

Statement of Purpose

Sterling Hall

My research has primarily taken shape within the areas of phenomenology and critical theory. From both traditions I have taken the idea that philosophy is best done within the dialectic between the seeming immediacy of given experience and the situated character of that givenness—that is, the struggle between philosophy as a mode of careful description of the worlds we inhabit and as a mode of critical intervention into these worlds in order to find ways of fundamentally changing them for the better. More specifically, I have been interested in questions of metaphysics (“what is an ‘event’ and how do we think of them in relation to time and beings,” “what is an object and how do we account for its (de)composition and relation to other objects,” etc.), epistemology (the problems of ideology, objectivity, and truth), and political philosophy (guided by the perennial question of ‘what is to be done?’ but also focused on topics such as spatial justice, housing, and the role of the public sphere in political action and change). In applying to [University], I hope to be given the opportunity to research the connections between these topics in more depth and to find ways of utilizing work in the developing fields of ‘critical phenomenology’ and ‘social reproduction theory’ to investigate these questions.

My first publications focused on the interrelations of these topics in a broad way (through a comparative analysis of the ontologies of Graham Harman (a Heideggerian) and Slavoj Žižek (a critical theorist), for example), but my sense of the fecundity of this shared space of thought has only deepened with my research at the University of Oregon. Having had the opportunity to be a part of a reading group formed around the department’s journal of critical phenomenology (PUNCTA), I have come to better appreciate the continued relevance of phenomenology for investigating the depths of experience within ‘everydayness’ in a mode of analysis that’s attentive to the systems of power which color these seemingly brute experiences. This appreciation has been tempered by: (1) research done in a course on Marx’s philosophy that focused on the emerging field of social reproduction theory (especially the work of Tithi Bhattacharya) and its ability to theorize intersectionally without sacrificing a focus on the importance of the relation of the ‘working class’ (but a working class understood through lenses of gender, race, ability, etc.) to the composition of the totality of social relations within a capitalist mode of production and (2) independent research done on the recent work of Alain Badiou, who has created a framework for analyzing the appearance of objects and events in their ‘everydayness’ without having to specify how these things appear to human consciousness, experience, etc., which he calls ‘objective phenomenology.’

Whereas many of the texts in critical phenomenology have taken the approach of attempting to critique classical phenomenology for its reliance on the viewpoint of a ‘transcendental subject,’ the work of social reproduction theorists and of Alain Badiou has opened up the space to

critique phenomenology for its reliance on a foundation of ‘intentionality,’ along with other unmediated phenomenological ‘givens’ (e.g. ‘the body’ or ‘being-in-the-world’). This approach—an immanent and critical engagement with the origins of phenomenology—potentially allows us to both preserve the figure of the ‘political subject’ and avoid the danger of reifying various identity positions by treating them as free-floating rather than historically and materially constituted.

If Althusser is correct to say that philosophy is principally a representation of “class struggle in theory,” then it follows that philosophy needs to be attentive to the various ways that this struggle can rise to the level of appearance within the practice of philosophy. My wager is that this intersection between critical theory and phenomenology can help us navigate such an appearance, both as it occurs internally (between the various sub-branches of philosophy) and externally (whether through philosophy’s relation to other academic disciplines or through its spatial relation to the surrounding community in which it is *literally* housed, through its placement within specific buildings within the geography of the university). In doing so, this intersection may be able to provide a framework that can both address many questions within the discipline of philosophy, while also creating a means to think of the *praxis* of philosophy, as a set practices constituted through specific material relations.

In sum, if I am accepted into [University], I hope to continue to work within the space of critical phenomenology and social reproduction theory as a means of practicing philosophy as it moves between the levels of generality (critical theory) and particularity (phenomenology) in their productive dialectic and also as a field concerned with forming interventions into various theoretical and practical problems (e.g. from creating an adequate account of causation to attempting to justify the moral necessity of housing the variously dispossessed). [At this point, perhaps it’d be good to say particular things about the university you’re applying to in order to show why you’re a good fit for them and they’re a good fit for you on more specific grounds.]