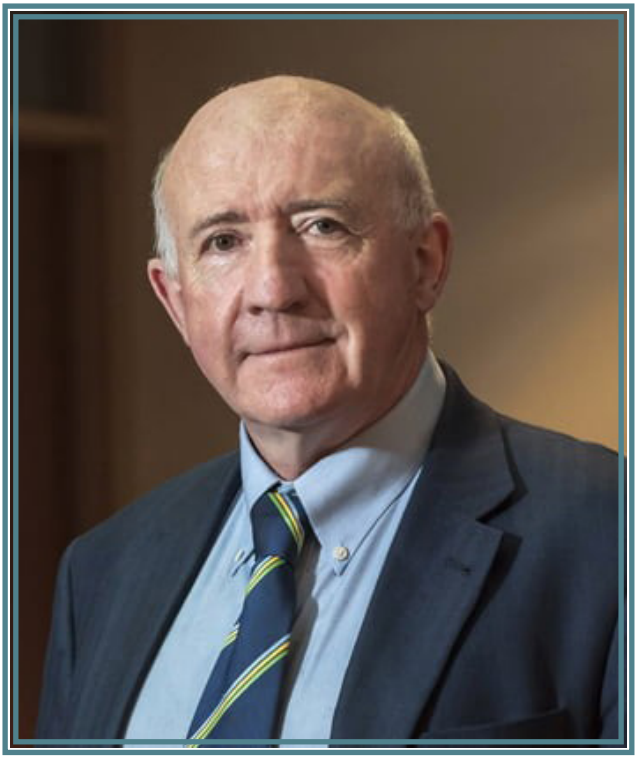
Sidvola

INTERVIEW WITH DERMOT MORAN

The Joseph Chair in Catholic Philosophy



Dianoia conducted an interview with Dermot Moran, the Joseph Chair in Catholic Philosophy and current Chair of the Department of Philosophy. Joining Boston College in 2017 after serving as the Gadamer Visiting Professor in 2015, he is currently the President of the International Federation of Philosophical Studies/Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie (FISP) and Founding Editor of 'The International Journal of Philosophical Studies' (1993). Moran's research areas include medieval philosophy (especially Christian Platonism) and contemporary European philosophy (especially phenomenology), and he is the author of nine monographs, fifteen edited books, and hundreds of journal articles and book chapters.

Dianoia: Could you describe what phenomenology is and say a little about its founder Edmund Husserl?

Moran: Well first of all, I always emphasize that phenomenology is an approach rather than a strict method. Edmund Husserl, who is the founder of phenomenology and the *Logical Investigations* (1900), really wanted a strict method and a method that would underline all the other sciences. It would be a scientific method to beat all scientific methods, that was his idea. And of course, his famous slogan was "back to the things themselves" since he wanted a descriptive science that describes how our consciousness encounters the world in the manner that it presents itself. It was meant to be a transparent description of our experience in its full richness, but his methodology was very much contested even by his own students (*e.g.* Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others), so his bracketing method, his method of pure description evolved. So I rather see phenomenology as still having this attention to the rich detail of our experience, but there are many different methodologies within an overall approach. But the overall approach is anti-speculative, anti-theorizing and just staying with the experiences, or phenomena in the broadest sense. So for example, how we experience an art object, how we interrelate with others in the life-world, these are all things that we need to describe in—as Husserl would put it—an unprejudiced manner.

Dianoia: What's the distinction between Husserl's pure phenomenology and what came with his followers in developing existential phenomenology, and who are some of the figureheads of each group?

Moran: Husserl had a huge number of very loyal followers, especially in the early phase, and they're often called the realist phenomenologists since they wanted to have phenomenology as a kind of realist description of the world; they really tried to overcome pre-judgment and prejudice. But once you have Heidegger coming along—the founder of existential phenomenology—he's the thinker that says there's no such thing as pure description, that all description is interpreted, and thereby gives a hermeneutical or interpretive phenomenology. But he also wanted to expand Husserl's interest in the body and consciousness, i.e. the body and the subject, to a

much broader interest in concrete human existence. That's really what inspires Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir to take up this notion of existence. *Dasein* literally means existence. So Heidegger is saying phenomenology is an analysis of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world, that becomes translated by the French as a description of our concrete existence. So I would say that you could find a lot of that in Husserl, especially in the later Husserl. And yet, it's very difficult to tell whether Heidegger's influencing Husserl or if it's the other way around since both were in daily contact for ten years. Heidegger didn't publish much and Husserl didn't publish much from 1917 to 1927 so we only have their notes, and consequently, it's hard to tell. But both of them start moving more and more to the idea of historically-invented being-in-the-world, which is also limited by time since it is finite—so we are finite beings located in a specific situation. Right now we are in the middle of the 21st century, so that alters our engagement in the world. So those factors, that being-in-the-world shapes our encounter in the world and means that there's no pure and direct, unmediated experience. Experience is always mediated by our beliefs, customs, habits, practices and so on. That's the big shift I think.

Dianoia: You mention "philosophical bracketing" or the *epoché*—how might we apply this and other phenomenological tools to everyday or quotidian phenomena?

Moran: Well, I think Husserl himself picked it up from the ancient skeptics, and he sees it as an archetypal philosophical practice, and the practice is that of withholding assent. That's how the skeptics saw it. When you have two propositions that both seem to be true, let's say the Democrats are doing a good job in handling the environment, and on the other side is, the Republicans are doing a very good job in keeping the economy open. These are not exactly contradictory, but they are two opposing views. And when you are faced with that, the ancient skeptics thought that in the absence of confirming evidence for one or the other we should withhold assent. So Husserl thinks that broadly speaking the *epoché* is a bracketing, or withholding of assent or a withdrawal of commitment, and that means we can take a much more detached look at our own experience. So that's the really key point—he thinks that we need to take the non-participating observer stance to our own experience, and I think we can all benefit from that. Standing back from our immediate engagement with things, and then trying to take a stance above our experience and look at it. This is the job of the transcendental spectator, and even though other philosophers like Heidegger rejected the idea of a transcendental ego, they still are engaged in that kind of 'sideways look on at our own existence.' When Heidegger says that most of our existence is caught up in everydayness, how do you know that unless you kind of step out of that experience and are looking at it from another perspective? So I think yes, the phenomenological *epoché* is a practice of disengaging from our immediate tendencies, beliefs, affirmations, confirmations and of adopting a much more non-engaged scrutiny of our experience with the hope that it will yield a lot more genuine

evidence.

Dianoia: In light of the coronavirus outbreak, how does our perception of the virus shape its impact on the world in both a social and political sense, and how might the phenomenological reduction (or any other phenomenological concepts) bring clarity to public discourse?

Moran: I've been thinking about that a lot because I actually have spent time in Wuhan—I was a visiting professor there three years ago, and have very good friends there who have given me firsthand information about their lives and about the changes in their lives. I think initially people in the West thought about this as a local problem in China, and there was a lot of misinformation initially; for example, that COVID-19 was no worse than the common flu, or that some would build immunity to it, but in fact it's ten times more deadly than the seasonal flu. Furthermore, for the flu there's a vaccine, but for COVID-19 there's none. And so the authorities were very slow in moving forward, it was like a tidal wave starting in China and Korea, and then showing up in Italy, Spain, France and then the UK and America. So each country had time to see what was happening, and quite honestly, they should have moved earlier. But what it does show, and I think this is really from the phenomenological point of view, is that first of all we live in one common technological world. I mean this was a virus that was spread by air travel, this was spread by people using airplanes, and so, this was highly mobile because our societies are highly mobile. Secondly, it's been interesting to see that many of the things that we thought belonged to our everyday life we just took so much for granted (so this a good example of the *epoché*). So we just took all of normal life for granted, completely. In other words, we are living in the natural attitude and we just assume things like public transport and restaurants being open, being able to visit friends, all of those things we just took for granted. And our everyday life that we thought was so boring and uninteresting is really vital. And we're all missing it now, and so this is a chance for us to realize that this supposedly inauthentic everyday natural life that we had isn't just always there, but is a fragile human construct that's threatened by things like this global pandemic. So we have to be very careful to guard our social realities, and to make sure that they come back. There's big debates about opening public parks because people that live in crowded conditions don't have public spaces to exercise in. But you also don't want the public parks to be crowded, so there's a fine balance to be drawn. But the reason parks were brought in during the 19th century was to provide people who lived in cramped urban conditions with public spaces to get exercise, to get fresh air and all of these things. I've started teaching Camus' *The Plague*, and I had forgotten until the virus came along how Camus had extraordinary foresight and described exactly the situation that we're in currently. I'll just read you a small passage from *The Plague*, "once plague had shut the gates of the town, they had settled down to a life of separation, debarred from the living warmth that gives forgetfulness of all. In

different degrees in every part of the town, men and women had been yearning for a reunion, not of the same kind for all, but for all alike ruled on it. Most of them longed intensely for an absent one, or for the warmth of a body, for love, or merely for the life and habit that they had endured. Some, often without knowing it, suffered from being deprived of the company of friends and from their inability to get in touch with them through the usual channels of friendship (*e.g.* letters, trains, and boats)." That's kind of a short description of the loss of the everyday social contact that this brings, that Camus describes extraordinary well, and that the only response—the response of the doctor—is to do your job, to face up to your responsibilities and to try and do your part in restoring this human life as best as we can.

Dianoia: When we eventually do return to normalcy, what lasting effects do you think that the coronavirus and social distancing will have on society?

Moran: I've been reading Giogio Agamben's book *The State of Exception*, and it was written after 9/11 in 2005, and it was about the various forms of political and social control brought in allegedly as emergency circumstances, which become part of the new normal. And I was also reading Slavoj Zizek's new book *Pandemic!*, and it says a lot of the same things that as philosophers we have to be careful of. It's certainly true that many things are introduced as emergency measures and then they never go away again. The classic example is income tax—introduced as an emergency measure during the civil war to pay for it, and it's never gone away because this was a great way of extracting money from the people. And one of the things that worries me most, and it's always a two-edged sword, is that modern technological means of social control, which are largely done by using your phone's geolocation, are being used very widely in China to monitor people's movements. And yet, the good part of this is that it stops people who are in contact with the virus from spreading it any further. Google and Amazon are posing a similar thing here, so that you could get a text in the morning saying that you had been in contact with someone who had the virus and then you should quarantine. But in China it's gotten to the point where they have to scan codes when they go into different buildings or when they go into certain streets, and you could be locked out if you're on the list of people that's been exposed. So you suddenly go into a society of total control, and that's terribly worrying from the point of view of social and political liberties. But again, we have to face that all this information is out there, and if they wanted, the people running the Zoom platform could tell that the three of us are on their app now, extract what exactly we're talking about, and they could even locate us from our phones—all of that information builds up. But virus tracing efforts need that information, so this is that double-edged sword that Heidegger talks about concerning technology—it's created the framework inside which we live. We just have to be very careful that we know the essence of this technological enframing, and until we know what it's doing to us in the long-term, we won't really be able to get the right attitude towards it.

Clearly we can't just be Luddites, but we also can't blend completely into the security state as Agamben calls it. The long term impact will be this idea of the security state and 'the state of exception' that Agamben discusses. On the other side, we have to be aware of the people that are protesting any kind of a lockdown and gathering with their second amendment rights and their guns to say "nobody's going to tell me what to do" (that's a pretty American phenomenon by the way). But it is an example that comes from a deep-seated suspicion of anything having to do with the state, whether it be anarchist or libertarian in nature. The state is always repressive for these groups, so I think that at the end of the day we have to go somewhere in-between these two ideologies. It does raise all kinds of issues about political phenomenology, and this will lead us as a final point, it makes us focus on the nature of the life-world and how the life world is being mediated and structured by technological infringement. And they're surely the central issues that Husserl and Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were talking about. From that point of view I think phenomenology is totally relevant to our discussions today.

Dianoia: You're an active member in mediating the dialogue between continental and analytic philosophy. Can you explain the difference between these two camps?

Moran: Well I wrote an article on it one time saying that "Our Germans Are Better Than Your Germans," because the origins of analytic philosophy are german-speaking philosophers like Carnap or others in the Vienna Circle. I say German because they spoke in German, wrote in German, they were either in Germany or Austria. Carnap, Schlick and the Vienna Circle generally moved into America and influenced others like Quine and A.J. Ayer. Analytic philosophy then grew out from that breed of German scientific thought of the 20th century whereas Husserl and Heidegger influenced people like Gadamer, Arendt, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, Kristeva and the more European thinkers that you tend to associate with continental philosophy. So I don't like the terms continental and analytic, but I do think there are different tendencies between thinkers of the 20th century, and what split them politically was the war—this much is clear. Phenomenology became associated with Nazi Germany though Heidegger, and actually, a lot of the Vienna Circle people were Jews who had fled the Nazi regime, so they were very hostile not just to Nazism, but to anything that they thought was associated with it—and that included Heideggerian phenomenology in particular. But in the 21st century, we have to realize that both methods are really intersecting; in fact, cognitive science these days is a mixture of both continental and analytical methods. And also it's a lot to do with people's interests. If you go back to Aristotle and Plato, Plato wrote dialogues, which were very literary products, and Aristotle wrote these more textbook style lectures. And that's interesting too, continental people tend to be more interested in the arts and literature, and analytic philosophers often want to be piggybacking on science, mathematics, logic and so on. So I don't like it when people think that one is better than the other, and I do

think they cover different aspects of the human experience. So I like to see room for both, but of course, as we know, because of the very complicated forms of technical language that have developed in the traditions, there's very little genuine dialogue between them and I've been at it for a long time. In the end, I decided that what's been going on are parallel conversations. So rather than people talking to each other, they're talking about each other in parallel conversations, and that's about as best as we can do.

Dianoia: Another one of your areas of specialization is medieval philosophy—what initially attracted you to the subject and can you fathom a scenario wherein it would be in dialogue with phenomenology?

Moran: I was really trying to write a dissertation on Heidegger for my PhD in 1976 when he died, and everybody said that there was this massive *Gesamtausgabe* of collected works coming out, and that it was supposed to be the second part of *Being and Time* with all of these manuscripts making current Heidegger research impossible. So now we've had one-hundred volumes of *Gasamtausgabe* and I'm not really sure it's changed all that much because people still read *Being and Time*! But at the time I wanted to work on Heidegger, and when he died, my supervisor said I shouldn't really work on him. I had a background from my undergraduate days in medieval philosophy, and I knew Heidegger had. So I said I want to work on a Heideggerian theme (*viz.* the forgetfulness of being in the history of philosophy in the medieval period) and that's what led me to Meister Eckhart. I discovered that one of Eckhart's sources was John Scottus Eriugena, on whom I eventually wrote my PhD. So, in lots of ways, I was kind of emulating Heidegger (who wrote on Thomas of Erfurt for his Habilitation) and writing about a medieval scholar and trying to answer contemporary questions. Of course, it made me kind of an object of suspicion both by the Heideggerians and the Medievalists, so it was hard for me to keep these two different pathways of research open and in dialogue with each other. A lot of the medieval people were philologists and classicists who really didn't want to talk about anything after the Middle Ages, or bring in any ideas from Hegel or Heidegger, or whoever. And similarly, phenomenologists wanted to talk about contemporary issues, and didn't want to talk out the history of philosophy. But it's changing, Jean-Luc Marion is an example of someone who's written on both as well, or Claude Romano who was here this past semester as our Visiting Gadamer Professor. ◆

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