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Phenomenology

David R. Cerbone

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understanding **phenomenology**

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David R. Cerbone

Abbreviations

Translations have been modified where appropriate.

BN	J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*
BP	M. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*
BPW	E. Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*
BS	D. C. Dennett, *Brainstorms*
BT	M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*
BW	M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*
CE	D. C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*
CES	E. Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*
CM	E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*
FTL	E. Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*
HCT	M. Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time: Prologomena*
HE	J.-P. Sartre, *The Humanism of Existentialism*
HSHC	D. C. Dennett, "How to Study Human Consciousness Empirically, or Nothing Comes to Mind"
Ideas I	E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*
Ideas II	E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*
IM	M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*
IOP	E. Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*
LI	E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*
OTB	M. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*
PCIT	E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*
PCP	E. Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*
PP	M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

SP	J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*
SW	E. Husserl, *Husserl: Shorter Works*
TE	J.-P. Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*
TI	E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*
WD	J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

introduction

Opening exercises

Introducing a book on phenomenology, indeed introducing phenomenology, is no easy matter, in part because there are so many ways to begin and no one way is ideal. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that, as will become apparent in the chapters to follow, there is a great deal in the way of technical vocabulary and concepts associated with phenomenology, but to begin by making use of such terminology will only add to whatever confusions arise from reading the primary texts. Since phenomenology has a relatively well-defined history, commencing at the start of the twentieth century (with some nineteenth-century premonitions), along with a generally agreed on set of central figures, a book introducing phenomenology could begin historically, with a recitation of various names, dates and places. Lacking, however, would be any sense of why select just these names to the exclusion of others, and what it is that is holding them all together. The historical development of phenomenology will be one of the themes of this book, and so there will be ample opportunity for names and dates as we proceed.

There is, of course, the word "phenomenology" itself, but its meaning, the study or science of phenomena, only raises more questions: phenomena as opposed to what, and what does it mean to study, or have a "science" of, phenomena (whatever they turn out to be)? Equally unhelpful is attending to the history of the word, whose use extends back a few hundred years and has well-established uses in both philosophy (e.g. in the philosophy of Hegel) and science (e.g. in thermodynamics) that are often only loosely related to how the term is used in the twentieth-century phenomenological movement. Accounting for these

various uses thus does little to illuminate what is special and significant about this movement.

I begin instead by inviting you to engage in a very simple exercise, which can be developed so as to indicate, in very broad outline, both the subject matter and philosophical importance of phenomenology. This exercise involves little more than continuing to do what you are doing right now, which at least includes looking at the words printed on the page of this book. (If you wear glasses, it might prove helpful to take them on and off as we proceed; if you do not wear glasses, you can squint or in some other way "screw up" your eyes.) That you are looking at the words on this page, that you are reading, means, among other things, that you are engaged in the act of seeing, or, to be a bit fancier but perhaps no less awkward, that you are currently having or enjoying visual experience. Now, suppose you are asked to describe *what* you see. In response, you may note such things as the page before you, along with the words and letters, and perhaps also the shape of the page, the shape and colour of the letters. You may even read aloud the words that are occupying you at the moment the request is entered. You may also, if you are being especially careful and attentive, say something about the background that forms a field on which the page appears. That you say such things is something we shall return to shortly, but first I want you to consider a slightly different request. Instead of being asked to describe what you see, the "objects" of your visual experience, suppose you were asked to describe your *seeing* of the objects. Here, you are being asked to shift your attention away from the things you see to your visual experience of these things, and here you may find the request a little less straightforward. Nonetheless, a moment's thought may serve to get such a description going. (If you wear glasses, this might be a good time to take them off and put them back on a few times.)

I happen to wear glasses. If I were to take them off while looking at the page of the book held at the usual half-arm's length away, the letters, words and page would, as I might put it, become blurry, while restoring my glasses would render them sharp once again. Of course, I do not for a moment think that the blurriness characterizes the things I am looking at in and of themselves, as though my removing my glasses had the magical power to soften the actual ink, paper and so on. (Think here of the difference between removing your glasses and taking your wet hand and rubbing it across the printed page. Doing the latter, wetting the paper and smearing the print, really does affect the object.) That there are descriptions that apply to visual experience without necessarily applying to the objects of that experience helps to make vivid the dis-

tinction we are trying to delineate between what we see and our seeing of it. To concentrate on the latter, to focus one's attention not so much on what one experiences out there in the world but on one's experience of the world, is to take the first step in the practice of phenomenology. The word "phenomenology" means "the study of phenomena", where the notion of a phenomenon coincides, roughly, with the notion of experience. Thus, to attend to experience rather than what is experienced is to attend to the phenomena.

Considerable care is needed in spelling out this talk of "attending to experience", since there are directions we could go in that would very quickly take us away entirely from the domain of phenomenology. Let us stick for a moment with the example of the blurriness brought on by the removal of my glasses. One way I might attend to that experience is to begin to investigate the causes of the change in the character of my visual experience. I may begin to wonder just why it is that my vision becomes blurry, just what it is about the structure of my eye, for example, that is responsible, or what it is about the glasses I wear that removes the blurriness. Such an investigation, while no doubt interesting and extremely important for some purposes, would lead us away from the experience itself, and so away from phenomenology. Phenomenology, by contrast, invites us to stay with what I am calling here "the experience itself", to concentrate on its character and structure rather than whatever it is that might underlie it or be causally responsible for it. But what might we learn or discern by staying with the experience itself? What kind of insights might we glean and why might they matter philosophically? Of course, the answers to these questions will be canvassed in considerable detail throughout this book, but for now a sketch will suffice.

Let us resume our exercise, now concentrating on the description of our experience. In doing so, we may begin to notice a few things. First of all, and as has already been noted, your current visual experience is of something: a page of this book, the words on the page and so forth. These objects are an integral part of your experience in the sense that it would not be the experience it is were it not to involve these objects. (Although phenomenology asks us to concentrate on our experience, on how things "appear" to us, to remain faithful to the character of that experience, we must not neglect or distort the idea that such "appearances" are largely appearances *of* things.) At the same time, these objects are not literally a part of your experience in the way that the pages of the book are a part of the book. (This observation indicates that the relation between experience and its objects requires special attention, as it cannot be accommodated by the usual understandings of "part"

and "whole".) For the moment, we will content ourselves with noting that talk of the book, page, words and letters being a part of the visual experience indicates that these are the objects of the experience: that the experience is of or about them. To introduce some rather technical vocabulary that will occupy us considerably in this book, this notion of experience being "of" or "about" its objects signals its having what the phenomenological tradition calls "intentionality". The phenomenological tradition has seen intentionality to be the defining, and even exclusive, feature of experience, and so phenomenology can be characterized as the study of intentionality. (Other schools of philosophy have likewise been concerned with understanding and explaining the notion of intentionality, so this kind of interest alone does not serve to pick out phenomenology uniquely.)

To return to your experience, although it is true that the book, page, words and letters are the objects of your current visual experience, at the same time it is not the case that you see the entirety of the book or even the entirety of the page at any given time. The object is presented to you perspectivally, in the sense that you see only one side of the object and from a particular angle. At the same time, it is not as though even your momentary experience is like looking at something flat, as though you were looking at a picture of the book, nor would it be correct to say that what you are "really" aware of is some kind of mental image that represents the book (phenomenology emphatically rejects the idea that attending to experience be construed as a kind of "introspection"). In a certain sense, even your momentary experience includes more than what you momentarily see, more, that is, than what you are currently seeing. What I mean here is that your current experience intimates that there is more to be seen: that the book can be seen from other angles; that it has other sides to be seen. This lends your current experience more in the way of "depth" and "density" than the experience of a flat image has. All this talk of perspective, intimation, depth, and density indicates that our visual experience, even in the simple case of looking at this book, has a rich and complex structure, which can be delineated and described in considerable detail. Moreover, if we reflect on this structure, we might begin to appreciate that it is far from arbitrary or idiosyncratic; on the contrary, we might begin to think that this structure indicates something essential with respect to having any visual experience of objects such as books. And here we begin to get a sense of the kind of interest phenomenology takes in our experience. By describing our experience, of which visual perceptual experience is but one example, one can delineate the "essential structures" of experience.

That is, one can delineate those structures experience must have in order to *be* experience (of that kind). In this respect, and here we introduce more technical vocabulary, phenomenology aims to be a transcendental enterprise, concerned with articulating the "conditions of the possibility" of experience or intentionality (unpacking just what this means will occupy us in the chapters to come).

To begin to name names, I have so far developed our opening introductory exercise primarily along the lines of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who initiated the kind of phenomenological philosophy we shall be examining throughout this book. Phenomenology begins with Husserl, but it by no means ends there. Although its subsequent practitioners are collectively inspired by, and indebted to, Husserl, many branch off in different directions, sometimes in ways that complement his original vision, and sometimes in ways that more properly amount to rejection or repudiation. The details of both Husserl's project and its development and criticism by some of those who inherit phenomenology from him will occupy us in the chapters to come. For now, I want to continue with our exercise in ways that sketch out some of these continuations.

In reflecting on the perceptual experience of the book, we have thus far been concentrating on that experience as it unfolds from moment to moment, noting how the particular moments "hang together" by pointing towards other possibilities of experience (e.g. the page and book from other angles). All of these moments are bound together by, among other things, their all being "of" or "about" one particular thing: the book that is the object of this visual experience. One way we can continue the exercise is by broadening the horizons of our reflection, by locating both the object of this experience and the activity in which you were, and still are (I hope!), engaged: reading. To say that a book is the object (or content) of your perceptual experience is to ascribe to your experience a particular meaning or significance, that is, your experience has the meaning "book" or perhaps "book here in front of me" (we need not worry about the completeness of any of these specifications). Now, just as any given moment of experience intimates further possibilities of experience beyond that moment, so too the fact that your current experience has this significance points beyond the confines of this current experience. That is, your current experience is not of or about a mere object, something whose sole description is that it takes up space or manages to take up just this much of your field of vision; rather, it is a thing charged with a very particular, determinate significance – it is a book. That it is a book signifies, among other things, its having a

particular use or purpose (reading, introducing phenomenology and so on). These uses and purposes further signify other things (reading glasses, bookshelves, paper, ink and so on) and activities (such as studying philosophy, perhaps attending university courses), as well as *others* (the author of the book, other readers, the bookshop assistant, the friend who recommended it). In other words, the particular significance your experience has ultimately intimates what Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) would call a "world". As we shall see, one of the principal tasks of phenomenology, for Heidegger, is to illuminate the phenomenon of world.

I said before that one of the ways in which the moments of your experience throughout our exercise hang together is that they have as their content one and the same thing, namely the book from whose pages you are reading. There are other ways in which the various moments hang together: they are united not just by means of a common object, but also by a common *subject*, that is, all of these experiences are had by someone whose experiences they are, namely you. At the same time, the subject whose experiences they are often does not figure centrally in the content of the experience, at least it probably did not until I asked you to reflect more closely on your experience. When you are absorbed in reading, the words, sentences and paragraphs are the focus of your experience, and it is only a reflective, often disruptive, move that introduces the element of "Here I am reading" into your ongoing experience. Until that point, there was little in the way of an "I", subject or self as part of the experience. The notion of the subject plays a prominent role in phenomenology, both as one of the "unifiers" of experience and as a "phenomenon", that is, as something that figures in the content of experience, but there is considerable disagreement, for example between Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), over the proper characterization of the subject of experience.

Let us consider a final direction in which to take our opening exercise, which incorporates elements from both of the last two sketches. If we consider further the object of your experience, the book, it will no doubt be noticed that books are designed and constructed with the aim of reading in mind. To that end, books are designed and constructed so as to accommodate various aspects or dimensions of your body. If books were too large, the size of an automobile for example, or too small, say the size of a sugar cube, then you would have considerable trouble putting them to their proper use; in other words, such books would be unreadable, regardless of the quality of the prose they contain. Similar observations apply to other aspects of the book: the size and shape of

the print, the spacing of the words, the dimensions of the pages and so on. Your bodily existence is not just intimated in your experience of the book, but is more directly manifest. In looking at the page, you are probably peripherally aware of your hands holding the book; you may also dimly discern the outlines of your glasses or the tip of your nose. Your attention may shift, gradually or abruptly, if you feel a sudden twinge or if your fingers gripping the book begin to fall asleep. Your body is not just present as a further object of perception, but is also manifest as active and perceiving: when you pick up the book, your hands take hold of the book and bring it into position to be read more or less automatically; periodically, you reach down (or up, if you are reading lying down, with the book above your head) to turn the page, your fingers gripping the corner of the page without awaiting a cue from an active intellect (like waiters who quietly refill your glass before you have noticed its emptiness). The bodily character of experience is a principal concern of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61), although as we shall see, many of his insights trace back to ideas already being worked out by Husserl.

If we take stock of the various ways in which we have developed our opening exercise, we may note a number of underlying points of commonality that serve to unite the four figures mentioned. Most prominent is the common concern with the notion of *experience*, of things "showing up" or being "manifest". Phenomenology is precisely concerned with the ways in which things show up or are manifest to us, with the shape and structure of manifestation. Perception, on which we have been concentrating, is one form of manifestation, but not the only one (some things, such as numbers and equations, are most genuinely manifest purely intellectually). A guiding claim of phenomenology is that the structure of manifestation, of intentionality, is neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic; rather, the claim is that there is an essential structure, irrespective of whatever the causal underpinnings of experience turn out to be. A further commitment at work in phenomenology's concern to delineate the essential structures of experience is that these structures must be delineated in such a way that they are themselves made manifest in experience. This additional commitment further underscores the point that the interest phenomenology takes in experience is markedly different from the kind that proposes hypotheses about the causes of our experience.

Phenomenology's general disregard for causes is symptomatic of a further point of agreement: its opposition to what is perhaps the most dominant trend in contemporary philosophy (which was also a heavy hitter at the time of Husserl), namely "naturalism". Such a view, which

gives pride of place to the findings of the natural sciences, tends to be preoccupied with precisely the kinds of causal structures phenomenology disregards. One of the dangers of scientific naturalism, according to the phenomenological tradition, is that such a preoccupation makes one lose sight of (and sometimes actively deny) the idea that things are manifest at all. Potentially lost as well is any appreciation of the kinds of essential structures that are definitive of the kind of beings we are.

We can get a sense of the opposition between phenomenology and naturalism by attending to a passage from one of the latter's most famous advocates, the twentieth-century American philosopher, W. V. Quine. In the opening passage of his essay, "The Scope and Language of Science", Quine can be seen as articulating, in broad brushstrokes, the point of view adopted by naturalism:

> I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back, emanating concentric air waves. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil. (Quine 1976: 228)

Although one of the prepositions most closely associated with the notion of intentionality ("about") makes an appearance in the last sentence of the quotation, what is most striking in Quine's characterization of himself and his experience is the absence of intentionality. Quine's talk of light rays, retinas, molecules and eardrums, all of which figure prominently among the causes of our experience, ignores the content of the experience so caused. Recall our exercise in its opening development. A description of your visual experience involved both the objects of that experience (the book, page, words) and the way those objects were experienced (angle or aspect, sharp or blurry and so on). Were we to have extended the exercise to auditory experience, we might have included the slight rustling of the pages as they were turned, the ambient noises in the background, and so on. It would have been very artificial, however, to include in those descriptions any of the things that Quine appeals to. When you see, you see the book, for example, not light waves striking your retina; when you hear, you hear the music being played, not molecules bombarding your eardrums.

Although Quine's description is written in the first person, beginning as it does with "I am", nonetheless his characterization of himself as a

"physical object" appears to overlook entirely the idea that the "I" picks out a subject of experience: a being to whom the world is present and who is present to himself. Again, recall our exercise. When you reach to turn the page of the book, you are not present to yourself as one more "physical object" among others; you experience yourself as actively engaged with the world, and, with suitable reflection, you experience yourself as having experience. That is, you can become reflectively aware of the fact that the world is manifest to you in various ways. Moreover, that you encounter a book, an item whose significance intimates a whole array of purposes and activities, belies the idea that the world manifest in experience is merely the physical world, the world that can be exhaustively characterized in the terms of the physical sciences.

Where Quine, and thus scientific naturalism, begins is altogether different from the starting-point of phenomenology. The disparity can be further documented by comparing the passage I cited from Quine with one from Husserl, where he offers a description of what he calls "the natural attitude", by which he means our ordinary conscious awareness of ourselves and the world around us. Husserl begins as well with the first-person declarative "I am …", but how he continues is markedly different. Notice in particular the differences between Husserl's description and that provided by Quine, especially how Husserl's description seeks to capture the content and quality of his own experience, while Quine's simply passes it by. Notice also that nothing Husserl says contradicts or repudiates any of Quine's claims (the differences and disagreements between phenomenology and naturalism are more subtle). Husserl writes:

> I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time. I am conscious of it: that signifies, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and in the different modes of sensuous perception, corporeal physical things with some spatial distribution or other are *simply there for me*, "*on hand*" in the literal or the figurative sense, whether or not I am particularly heedful of them and busied with them in my considering, thinking, feeling, or willing. Animate beings too – human beings, let us say – are immediately there for me: I look up; I see them; I hear their approach; I grasp their hands; talking with them I understand immediately what they mean and think, what feelings stir within them, what they wish or will. (*Ideas* I: §27)

Over the course of this book, we shall have occasion to return to the differences between these two passages, and between the respective philosophies they initiate, both to bring the specific contours of phenomenological philosophy into sharper focus and to measure the significance of phenomenological philosophy. Given that naturalism is one of the dominant philosophical outlooks today, any success on the part of phenomenology in undermining naturalism attests to its lasting importance.

The four philosophers I have introduced over the course of our opening exercise – Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – are without doubt the most famous figures in the phenomenological movement. Accordingly, a chapter will be devoted to each of them, and the final chapter will canvass several critical responses to phenomenology. There are many other significant figures in the phenomenological tradition, such as Max Scheler, Eugen Fink, Alfred Schutz, Edith Stein and Paul Ricoeur, who will not receive much in the way of further mention in this book. Their omission is in no way meant to suggest that their contributions to phenomenology are uninteresting or unimportant, although understanding their contributions very often presupposes some grasp of the works and ideas we shall be considering in this book. Getting a grip on the thought of these four main figures serves to lay the foundation for further study, which is, after all, what an introductory text ought to do. Even by so restricting our attention and even by devoting an entire chapter to each figure, we shall really only be scratching the surface of these complex and comprehensive philosophical views. The primary texts of phenomenology are, for the most part, rather massive tomes (my edition of Heidegger's *Being and Time* comes in at over 500 pages, and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is nearly that long as well; Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is around 800 pages, and Husserl's *Logical Investigations* alone is nearly 1000), and their length is matched by the density of their prose. When I teach phenomenology, I never fail to notice the looks of shock and incomprehension on students' faces after the first reading of Husserl has been assigned. My hope is that this book, by providing an overview of each figure and by working through some of their main ideas, will help to relieve some of this stress.