

# Phenomenology and Spirituality

## §1. Introduction

This small essay is an attempt to make some preliminary connections between phenomenology and spirituality. In the first section the two terms will be given some more flesh and in the second section their interconnection will be explored.

### §1.1 Phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a 20th century philosophical movement inaugurated by Edmund Husserl in his important publication 'Logical Investigations' <sup>1</sup> and further developed in his own and others' works. <sup>2</sup> Phenomenology stands for a method and its results based on the attempt to bring to experiential evidence, or insight, the universal structures of pure consciousness, which are the conditions of possibility of any experience (perceptual, emotional, mental, scientific etc.) whatsoever. Methodologically its main concern is the transition from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude, the first one being naive and riddled with many un-clarified presuppositions, the second one being self-founding, self-evident and purified of any unjustified presuppositions. Many mutually inclusive steps, called reductions, will lead to and refine this transition, the two most important ones being the phenomenological reduction and the eidetic reduction.

The phenomenological reduction suspends in one swoop our belief in the existence of the world, and all it contains in its transcendence, without tossing out our immanent experience of the world. In this way our naive belief that we are a psycho-physical part of the really existing world is transformed into the experience that the appearing world is given to consciousness as a claim, which has to be carefully examined in all its ramifications. Helpful in this transition is the scientific reduction, which suspends all claims of the physical and psycho-physical sciences, which try to explain conscious phenomena like thought, feelings and awareness in material-causal terms. This reduction is helpful, because the sciences already start with un-clarified, naive suppositions within its own procedures, in which thought and perception themselves are already naively accepted key ingredients. Husserl's refutation of psychologism, which is an attempt to explain the laws of logic and mathematics as based on inductive generalizations of our actual thoughts, would be a half-way station between the natural and the phenomenological attitude. <sup>3</sup>

The eidetic reduction is a thoughtful technique to purify any phenomenon, either worldly or transcendental, from contingent contents in order to arrive at an insight into its necessary, bare-bone skeletal structure. Its guiding thought is the thought-experiment to envision phenomenon X in different variations to a) find out what elements belong to X in such a way that if these elements were taken away, X would not be X anymore, and b) to take away those contingent, non-essential parts without which X would still be X. My favorite example of a specific material phenomenon to be examined in this way is a drinking cup. What specific features make a drinking cup to be a drinking cup? A next step would be Husserl's favorite example of a 'material thing in general' using a die. His goal being to arrive at an insight into the essential structure(s) of any material thing whatsoever in general and our experience of such. In this way Husserl brought to evidence the insight that consciousness is essentially intentional, because consciousness is always consciousness OF something to which it is directed, and

because any thing is only a something, because it is a something FOR a consciousness (the noetic-noematic structure).

Other structures he uncovers are those of a phenomenon's inner and outer (contextual) horizons, the structure of experience of temporal objects within the extended now (or living present) consisting of protention-present-retention, and much, much more. As the phenomenological and eidetic reductions will provide important philosophical clarifications of the necessary structures of different modes (perception, memory, imagination, doubt, reflection etc.) and fields (things, individuals, states-of-affairs, melodies, scientific theories, mathematical entities, reflected or self-consciousness, my worldly ego etc.) of experience, the transcendental reduction moves a step further into the realm of the Transcendental Ego as a final self-constituting principle of consciousness, the final "source of being, of objectivity, of reality and of truth." In Latin his basic philosophy is expressed in the following: "Ego cogito cogitatum qua cogitatum," which in a very free translation would mean: The Transcendental Ego always is conscious of a constituted entity (noema) as constituted (noesis) by the Ego itself. The Ego also carries within itself the structure of a historical-teleological horizon, which is of importance for the development of a phenomenological theology.

## **§1.2. Spirituality.**

A tendency of consciousness of most sentient beings is the tendency of self-transcendence towards truth, enlightenment, beauty and goodness, all of which might be just aspects of the sacred, the "Holy." This tendency is self-amplifying by consciousness being habitually (ritually) or originally (creatively) exposed to these phenomena. The most controversial, central and complex attribute of spirituality seems to be self-transcendence, because all religious, mystical and trans-personal traditions will always give, though with certain variations, accounts of a) the self, b) the act of transcendence and c) the nature of that to which one transcends. I'm sure that most people have a pre-reflective (hermeneutic) understanding of transcendence, but once reflection and formulation sets in (apophantis) there will be a veritable cornucopia of techniques, philosophies, schools, doctrines, dogmas etc., most of which might be mutually exclusive on a verbal level, but at the same time producing comparable results on an experiential level.

## **§2. A tentative rapprochement of the two terms.**

For a deeper understanding of both phenomenology and spirituality I propose to work towards a possible middle ground by consecutively exploring a) the phenomenology of spiritual experience and b) the spirituality of the phenomenological experience.

### **§2.1. The phenomenology of spiritual experience.**

This field of investigation has been very fruitfully explored by different phenomenologists or phenomenologically inspired scientists (Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, W. Brede Christensen, Mercia Eliade, Martin Heidegger). Their common theme is to inquire after and describe (not explain) the essence of religious phenomena like experiences (mysticism, holiness, rapture, benediction, inspiration, etc.) and their expressions (prayer, ritual, myths, symbols, doctrines etc.). Most will start with a survey of other peoples' experiences, maybe add some personal experience also, and then try to see what is common and even essential to, for example, prayer as it is practiced throughout the world. Another question is the

relation between the found essences themselves, as it is recognized that all essences are essentially related. For me the most integrative concepts became the 'numinous' (Otto), the 'Sacred' (Eliade) and the 'Unknown' (Krishnamurti). Though all three concepts are slightly different, they have very much in common and provide some powerful conceptual tools for spiritual self-understanding and the understanding of other people's spiritual life.

An open question is whether these investigations might deliver a common natural religion underlying all the positive religions, or only provides a reflective insight into actual religious practices. The outcome of this question is very much determined by what kind of ontological status one gives to the concept 'essence' itself: a) realistic, in which case the essence is an intellectual construct, b) Platonic, in which case the essence is a universal, trans-personal, eternal blueprint, c) transcendental idealistic, in which case the essence is seen to be constituted by a or 'the' transcendental Ego, and about which no further realistic or idealistic metaphysical claims are made, or d) Theosophical (neo-Platonic), in which case essences emanate from, and are meditatively sustained by, a community of divine creative intelligences, who themselves emanate directly, or through other intelligences indirectly, from the absolute (Parabrahm, Ein-Soph, the Eternal Parent).

One step further in this investigation would be the development of Husserl's own theological musings as done by James Hart and Steven Laycock. They argue that phenomenology of religion is still contaminated by a certain naiveté and naturalistic positions and want to proceed towards a phenomenological theology, by deepening the movement of the phenomenological reductions. To quote Laycock: "phenomenological theology ... seeks to discover its Subject Matter, the Divine (theos), in that web of intuitively articulable necessities in which phenomena are caught and seek to do so by means of the reductive-eidetic-reconstructive techniques characteristic of phenomenology. Phenomenological theology, in Husserl's exquisite phrase, seeks to reach 'God without God.'"<sup>4</sup> Though it might not be immediately intelligible, their vision is something like this: God is both a) the creator of the intersubjective community of monads, and is aware of the world only through this community of consciousnesses, and b) God is the infinite telos to which this community, through its awareness of the world and its horizon, is directed. This theo-phenomenological vision is the radicalization toward the divine absolute of the historical-teleological structure of the transcendental ego. This structure provides an even more radical understanding of spiritual experiences.

## **§2.2. The spirituality of phenomenological experiences.**

In my efforts to understand phenomenology, especially the whole problematic of the reductions, many amazing experiences were triggered. Apparently one of the most common phenomenological experiences is the realization that we only experience experience itself and not an objective world of things 'out there.' I can try to prove the existence of the world out there by kicking a stone, only to end up with the experience of pain. Translated in Kantian terms it is the realization that we only experience phenomena (appearances) and never noumena (things-in-themselves). In oriental philosophical terms it would be parallel to the realization of the maya-like nature of reality. As such it is a first tentative break with the natural attitude, though people from different traditions might come so used to this possible perspective that they will not further explore its implications and possibilities and fall back into the natural attitude.

A deepening for myself of this perspective occurred while remembering and wondering about a previous experience of 'space' after having visited a holographic museum. When I came

outside again 'space' was not 'space' anymore, the usual naturalistic experience of depth and three-dimensionality was suspended and I was just in a state of great wonder. After reading some phenomenology many years later I re-interpreted the experience as an 'epoché' (bracketing) of naturalistic space, and being on the threshold of a possible phenomenological investigation of the constitution of space. Another experience was during a walk while contemplating the phenomenological problematic of meaning-endowment. It occurred to me in a flash that the possible explanation of the fact that I was walking there and then and having the thoughts I had, could be explained, not by some physico-psycho-sociological theory, but by an 'archeological' investigation into the meanings I had endowed on certain experiences throughout my life: the meaning of walking in nature, the meaning of living close to the TS, the meaning of living in the USA, etc. etc. The significance of this experience was not so much the actual investigation itself, but the insight into its possibility and the seeing of a vast horizon of further possible investigations. This experience became later the foundation for the realization of Heidegger's insight that phenomenology is the seeing of its *possibility*.

The point here also is the insight that doing phenomenology is, as Husserl says, a zig-zag between new insights and the re-interpretation of older insights. For example a new insight into the nature of the natural attitude will provide a new perspective on a previous position, which might have been contaminated by remnants of the natural attitude, though without one knowing so. This new insight might then become a tool to purify the previous position, which might produce a new insight, etc. Further, the understanding of the phenomenological learning process can be seen as the matrix of any learning process in general and as such contribute to their own refinement. With this in mind I can come to the appreciation that phenomenology is itself the process of philosophy, and any other endeavor trying to attain truth, in which this process itself comes to a more explicit self-consciousness. The crowning achievement of Husserlian phenomenology is the self-reflexive exploration of its own foundation with the result, not of providing this foundation for itself, but to provide the insight that it is possible to do so, though, paradoxically, it might never actually achieve that end.

The spiritual aspects of all these phenomenological explorations and experiences are very subtle and hard to express. First of all there are the parallels between spiritual experiences and phenomenological reductions: both are transformative and when practiced with diligence become sedimented within our personal lives. Both are liberating from all kinds of prejudices. Both open infinite vistas of possibilities. Second, the attainment of truth in the philosophical domain, and even in the more narrow epistemological domain, is by definition already an achievement by the spirit. Thirdly, some phenomenological endeavors have direct ethical implications. For example the phenomenological insights into the nature of inter-subjectivity has far-reaching moral implications about communal life. Central in this is the exploration of empathy which might result in a more intense compassion. Fourth, many commentators have seen the many parallels and congruities between phenomenology and oriental philosophy: Husserl's transcendental ego and atman (Theosophy), Sartre's non-egological position and the doctrine of anatman (Krishnamurti), constitution and Adyhasa (superimposition), Heidegger and taoism, etc. This will help phenomenology to further develop its phenomenology of religion and also a phenomenological based theology. Oriental philosophy might get infused with a more precise self-conscious methodology in its subtle differentiations of states of consciousness.

### §3. The middle ground

The above presentation might help to see the possibility of a middle ground of a spiritual phenomenology or phenomenological spirituality, both centered on the exploration of the *a priori* structures of philosophical and spiritual experiences itself. This might result in a new 'prisca theologica' in the sense that it expresses the timeless, original, necessary paradigm of any spirituality whatsoever, regardless of creed, race, gender, culture, etc (Blavatsky, Leadbeater, Gebser, Wilber). On the practical side work is already done in the field of trans-personal psychology and psycho-therapy wedded to phenomenological insights (Laing, Frankl, Boss, Walsh, Vaughan). Personally I see great possibilities in the exploration of the interconnection of the themes of a) pre-reflective self-awareness; b) the structural transformation of consciousness through different kinds of reflection; c) the constitution of the worldly ego in reflection; d) the transcending of the worldly ego through spiritual practices; e) the discovery of the transcendental ego and the inter-subjective community of monads; f) the stabilization or sedimentation of a spiritual-transcendental view and life; and g) the ultimate possibility of its transcendence into the absolute.

### §4. Phenomenology and Theosophy.

Lastly something about phenomenology and Theosophy. Similarities between Theosophy and phenomenology are at first very hard to find, because theosophy is primarily a cosmogony and phenomenology is primarily an epistemology. One is the outcome of an esoteric investigation, the other a specific beginning for philosophical investigation. The two are seemingly miles apart qua subject, method and vocabulary. At a superficial level the best way of them coming together would either by a) developing a phenomenological elucidation of the essential features of the theosophical worldview and experience, or b) developing a comparative analysis of phenomenology with other related philosophies like those of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Shankara and other eastern idealistic philosophies (including Krishnamurti), all done within a theosophical framework. At this level it can be stated that both views are a) a refutation of positivism in all its guises and variations, b) are close to Platonism, c) recognize a teleological principle at work both in the universe as well as in consciousness, d) overcome Cartesian dualism with a qualified monism, and e) recognize different levels of consciousness with their inherent 'egos' or principles.

For me the big 'click' between the two views happened when I realized the striking congruence between Sartre's phenomenological-existential investigations of consciousness and Krishnamurti's teachings, which has its roots, despite all claims to the contrary, in theosophy. As this has happened quite a while ago I've had plenty of time to discover (or spin) a thick web of interconnections, congruencies, direct and indirect historical influences between phenomenology, theosophy, theology, trans-personal psychology, religious studies, social studies, consciousness studies, Vedanta, Buddhism, and much more, all confirming for me the profound wisdom of both theosophy and phenomenology.

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl, Edmund, *Logical Investigations*, in 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2001 [1970]).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the most important thinkers within the phenomenological movement are Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Hans Gadamer.

<sup>3</sup> The first volume of LI is mainly dedicated to this refutation.

<sup>4</sup> Steven W. Laycock and James G. Hart, *Essays in Phenomenological Theology* (New York: SUNY, 1986), p. 5.