are an effort to reawaken an appreciation of what it is to live in the presence of God, to recognize that our most intimate mode of existence is not one of being-in-the-world only. Surmounting received divisions between philosophy and theology, they explore the relation we have to God and others, tracing a path instituted in antiquity and latent still in certain strands of contemporary phenomenology. After an introductory exploration of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life that undermines the modern notion of philosophy as methodologically atheist, the second chapter raises the question of our relation to others through an assessment of how, paradoxically, we are together in the world yet ever alone. This theme of our

relation to others is deepened with an analysis of forgiveness in its various forms. The theme is continued in the next chapter's discussion of peace, which is seen to prove so elusive because of the omnipresence of evil in the world, a fact which itself is explored in connection to the varieties of silence we encounter throughout our daily lives. Utilizing these results from the preceding chapters on forgiveness, peace, and silence, the last three chapters set out to inquire into perennial questions as immortality, doubt, and deception. Drawing together the previous results, the final one expounds on the view of man which has emerged: we utterly are open to a God who in Jesus Christ calls each of us back to ourselves.

The second book, *Conscience*, will begin where the last chapter of *Before God* 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.