

AN EVALUATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the phenomenological method in the light of important objections and criticisms.

We see that the entire phenomenological enterprise is criticized frequently for its "methodological circle". In fact, the methodological circle arises when the method itself must be used to clarify what the method itself consists of. It means that we can use the method only if we know what it consists of; but we can know what it consists of only if we have already used it. This shows that only while doing phenomenology can we clarify its method. But a reply is given by the phenomenologists. "That is since phenomenology is reflective, it does not presuppose the knowledge that the phenomenological method consists of certain procedures; it only presupposes that we know how to use it, even if we cannot describe. Such a description of method is not a necessary pre-condition for using the method, so there is no problem here."¹

The phenomenological method is blamed for its epistemological circle too. It is circular because it confirms its statements by reference to examples, and then attests the accuracy of the descriptions of these examples by the reference to statements derived from them. It seems that we can know a phenomenological statement "'P' is true", only if we know that the description 'E' of the corresponding example is accurate. On the other hand, we can know that "'E' is accurate", only if we know that 'P' is true. Thus we cannot know either that 'P' is true or that 'E' is accurate. To this the phenomenologist may reply that the phenomenological reflection begins with our recognition of the example (object) described in 'E'. We know that we describe the example accurately to the extent that we recognize the object in our description of it. Thus both the accuracy of 'E' and the truth of 'P' are tested by the criterion implicit in our ability to recognize the object. Hence there is no epistemological circle.

It is said that by giving importance to intuition, it turns out to be a species of intuitionism, and has accordingly acquired the ill repute of all intuitionisms, of being no more than a veiled

refusal to provide evidence for one's philosophical statements. But sometimes such a refusal can be justified and this is true in the case of phenomenological intuition. In fact, intuitionism is objectionable only if the philosopher is not willing to argue either about the nature of his intuition or about the justification for appealing to it. That is to say, if his appeal to intuition is merely intended to terminate philosophical debate. But phenomenologist's appeal is not of this kind, hence not objectionable. Nevertheless, the phenomenologists must specify their sense of intuition to clarify in what respects it differs from the simple seeing of sensory objects or from psychological intuition.

Some critics believe that all the phenomenological statements resulting from phenomenological reflection or method, are regarded as non-empirical, but there is no ground for thinking that this is true. A phenomenologist has to differentiate the different senses of "empirical", But no phenomenologist so far has barely begun to undertake such an examination, and hence their conviction that the phenomenological statements are non-empirical is not supported by adequate phenomenological analyses. "This important shortcoming in the theory of the phenomenological method is all the more serious, because there are good reasons for thinking that there is one perfectly good sense of the words "experience" and "empirical" in which phenomenological statements, as defined are empirical."²

Sometimes phenomenologists are also criticized, and perhaps not wholly without reason, for wanting to exclude every other form of knowledge, e. g. the knowledge of probabilities. But their principle does not really lead to any such consequences. The probability of a statement can be known only by inference, and such inference always presupposes the certainty of something and thus the grasping of certain objects. The basic theory of phenomenology is valid only in this sense. If it were taken as meaning that we could know only "certainties" by phenomenological method, it would obviously be false.³

Objectivism, which is a positive principle of phenomenological method, is only an 'ideal' since Man is not merely a rational being. Some emotional motives even seem to be beneficial to enquiry, e. g., the passionate desire for knowledge. It seems practically impossible to exclude feelings and emotions altogether.

But this criticism is not adequate, since by philosophical method we always want to achieve objective knowledge. As for the exclusion of theory and tradition similar objection can be raised. Because "in practice, these postulates, like those of pure objectivism, are uncommonly difficult, indeed, impossible, to fulfil absolutely."⁴ This objection can also be eliminated by replying that the art of pure contemplation can be learned by a long course of training. Admitting the importance of this method in this respect Bochenksi writes: "a chapter on phenomenological method must be included even in a brief exposition of contemporary methods of thought since it is used by many (possibly even most) present-day philosophers and contains many principles which are valid independently of any particular philosophical point of view."⁵

Marvin Farber rightly asserts that in this method one begins with an individual and his stream of experience. This mode of beginning has its special merits, but also its limitations. He accepts that if one wishes to achieve certainty in knowledge and to examine all dogmatic and naive beliefs, it is necessary to begin with his own conscious experiences. That is to make a "radical" beginning and a definite field for inquiry. But one may not remain restricted to his own experiences, if philosophic inquiry is to have access to all regions of experience and knowledge. Further, he says that this method is helpful for its range of problems; but it must be used in co-operation with other kinds of method. For the "extravagant" claim that it was the only genuinely philosophical method led to strong reaction against it, with the unfortunate result that its specific merits were forgotten or ignored.⁶

According to some, the phenomenological method provides a technique for the treatment of "universal" experience, i. e. all types of experience, and a foundation for all knowledge. In fact the 'absolute' or 'radical' beginning claimed by the phenomenologist assists as a "methodological device" in the theory of knowledge. Husserl himself claims that his method, although very similar to Brentano's pure description of inner perceptions, reveals absolutely certain truths of fact, so that the Cartesian ideal of philosophy as systematic, certain and comprehensive theoretical knowledge once again seems capable of realization. Husserl believed that he had established the foundations of a

“method of research” which would have to be developed, applied, and extended by generations of philosophers. James M. Edie correctly says that “this explains why phenomenology, among all the schools of contemporary philosophy, manifests the most profound and striking diversity while claiming the unity of one method.”⁷ For example, there is a Phenomenology of Emotions (Scheler, Sartre, Strasser), Phenomenology of aesthetics (Dufrenne), Phenomenology of religion (Scheler, Van der Leenw, GUSDORF), Phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty), Phenomenology of imagination (Sartre), Phenomenology of will (Ricoeur), Phenomenology of Language, of ethics etc.

Some criticize this procedure by exhibiting that the very point of departure for this method is fallacious. They argue that “my own world” and the very conditions of my meaningful experience always presuppose other selves and an objective world, which, as a matter of fact, can never be eliminated. These facts are genetically prior to the use of the phenomenological method, and are not to be altered by the adoption of that method. Pierre Thevenaz perceives a paradox in phenomenological position. He tells that “phenomenology paradoxically unites two qualifications, reputedly exclusive of one another; it is methodical and groping.”⁸ We find that the nominal adoption and misuse of this method can easily lead to the dangers of mysticism, one-sided and hence misleading description, dogmatism, and assumptive reasoning. But this difficulty can be resolved by acquiring its competent, critical mastery and deep awareness of the special functions and limitations of the method.

Sometimes this method is criticized for its so-called “Solipcism”. Critics assume that its ideal of presuppositionless leads to solipcism. To this phenomenologists reply that it would seem that solipcism is the unavoidable beginning. If one’s quest for ultimate understanding leads him to such a basis, he must be prepared to pass beyond solipcism. According to them, the phenomenological method undertakes to meet this problem. In Russia, the prevailing view concerning the phenomenological method is that it leads to a subjective philosophy, and is in its final consequences “reactionary.” But this view is not impartial. Since Russian thinkers generally criticize everything from the typical standpoint of their own.

Some hope that this method with its technique of reduction and essential analysis may be the most radical of all methods, if used correctly. The intentional analyses of the cognitive process may well be the most critical possible beginning for philosophy. The examination of all assumptions, including its own is made possible by this method alone. Other philosophical methods always assume something as their starting-point. Heidegger, the phenomenologist, has contributed much to the explicit examination and constitutive analysis of all elements of the structure of knowledge and reality.

Some philosophers acknowledge the debt of Husserl by accepting that Husserl opened a new direction in the analysis of consciousness with the help of his new method. This phenomenological analysis is not psychological analysis, for it aims essentially at answering the epistemological question as to the absolute foundation of logic. Phenomenologist also defends his procedure by insisting that the "incompleteness" of phenomenology and its "inchoative" appearance are not the signs of failure. They are inevitable because the task of phenomenology is to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.

We find various terms which are ambiguously used in the theory of phenomenological method, namely, 'constitution' 'evidence' 'reduction' etc., with whose help the phenomenologists claim their superiority in the work of clarification. But this can only be proved by presenting examples in support of their claim. Nonetheless this still remains largely to be done.

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NOTES

1. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. VI, p. 143.
2. Ibid p. 148.
3. J. M. Bochenski, *The Methods of Contemporary Thought*, p. 19.
4. Ibid p. 22
5. Ibid, 18.
6. Marvin Farber, *The Aims of Phenemenology*, p. 13.
7. Pierre Theivenaz, *What is Phenomenology*, p. 29.
8. Ibid, p. 39.

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