

Akademiniai maršrutai

DOING PHILOSOPHY IN ACADEMIA REQUIRES A “DOUBLE” LIFE

Professor Nicolas de Warren interviewed by Vijolė Valinskaitė

The Husserl Archives in Leuven were established in 1939, shortly after Husserl's death. Professor H. L. Van Breda secretly brought Husserl's manuscripts from Freiburg to Leuven in order to prevent their destruction by the National Socialist authorities. Archives in Leuven now have all original manuscripts and also are responsible for the publication of Husserl's philosophical work. In collaboration with the archives in Freiburg and Cologne, The Husserl Archives in Leuven have already published 42 volumes of Husserliana. For this reason, the Archives naturally attract many Husserl scholars from around the world. One of them is prof. Nicolas de Warren with whom we are talking today.

Nicolas de Warren has worked in the Archives since 2012 and he has now attained a position at Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of the book titled Husserl and the Promise of Time: Subjectivity in Transcendental Phenomenology (2009) and has authored numerous other scientific publications. Professor de Warren now works on several different projects and books, among which are the project on First World War and Modern Philosophy and his forthcoming book on Stupidity. In this interview, he discussed the history and future of the Archives, the impact and importance of Husserl's phenomenology, his academic interests and, last but not least, the role of a philosopher in our times.

V.V.: I would like to start this interview by asking what made you decide to come to Belgium from the United States to work at the Husserl Archives. What about the Archives attracted you to it and why do you personally feel that the work of the Archives is important to the philosophical community today?

N.W.: There are a number of reasons why I came to the Archives in Belgium. A few years before I came, there was a decision that Ulrich Melle (Director of the Husserl Archives in Leuven from 2007 until 2017 – V.V.) would work on the last official edition of the Husserliana, which brings to an end this project of seventy years. Part of the interesting thing about coming here was to contribute and to think about how to transform the Archives, which had primarily the mission of producing editions, into something else which would be a kind of research center. In what sense can there be an archive that is no longer based on the production of editions, but on research: what should meaningful research on Husserl and phenomenology mean? That is one of the reasons why I thought it would be attractive to come to Leuven – to face that challenge.

I think that the work of the Archives is important because it is a very unique institution in so far as it has a unique narrative. That is, the manuscripts were so to speak saved and brought here. Husserl is really the last great classical philosopher, that is, he produced this

mass archive of writings, which he understood as a kind of gift that he gave to posterity. Also interesting is that Husserl didn't publish much, relatively speaking, and he thought about philosophy in a very unique way: he thought that philosophy really is research in some basic sense and that the main vehicle for philosophical research is not publication, but a combination of oration, teaching, having students, creating an oral environment of discussion, and debate. There is something quite monological about Husserl as a thinker, he is not someone who enters into dialogue directly but more so, as Plato describes it, he is a soul that is in conversation with himself. He is monological in the sense that he's speaking to himself but this speaking to himself is dialogical in some way. He produced this quite unique corpus of 40,000 pages. I like to think about what one does with these manuscripts. Not merely in terms of editions, but also how they generate research. We need to consider now how we can execute philosophical investigations – and specifically, philosophical investigations, as Husserl conceived of them – while working from these collections of materials and artifacts; in this case, his manuscripts. I think the Archives are important in that sense. Sometimes I think that Husserlian phenomenology is very normalized for us. But to really look at Husserl, there is something unusual and eccentric about what he does. Part of what the Archives should do is to maintain that eccentricity. It is not a normal undertaking; it is somewhat titanic. We no longer have this sense of one man that will serve as a philosophic Atlas, who wants to carry the world on his shoulders. Those are the senses in which the work of the Archives is important. Not just in terms of a place of memory, a place of keeping, but it really should be able somehow to reinvent or renew, as Husserl would say, the spirit of phenomenology as a collective project of research.

V.V.: You are now working on several topics. One is “The First World War and Modern Philosophy”. Could you tell me more about this project and how you came to this idea?

N.W.: Ever since I was very young, I've been interested in war. I've always been reading a lot about military history, etc., and then I was just sort of led to it. Many 20th century philosophers and not just Husserl – but also the main figures, the main canonical figures of 20th century philosophy, those philosophers that we recognize as having changed philosophy and created 20th century philosophy, whether it's Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, the Vienna Circle, or Russell – are connected to the First World War. In a sense WWI, it's banal to say, was the catastrophic event of the early 20th century, which, of course, ushered in *the catastrophe* of the 20th century – the Holocaust. It is for these philosophical and historical reasons that I became interested in understanding and studying WWI. The importance of the WWI on literature, on visual arts, and on music is apparent, and it's something that many people have studied. But it always struck me as very strange that there was a kind of silence or forgetting of how important WWI was for philosophy, not just historically, but also, and naturally, philosophically. I am not just interested in the history of the influence or impact of WWI, but my idea is that for this whole generation of philosophers, in many different ways, the war was a philosophical event. It produced something. It forced them to change their thinking. You can't understand the development of 20th century philosophy without understanding the impact of the war. And since that's such a massive topic, I thought, at least at first, to look more closely at German philosophy and German philosophers during that period.

V.V.: At the time of WWI, scholars were engaged in politics, whereas today this does

not seem to be the case. At first, it seems as if one of the goals of the project is to examine and highlight those political activities so as to rethink the role of philosophers and intellectuals in the society. Would this be a correct depiction of the aims of your project?

N.W.: That wasn't explicitly what I was seeking to do. I'm interested in how philosophers became intellectuals and how the institution of philosophy was put under a kind of stress and mobilized. I want to understand this from a historical lens and I am not primarily executing this project as an attempt to contextualize the actions and writing of those philosophers within today's politics. One thing that we forgot is that the modern institution of philosophy, which is a kind of profession, a certain form of the institutionalization of philosophy, is an invention of the late 19th century. Philosophers are both professionals within a university and also are to some degree or can be public figures. In the late 19th - early 20th century, just before WWI, you really have an internationalization of philosophy, by which I mean a creation of a European space of philosophy that was institutionalized. So what happens in WWI is precisely that this formation of philosophy as an institution undergoes a crisis. Philosophers react in different ways to this crisis. The most interesting examples are the ways in which they mobilize their profession and, as I call it, weaponize philosophy, in a discourse about culture – the clash of culture, which was really the discourse of the WWI.

When you look at the most extreme examples of German philosophers, you see that they become important figures as soon as the war begins, as they motivate and galvanize public opinion. The now obscure German philosopher Rudolf Eucken was a kind of international star of philosophy. He won the Nobel Prize before the war and he was a professor at

Harvard. As soon as the war began, he went out and gave lectures about the war, about the justice of the German cause to thousands of people. Especially when we look back at philosophers who support the war, what happened was that philosophers somehow miraculously stopped being philosophers and fell into ideology. How could philosophy and philosophical discourse support war, and not just any war, but a war of one nation against another nation? How could philosophers support nationalism? Our default judgment is that this is the collapse of philosophy into ideology. I'm interested in trying to show that this situation is much more complicated in the sense that it's very difficult to imagine what kind of force WWI was, and how one can maintain the composure of a philosopher in a time of absolute distress. So I think that WWI shows us the way in which philosophy can become transformed in the context of extreme violence, which is something that, in our age, thankfully, we don't experience. One exception might be after 9/11 in the U.S. You really saw intense academic debates; you saw a lot of academics embracing a form of nationalism, or embracing, in some sense, that we have to support America, American values, or Western values, whatever you want to call it.

So for our purposes, WWI might be interesting to check our own prejudices. WWI shows what I would call the three constitutive distinctions that need to be stabilized in order to have philosophy as we recognize it today; first, a stable distinction between philosophers as professionals and as private persons, second, a stable distinction between philosophy and ideology, and third, a stable institutional distinction between the university, as a neutral space, and something called the public discourse, which is political. What WWI shows us is how it is possible for those three distinctions to collapse. From our point

of view, we constantly try to stabilize those distinctions, but we haven't experienced anything comparable to the total distress of an event in which those three distinctions become unstable.

V.V.: You have chosen to study Husserl by giving special attention to his personal experiences of and relation to the Great War. You contextualize Husserl's thought by studying him as a father who lost his son in the war. Why did you choose this quite unusual approach? What do you think this particular analysis can and will contribute to the study of Husserl's phenomenology?

N.W.: What makes Husserl an interesting case is that he's a professor in a German university, but he's not German. He's born in Moravia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, but – like a fully assimilated German, and more importantly, as a professor in a German university – he is very patriotic, very supportive of the war. You see very clearly that when the war breaks out, Husserl is like everyone else. His two sons, who are students, volunteer and go to the war. He adopts all of the rhetoric. In a sense, he speaks, in Heidegger's terms, like *das Man*. It's important to note that Husserl, as a private person, is like everyone else, but not as a philosopher. There is a distinction between Husserl as a private person, as a father of sons, and Husserl as a philosopher, the father of phenomenology. The interesting thing is that other German philosophers, who are equally patriotic – their sons also fought in the war – are themselves engaged in the public space. Husserl, in contrast, does not make public statements for the war, and he does not produce any so-called war writings and this despite the fact that he is patriotic, as one can see from his letters. As the war progresses and it becomes evident that the Germans will not win, you see a change in

his perception and temperament, even though he remains patriotic. When his youngest son Wolfgang dies in Verdun in 1916, you can see a very complex change that goes back to what I was saying before: that the stability of the distinction between the private person, father of sons, German nationalist patriot, and the philosopher who has a kind of political neutrality starts to break down. It is no longer tenable. Husserl in 1917 and 1918 gives lectures on Fichte to an audience mainly of soldiers going back to the front, and then later to an even wider audience. He does this near the end of the war, when it was clear that the war was lost. Why does Husserl decide to engage himself philosophically in the war when it is clear that the war is over?

So, in brief, what I've tried to show is that you see this very complex transformation in Husserl's thinking that you can map on three points. One is that the war and the death of his son motivate his thinking about ethics and serve as the lens through which he examines that topic. Husserl develops a different way to think about ethics, which does not supplant but somehow runs parallel to how he thought about ethics prior to the war. Looking at late Husserl's ethics, there are always two examples that reoccur. He always uses two examples to illustrate one of his interpretations of the notion of value. For Husserl, absolute value is a kind of singular demand on us. He always illustrates that with a mother's love for her son, and the mother's love for the fatherland. For Husserl, the love for the son is a kind of absolute demand, and is a kind of absolute love that has a set of duties and responsibilities. Husserl also thinks, rightly or wrongly, that love for the fatherland is also an absolute value. The problem is how you recognize two absolute values that make demands on us and which contradict each other. It's not just a philosophical example,

but an example that comes out of his own biography. That's the first point.

The second point is about the problem of history in Husserl's phenomenology. The fairly established view is that Husserl only starts to think about the problem of history in the 1930s. Instead, Husserl's first awaking to the tragedy of history is in the context of WWI. One can see this in the Kaiser articles, which he writes right after the war in the 1920s.

The third point is about a very pervasive consequence of WWI, namely a kind of fundamental loss of faith in reason. You see this in many artists and philosophers. What happens with WWI is that this sort of optimism of European culture in reason and philosophy's optimism in itself doesn't survive. You have a rejection of the primacy of reason. Heidegger is a good example of this. But what's fascinating about Husserl is that for him the crisis of WWI does not produce the abandonment of reason, but actually produces a much stronger commitment to reason. That is what you see in the Kaiser articles. That is a quite unique example of a philosopher who, in a sense, survives the war philosophically. I tried to show that this is very unlike most other significant philosophers. That might also be why there is something anachronistic for us today about Husserl in that he maintained his commitment to the absoluteness of rationality and reason. He continued to believe that there is no such thing as a full realization of humanity without the realization of a pursuit of a life in truth and reason. We might try to maintain this today, but no one really believes that any more.

V.V.: It appears as if you, in this project, are analysing Husserl's ideas through the lens of his personal experiences. Do you feel this method as having any relationship to Schleiermacherian hermeneutics? Or, more generally, how do you understand the

method of the project "The First World War and Modern Philosophy", specifically with regards to Husserl?

N.W.: All we can deal with as philosophers are documents. The letters, texts, etc. So rather than collapse these documents into one subject, all of the documents should be understood as manifestations of the subject. The Husserl who writes a letter to his son, the Husserl who writes a letter to his brother, the Husserl who writes the Fichte lectures and speaks to students, the Husserl who writes the Kaiser articles, who speaks to humanity, and the Husserl who, on his little desk, writes his notes – those are all *Husserls* who are speaking. Rather than say there is one biography of Husserl, the philosopher, one should instead look at all these documents as subjects who speak. And then just to show the complicated relationship between them.

So my method is to try to do something which may not always be successful. To put it bluntly, I don't want to reduce the philosophical thought to the person, but I don't want to reduce the person to the philosophical thought either. Part of the strategy is to show that for many of these philosophers, like Husserl, the way in which they understand themselves as a person is through a very robust notion of being a philosopher. So this distinction between the philosopher and the person is in a sense an artificial distinction. You see very clearly in Husserl (again, you have to read his letters to see this) that his self-understanding as a philosopher verged on being a kind of religious devotion to reason, to humanity, etc.

I tried to move between three different approaches: first, the biographical, second, the historical, and, third, the philosophical. Concerning the historical, Husserl composed the last iteration of his lectures on Fichte (that he gave three times) one week before the end of the war. What is interesting here is that Hus-

serl sounds somewhat banal at the beginning of these lectures. He says that the war is in the spirit of the war of 1813. He speaks all of the clichés and ideology of the war. I ask myself, how could he speak that a week before the end of the war?

I tried to balance these three – the biographical, the historical, and the philosophical – and to show the way in which they interpenetrate each other. It is not an attempt to explain or to say that one is reducible to the other. To demonstrate this point, let's look at the example Husserl utilizes in his late ethical writings, which I mentioned earlier, the example of a mother's love for her son. This has a philosophical meaning, because it is an example of a philosophical argument. So it has a philosophical function, that's one layer. Another layer is that it's biographical. The third layer is that it's historical in so far as it is important to note that his son was killed at the battle of Verdun. In these ways, we can see that the example has three levels of meaning. And we also see that they don't collapse into each other. You can't understand that example as a philosophical example if you don't understand the philosophical theory. But you also can't understand it as a biographical example if you don't put it in the context of Husserl's biography.

V.V.: It is common today to segregate the early Husserl from the later Husserl, or to break up Husserl's thinking into radically distinct periods. Do you find there to be more of a continuation throughout Husserl's oeuvre or do you think that there really are some breaking points in his thought where he radically changes his perspective, method, etc.?

N.W.: Difficult question. I think it's difficult because the forms of both narratives are in some sense true. There is an early and late Husserl. Like any philosopher Husserl

evolves, changes, and develops. There are various narratives about how to describe that. That's obviously true. Clearly, Husserl didn't begin as a philosopher. He was a mathematician, and he became interested in philosophy later. The narrative that Husserl can be divided into the early Husserl, who executes a static analysis, and the later Husserl, who performs genetic investigation, is, in one sense, true. But likewise, the narrative that, despite all of these changes, Husserl's philosophical commitments don't fundamentally change, well, that's also true. In both of these narratives there is a kind of historicity of Husserl's thinking and one can identify different stages and different reasons for those changes. But Husserl is also always dedicated to certain fundamental philosophical commitments. He is not just committed as a philosopher, but really as a person, which is indispensable for phenomenology that would be a science, phenomenology, as committed to centrality of reason to all human existence. That clearly doesn't change. The more you read Husserl, the more you see that Husserl always surprises you in being able to become a kind of Husserl that you think he couldn't be. There is something always changing, though you always see that it's Husserl. It's almost like a kaleidoscope. The other thing is that there are different lines of his thinking developing in different speeds. There's not a kind of synchronization. Certain problems develop on a different rhythm from other problems. It's difficult to take a measurement at any point and say where Husserl is *vis-à-vis* himself.

V.V.: This year you taught a class on stupidity and as I know you are also writing a book on the same subject. Can you tell why this topic interests you? What will the main argument of the book be? Which philosophers will you be drawing from, primarily? What

overall impact do you want the book to have? Simply stated, why the topic of stupidity?

N.W.: Maybe I put it in a way which is cynical; being an academic you're constantly surrounded with people who, in one sense, are intelligent – they can talk a certain talk, they have a certain discourse – but they are also pretty stupid. When you talk to them and hear them speak, you encounter that there is something impenetrable about their thinking, and they can't think outside their box – they are stuck inside. I've always been fascinated by that, because so much of teaching is the challenge to somehow understand how someone is not thinking in order to make them think. So the question is what do you do when you encounter stupidity in the most extreme form? When you encounter someone who is unable to be taught. Stupidity is essentially the figure of the unteachable. It's unteachable, because it's not just a lack of knowledge or ignorance or error – there is something more. I'm interested in trying to think about stupidity, not as the opposite of knowledge and not as a lack of knowledge, but as a kind of plenitude itself. Stupidity provokes a certain kind of violence when one is exposed to it and a certain kind of indignation. Stupidity comes in many forms, but yet there are not many discussions about it. I became more interested in understanding it and came upon the idea that one of the philosophers who is helpful here is Sartre, although he himself rarely talks about stupidity. Sartre is a kind of philosopher who has produced concepts that can be harnessed to think about stupidity. Sartre himself was, in a very unconscious way, aware that stupidity is a central problem. He becomes somewhat conscious of it in the form of writing his unfinished biography of Flaubert. As we all know, Flaubert is fundamentally obsessed with stupidity; not only other people's stupidity but also his own.

It's difficult to write a book about stupidity because there are so many risks involved in writing a book that's too pretentious. What is typical about the problem of stupidity is that you can't take it too seriously as an academic topic, but you also can't simply say that it's too dumb to be an academic topic. How does one get that right measure? And indeed, why would you even write about stupidity if stupidity is something that's incorrigible? There is a nice line from a play by Schiller: "Even the gods struggle in vain against stupidity". So even if the gods struggle in vain, how could a philosopher struggle? The difficulty is that there is no theory of stupidity, there is nothing to understand in a deep sense. And if we did understand anything, it would be meaningless, stupid. The question is how do you write about stupidity that makes no promise, and yet says something. My idea was to write it in a way that moves back and forth between looking at certain ideas in Sartre as a way to think about stupidity.

The book begins with a long setup, where the basic idea is that philosophers should not be concerned with ignorance and error, but that they should think about stupidity. The fact that traditionally philosophers are more interested in error and ignorance reveals something about the stupidity of philosophy. So we don't really see what the true problem is for us. Stupidity poses a different kind of challenge than the challenge of ignorance and error. This is already apparent in Plato and Socrates, who are failing to meet the challenge of stupidity. I try to show that the inauguration of philosophy in its Socratic idea is that Socrates is always depicted in various confrontations with the other of philosophy. Socrates is always trying to teach the other. In the dialogues there are three basic types of the other: the sophist, the many (the prisoners of the cave), and then Alcibiades. The real

problem is Alcibiades, as he is the figure of stupidity. But then, in the dialogue, we see the failure of Socrates to domesticate and teach Alcibiades. This is the failure of philosophy in the face of stupidity, which is inseparable from the success of philosophy to be ridiculous. Ridiculous in the way Socrates appeared ridiculous to Aristophanes in the play *Clouds*, which is also discussed in the book. Socrates is the ambiguous figure, who is caught in-between confronting the other and failing to triumph over Alcibiades. So we have a sort of intuition that there is something fraudulent about Socrates. I like this idea that if philosophy is the voice that calls out the imposter, if we philosophers pretend to know what is false, then the true imposter is precisely the voice that calls out what is false. So Socrates is the true imposter.

In the book, I try to show the different aspects of stupidity, which in part is a structure of self-deception. In Sartrean terms it would be bad faith. I conceive of my book not as a constellation, but instead as something like an archipelago, that is, as little islands of discussion, where all of those little islands do not make up a unitary figure, as a constellation does.

V.V.: Finally, you have taught at both American and European universities. In what way do you find the academic environments to be different on the two different continents? It's no secret that nowadays the humanities have to fight for money and ceaselessly justify their existence. In light of that fact, do you find it easy to do philosophy in the university setting?

N.W.: On my view, it was never and never will be easy to do philosophy as such. And it was never easy and never will be easy to do philosophy in an institution, whatever kind of institution that is, a university, etc. I think

that under no circumstances can we have any assurance of the possibility of philosophy and especially in the context of its institutionalization. A general predicament of philosophy is that all of the signs of philosophy, all of its markers, and even the question of the value or use of philosophy can be misrecognized. So now our situation, if you wish, is just an extreme exploitation of the fundamental vulnerability of philosophy, of philosophy that by definition eludes any kind of institutional identification, even as it requires it in some form. But the vulnerability (of philosophy) is that we as academic, professional philosophers are constantly placed under the demand to justify and to know what it is to do philosophy in order to justify it and to justify it in accordance with a kind of rationality that is not our own, which is the rationality of money, social prestige, practical applicability. What we constantly have to do as philosophers is to justify our existence to others, and also to ourselves, we are constantly in these debates of who is the true philosopher, which is a kind of inane debate. We constantly have to show our credentials.

I think the other difficult thing for philosophy, as you have rightly stated, is that now universities are neo-liberal institutions: as a professor you are meant to be an entrepreneur. You are tasked with running a kind of small business, which is your research. The university doesn't provide you with any money, nothing. It's inconsequential. So you have to make projects to get money and then manage that money. Increasingly the measure of success is money. In one sense, it's the crassest reduction of philosophy, as Adorno already saw, to the instrumental rationalization and consumer culture, as it's so called. You cannot be a philosopher in this kind of institution, as was the intuition of many philosophers like Adorno and Heidegger. So you'd have

to make a distinction between thinking and philosophy. There is philosophy, but there is no thinking. Because, precisely, the thinker cannot operate in this kind of institution. From my own experience, in Europe this is unfortunately going to get worse before it is going to get better. Part of this is that no one cares about philosophy anymore. In the 19th century one had to create an idea of culture, an ideology of culture in order to support the value of philosophy. That's why people thought that philosophy was so important for culture, and we all accepted that culture is important. Moreover, we all accepted that Europe is the highest culture. There is an important relationship between the narcissism of Europe and the success of philosophy as a cultural enterprise. Now Europeans don't think that they are special culturally – the consequence is that we don't care if philosophy thrives unless it conforms to a rationality by which we judge other pursuits. You can see that increasingly in the whole system of chasing after money, like in any system in which money becomes the central goal.

Philosophy in general is in a kind of crisis for 150 years. This crisis is the crisis of the institution of the university and of the role that the university has within a culture. The idea of the university in the U.S. is different from the idea of the university in Europe, but in both cases, the university has been going through a fundamental transformation in its identity and function, and in both cases, I think, that it is not healthy for philosophy. It's also not healthy that academic philosophers only want to recognize and speak to themselves. We have accelerated our own irrelevance because we don't want to recognize and talk to people who don't have a position in philosophy; the non-academics.

It's difficult to say whether it's better or worse in the U.S. The universities in the

U.S. are much more affected by the nature of identity. These cultural and social issues have a greater impact than they have here in Europe, at least in my experience. Here, in Belgium, no one cares about these things, it doesn't affect philosophy. But in the U.S. that is very different. That is for better or for worse. In the worst case scenario, it's also not healthy for philosophy.

V.V.: Your comments seem to suggest a certain pessimism about the university? Do you find any reason to be optimistic about the future of philosophy within the context of professional academia?

N.W.: I think that as someone who has a job at a university and calls oneself a philosopher, you need to have a double life (and maybe philosophy always required this duplicity). Double in the sense that you need to have a life imposed on you by your office – you're a professor. There are aspects of it that are enjoyable, for example teaching. You have this life – the exoteric life, but you also need to have an esoteric life. In that context you have to try to maintain integrity, meaning that I'm going to write about things that I care about, regardless of whether it's economically viable. In that sense, there has to be a kind of foolishness in the philosopher: regardless of what anyone is thinking, I'm going to work on it. That has to be a kind of inner life, which is secret and invisible. In my situation, I thought, once I get a permanent job, once I get tenure and become a full professor, that I will not have to play the game anymore. I have to play it just to keep everyone happy, but I will write a book about stupidity, I will write books that I want to write. Writing a book on stupidity is not something that's going to get me research money. As a joke, I submitted an FWO (*Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, Research Foundation – Flanders – V.V.) project on stupidity.

Part of the project was to show the stupidity of the very idea of applying for money. Of course, it didn't get accepted. As Deleuze says, *faire l'idiot, ça a toujours été une fonction de la philosophie*. There needs to be more of that. Unfortunately, what happens is that we as human beings want more glory and

money. But I think that it is the responsibility of people who are established to no longer be established – to say “I will no longer apply for money, I will write what I want”. So that's the sense in which one could change institutional philosophy, and that's the way in which you need a double life. An inner life.

2017 m. liepos 8 d.
Liuvenas, Belgija