

The Flight from Objectivity

**a survey
of existential-
phenomenology**

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Kierkegaard could hardly be called a phenomenologist and Husserl, the philosopher who inaugurated phenomenology, was not an existentialist. This means, obviously, that there was a time when it was necessary to make a distinction between existentialism and phenomenology. We must see, therefore, how these two differ and how there developed a unified existential-phenomenological movement.

Kierkegaard/Nietzsche

The movement which came to be known as existentialism finds its source in the life and writings of Soren Kierkegaard. His self-analysis and his consideration of a hypocritical Christianity brought forth themes that have occupied philosophers, psychiatrists, theologians and artists. Although our understanding of alienation, anxiety, subjectivity and commitment has broadened and deepened, these realities have remained the kerygma of existentialist thought. Kierkegaard's main preoccupation was how to become an individual, but it is imperative to see this emphasis within its original religious context. Although the individual was being devoured on the rational side by Hegel's absolutist system, on the economic side by the objectification

of the person,¹ it was still the soft and spineless religion of his day that disturbed Kierkegaard so deeply. The problems in becoming a Christian at any time are as difficult as those encountered by the first disciples and the main problem, therefore, is not a theoretical one but existential; not a problem of understanding Christianity but of becoming a Christian. Thus, a radically absolute faith in God is the only answer to an individual's despair.

Aesthetic existence is one possibility open to man, but basically it is a sham, a superficial display that ends in self-deception. As Kierkegaard notes in his diary "I was the life of the party tonight; I came home and wanted to shoot myself." Another way of life is the *ethical*. Here the moral man lives for duty; the law is always the same and the same for all—"impersonal, impartial, identical, yesterday, today and tomorrow."² Obviously neither of these life-approaches are satisfactory, that is, neither the pleasure of the esthete nor the pure reason of morality. The *religious* man who lives by faith in an absurdity that transcends all other possibilities has made the only authentic option. As Abraham abandoned reason and common sense in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, so the Christian must abandon himself to God, thereby achieving freedom in personal relationship. If man is to attain his destiny as an individual, it must be through paradoxical trust.

If Kierkegaard detected the symptoms of God's oncoming demise it was Frederick Nietzsche who signed his death certificate. Man had fashioned God to his own image and likeness but had projected the Divinity into a state of perfection that removed him from accessibility.³ Thus, God was placed outside the world and the worship of a fictional human ideal produced a weakening effect upon mankind. God is to be blamed for the lethargic state of Christianity. The only consequence, then, is to choose against Christianity and return to the earth. The voices of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche prophetically announced the illness that was seizing the European mind. This period has been called the Good Friday of Western philosophy but it would take decades and perhaps centuries before the memory of God would completely disappear from our society. The Absolute that had been centered "out there" would now be localized "right here" in the world.⁴

Nietzsche saw that man had decomposed not only on a religious level but also on a humanistic one, for man had ceased to develop

himself and turned instead to the making of machines in technology. Parallel to Kierkegaard's individual, Nietzsche offered the "man of power" who would embody the self-realization of the individual in the fullest sense. The "will to power" is not a mere psychological pattern of behavior but an ontological category—an aspect of being.⁵ It is on the affirmation of one's existence and the realization of one's potentialities; it is the "courage to be as an individual" as Tillich comments in his discussion of Nietzsche.⁶ Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche emphasized the need for self-consciousness because "the more consciousness, the more self." Human dignity must be restored, self-deception unmasked and individuality achieved as life's task.

Husserl

As already mentioned, Husserl could never be classified as an existentialist, yet there is a certain agreement between his way of thinking and that of Kierkegaard. This unity can best be found in their common opposition to elementaristic ways of thinking about man and things human. Yet, their modes of approach are different: Kierkegaard speaks about *man* while Husserl limits himself to *consciousness*.⁷

Edmund Husserl, originally a mathematician and physicist, was disturbed over the multiplicity of philosophical opinions. He, therefore, set for himself the goal of developing philosophy into a rigorous science. In his time, naturalism was the strongest contender for the title of scientific philosophy. But naturalism limited itself to the physical and refused any reality to the ideal. Thus, the objectivity it sought could never be attained since it fails to rise above the merely factual. Psychology also fails to fill the requirements for rigorous science because it too remains chained to the physical. A theory of knowledge was needed that would transcend the empirical: this theory on the relationship between being and consciousness "must concern itself with that being which corresponds to consciousness (ideal) rather than a consciousness that would correspond to being (existential)."⁸ Phenomenology is the only answer, for it examines ideal objectivities and not psychological processes. To overcome the crisis of European philosophy Husserl insists that we must study not the factual world of nature but the envining world of the Subject.

Three of the most influential philosophers on the development of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology were Descartes, Hume and

Kant.⁹ (1) Descartes inspired him to seek a universally rational science by turning from the factual world to an examination of the conscious subject. But Husserl does not see the *Cogito* as the principle from which comes all other knowledge. Rather he sees the *cogitatum* as the correlate of the *Cogito*. Here we have the noema-noesis relationship. (2) Husserl rejects Hume's skepticism but accepts his theory on appearances. Yet he takes this one step further and finds in the phenomena all the knowledge he seeks, and this will be absolute. The phenomena must be made to give up their secrets. (3) Through Kant Husserl realized that objectivity could not be the measure of subjectivity. The essential content of reality would be found in phenomena as they are revealed in consciousness. We can also mention the influence of Franz Brentano who offered an insight into the intentional character of every act of consciousness and Bernard Bolzano who helped Husserl develop a total theory of intentionality, whereby objectivity could remain immanent to the Subject and yet be valid for *all* Subjects. Of course such immanent objectivity would have to be ideal, prescinded from the factual existence of worldly objects, but in Husserl's mind this would produce the philosophic science that was his goal. Through an intuitionist, rather than through an inferential approach, essences can be reached in the subjective acts wherein "that which is is present to consciousness." Therefore, this philosophy is (a) a *phenomenology* because it does not go beyond the givenness available to consciousness; (b) it is *transcendental* because the ideal essences can be found by examination of subjective acts with their objective correlates; (c) it is *science* because it has done away with all contingency.

In order to achieve scientific knowledge in the purely phenomenal, Husserl developed certain techniques which eliminate factuality and focus on the essence. The first of these is the negative method of *epoché* which leaves out of consideration "any form of existential positing of that which appears, retaining only the appearance." Then the more positive technique of reduction follows whereby the essentially given is made more present to consciousness. There is also the process of ideation which attempts to extract the ideal through a method of variation but this is in no way an inductive process.

To assure an objectively valid knowledge Husserl concerns himself not so much with truth or falsity, but with the validity of the knowing act itself. If the judgment is valid then the reality which corresponds

to it is truly this or that way. If the noetic or experiential is grasped then so is the noematic or objective. Although Husserl is primarily concerned with a theory of knowledge, nevertheless his work implies serious metaphysical consequences. If absolute being is the content of a conscious act, then the validation of that act will be related to absolute being and this will be in an essentialistic rather than existential mode.

Because his was an entirely new approach to philosophy, which newness depended on its subjective character, Husserl insisted on a constant return to subjective foundations. This he did because human nature has a tendency to objectify and therefore this revolutionary way of thinking would demand a repeated act of the will to preserve scientific thinking. Since Husserl's philosophy was *the* authentic one, true progress demanded an exchange and accumulation of findings. Husserl promoted this by assigning phenomenological investigations to his students much the way a math professor assigns problems. While there is a unity in method, there can be a multiplicity of cognitions, which, although not unrelated to one another, are not attained by inference.

Husserl's philosophy maintained a metaphysical neutrality which merely ignored the problem of the extra-mental state of essences, for he was interested in the being of consciousness. Yet, in his later years he would take up the problem of the "enviroming world" (*Umwelt*) and the "everyday world" (*Lebenswelt*). These aspects do not mean that Husserl introduced a "real world" into a philosophy from which it had been originally excluded but they place an emphasis on pre-reflective, pre-scientific consciousness.¹⁰ This is still a world of consciousness but one that effects reflection, for *Umwelt* and *Lebenswelt* form the objective counterpart to pre-reflective consciousness. It would remain for Merleau-Ponty to develop and explicitate this notion of pre-reflective consciousness through his study of perception.

Heidegger

On the one hand we have existentialism with Kierkegaard's conception of man as existence, on the other we have Husserl's method of conceiving consciousness as intentionality. One is concerned with questions of theological anthropology while the other is preoccupied with theoretical problems of knowledge. But these two currents of thought would finally merge in the work of Martin Heidegger, par-

ticularly in *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger presents us with the philosophy that is now known as existential phenomenology in which existentialism renounces its anti-scientific character while phenomenology is enriched through Kierkegaard's existentialism. In short, Heidegger's role in phenomenology was to open the way to metaphysics.

As a young Jesuit scholastic, Heidegger underwent a serious religious crisis, the Nietzschean crisis of the Death of God. His thought, therefore, is neither theistic nor atheistic. Rather he maintains a respectful silence and concentrates on developing a philosophy of man-in-this-world, man on this side of Divinity. Perhaps some day we may speak of God once more, but for the present we must assume the attitude that one finds in Bergman's films and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like the characters Vladimir and Estragon we live in waiting, faintly recalling a past reality, but in the meantime do nothing "because it is more prudent."¹²

In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger presents an anthropology based on a phenomenological description of man. To manifest his general approach to being we can look at the meaning of the word phenomenon, for Heidegger has a passion for etymologies especially of Greek words.¹³ Since phenomenon means "that which reveals itself" phenomenology will be the attempt to let things speak for themselves without coercion on the part of the subject. *Phainomenon* is also related to the word *phaos* or light and *apaphonasis* or speech. The sequence of ideas then is revelation-light-language. Heidegger's etymology of the word for truth is another key to his approach. *A-letheia* means *unconcealedness*. Truth, then, is not primarily in the intellect but in being's self revelation much the way a work of art manifests itself as true. Through such an approach to truth Heidegger leaps beyond the boundaries of phenomenology set by his master Husserl. He unlocks man from the prison of his ego, leaves aside the Cartesian Cogito and places man squarely on the earth as being-in-the-world, as *Dasein*.

Man's existence, then, is not an impersonal or empirical fact. Rather, it is a conscious *presence* to himself, to other men and to the environing world. Existence is not limited to the boundaries of one's skin but is a force directed towards the world. This has come to be known as the "field theory" of existence which is not only spatial but temporal because man lives in the past as well as the present, but most significantly man lives in his future-directedness, in that which

has not yet been achieved. Time, according to this notion, becomes part of man's inner structure, for he is the source of history and gives meaning to being. Heidegger expresses man's existence for us through existential analysis of *Dasein*-analytics. He presents the categories of Freedom, Death, Angst, Care and Guilt not as an exhaustive list but as the most fundamental aspects of human existence.¹⁴

Freedom towards death is not to be taken in a morbid sense but should be seen in contrast to the overly optimistic conception of glorious, triumphant man. Heidegger is not out to belittle man but wishes to show his true dignity. Thus, the Death he speaks of is not my empirical demise nor the objective notion of death. Rather it is an intrinsic possibility of my own *present* being. The Death that is potential to *Dasein* reveals to me my own finitude, my own limited structure. But this realization has a liberating effect upon me, for it frees me *from* the petty and unauthentic and frees me *for* awareness and authentic existence. Freedom towards death also has ethical overtones for there is a daily death when I make mistakes or lose control. At such a point nothingness enters my life and I recognize the seriousness of achieving authenticity. Basically what Death manifests to us is that our lives are our own, that no one can live life for us, nor can anyone think for us.

Angst or Dread, which is not to be identified with worry, usually manifests itself in the area of making responsible choices. It is not a particularized fear but a general, subliminal fear of non-being. This is experienced when we attempt to pass from the impersonal crowd of *Das Man* and become *Dasein*, truly present to the world in freedom.

Care or Concern is man's response to his being thrown into the world. He finds himself in the midst of things he did not create and for which he is not primordially responsible. But he assumes a responsibility for being. Through Concern he develops science and technology and thus gives meaning to his being. This reality of Care is the factor which distinguishes man from the brute, for man will overcome obstacles while animals dumbly accept their situation without caring about it.

We can also mention the categories of Guilt and Resolve. Again this has nothing to do with abnormal guilt feelings. The German expression is more related to debt and responsibility. Because man lives in an intersubjective world, his existence imposes on him debts to others. There is the responsibility for history, culture and society.

Because this guilt or responsibility to others cannot be escaped from, man transcends his situation, gives meaning and value to the future. Because God is dead, man must seek the solution alone.

Finally, a word about Heidegger's notion of metaphysics. He maintains that all of Western philosophy was a forgetfulness of *Being*, because it was too pre-occupied with *beings*. It is for this reason that he abandoned former categories and logical reasoning. The task of metaphysics is to let Being reveal or unconceal itself as we become present to it. Since man has been so lost in particularized being, he must return to the pre-understood foundations of human existence because Dasein already understands Being but in an unthematized manner.

Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, youngest man to hold the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France, is the most significant French phenomenologist, for he believed that philosophy meant to answer life-situations. His writings extend to the political sphere, the painting of Cezanne, the filmwork of Podovkin and the novels of de Beauvoir. If Husserl developed the notion of consciousness and Heidegger emphasized man's existence as being-in-the-world, then it was Merleau-Ponty who completed the picture by stressing the role of man's body as his mode of access to the world.

Like Husserl, Ponty studies essences but replaces them in existence; he is transcendental yet existential "because the world is already there before reflection." His aim, therefore, is toward the pre-objective world, the world prior to all constructions, prior to all knowledge. A true return to things themselves means a return to experience: to sounds, light and tactile impressions.¹⁵ Man's being is not an interiority but a being-in-the-world. Thus, I cannot be a detached spectator and my reflection cannot be a retreat from reality. The world would not be if man were not there at its center. Therefore I cannot approach the world as a conscious being unless I become aware of it in a primordial, pre-reflective encounter.

Ponty's work navigates a middle course between empiricism and idealism. This he does in his two main works: *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Through his discovery of the Body-Subject he lays the foundation for overcoming the Cartesian dualism of the thinking mind and the mechanical body.

The body as subject does not belong *either* to the material or to the spiritual, but to *both* and this not as a union (for this implies opposites) but as a *single* reality. The body itself is an existence and therefore of a subjective nature.

In Merleau-Ponty's notion of subjectivity, consciousness becomes marginal because there is something more basic. A reality takes on the character of subjectivity when it has a dialectical relationship to its surroundings, and this is not merely inter-reaction. For instance, food influences an organism and the organism assimilates the food; yet it is because of the organism's structure that we can call food "food." Thus, there must be a circular causality wherein one element of a dialectical relationship can have everything else referred to it as its milieu or surrounding world.

Our orientation in space, time, sexual meaning and other sensitive fields of meaning are the result of our dialog with the world, but this dialog takes place at a level that is pre-personal, pre-conscious. The basic subject, therefore, is the *body*, for all forms of meaning on this level appear as related to the structure of the body. Because Merleau-Ponty's philosophy moves in a chiaroscuro which cannot be fully illuminated, Alphonse de Waelhens of Louvain has called his thought a philosophy of ambiguity because its proper consideration is neither mechanical matter nor spirit but the ambiguous mixture of both.¹⁶

If we compare Ponty's thought with that of his former colleague, Jean-Paul Sartre, we come upon striking contrasts.¹⁷ In the *Phenomenology of Perception* we read "We are condemned to meaning." Compare this with Sartre's statement: "We are condemned to freedom." For Sartre "Hell is other people," while Merleau-Ponty challenges this dismal view of coexistence by saying "History is other people." Sartre remains caught in a dualism between Cartesian subjectivity and meaningless objectivity while Ponty attempts to reunite the subjective with the objective world.

Although Merleau-Ponty helped to shape contemporary phenomenology, his early death prevented him from completing his projected studies of imagination, language, culture, truth, and on ethical, aesthetic, political and religious experience. That he was able to do no more than begin his work is something that he was painfully aware of. His program must now be either abandoned or assumed by others.

This brief historical survey was not intended to be an exhaustive

study of existential-phenomenology's development. Nor was the mode of presenting the philosophers discussed meant to convey the impression that there was a teleological principle at work in phenomenology's evolution. The men presented represent the key sources as well as the fundamental characteristics of this movement. The author has intended to portray a philosophical conception that has emphasized man as an individual, his role in knowing, his character as being-in-the-world and this precisely as a Body-Subject. The techniques and implications of phenomenology have affected psychology, metaphysics, art. And its impact upon theology is better known through the works of Bultmann, Tillich, Ott, Rahner and Schillebeeckx. The future of existential-phenomenology seems to be open and promising for those who employ its method and approach to bodily-man-in-the-world. As the Church struggles to find its place in the world, concerned thinkers might do well to hearken to these words of the "atheist," Merleau-Ponty:

. . . Christianity consists in replacing the separated absolute by the absolute in men. Nietzsche's idea that God is dead is already contained in the Christian idea of the death of God. God ceases to be an external object in order to mingle in human life, and this life is simply not a return to a non-temporal conclusion. God needs human history. As Malebranche said, the world is unfinished. My viewpoint differs from the Christian viewpoint to the extent that the Christian believes in another side of things where the "renversement du pour au contre" takes place. In my view this "reversal" takes place before our eyes. And perhaps some Christians would agree that the other side of things must already be visible in the environment in which we live.¹⁸

FOOTNOTES

¹ Rolo May, "Origins of the Existential Movement in Psychology," *Existence*, ed. May, Angel and Ellenberger (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 25.

² William Earle, "The Paradox and Death of God," *Christianity and Existentialism*, Earle, Edie and Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), p. 73

³ James M. Edie, "The Absence of God," *Christianity and Existentialism*, p. 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵ May, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 25.

⁷ William Luijpen, *Phenomenology and Atheism* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1964), p. 162.

⁸ Quentin Lauer, *Edmund Husserl: Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 10.

⁹ This is essentially a summary of Lauer's analysis. Cf. *Ibid*, pp. 20-23.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 67.

¹¹ Luijpen, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹² Edie, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹³ William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), p. 215.

¹⁴ This summary of Heidegger's key concepts is based on James Edie's interpretation. cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 125-132.

¹⁵ Mary Rose Barral, *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 25.

¹⁶ Alphonse de Wachtens, *Une philosophie de l'ambiguïté: l'existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Louvain, 1951.

¹⁷ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), Vol. II, p. 520.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 27.

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