

Do It Yourself Phenomenology

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The aim here is to present the phenomenological method as a working method which can be used at once by novices with a slight philosophical background. Accordingly, wherever possible, appeal will be made to certain structures of experience which are more readily accessible to those uninitiated in this procedure, and which point to a certain natural basis for its various techniques. The most general of these is the frequent comparison of the methodological movement of phenomenology to the Heraclitean-Socratic experience of conversion (*metanoia*) from the somnolent state of "the unexamined life" to the attentive reflection upon the total human situation which is philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle affirmed that *Thaumazein* (wonder, astonishment, amazement) is the experiential start that startles man into the quest of philosophical questioning. Later parallels are Cartesian doubt and existential Angst. As conversion experiences, these all involve a turning from one thing in order to turn to something else. Accordingly, the methods formulated on the basis of these experiences all have a "from-to" structure. The Socratic method encourages a switch from the immediate world of concrete particulars to the depth penetration of universal definition. In terms of Plato's allegory of the cave, this means graduation from the shadow world of *hoi polloi* to the essential visions of *hoi aristoi* in the "really real" world of bright sunlight; in other Platonic terms, from the dogmatic opinions of the Sophists to the scientific quest for truth of the *philo-sophes*. The Cartesian methodic doubt turns from anything subject to even a shadow of a doubt to the clear and distinct ideas of indubitable certainties, above all, the *Cogito sum*. At about the same time in the history of the Occident, Galileo formulated the scientific method in terms of a turn from subjectively vacillating "secondary" qualities, like color and odor, to the objectively fixable "primary" qualities, like size and shape, which are readily subject to exact mathematical formulation.

Now, the "from-to" structure of phenomenological method is usually expressed by two distinct terms which are at once as closely intertwined as two sides of the same coin: epoché and reduction. To ether—and this is their unique difference from and even reversal of the above methods—they demarcate a movement from the prejudicial beliefs of common sense and the technical explanatory constructs of scientific and philosophical theory, which stand as screens in the way of a direct and unadulterated consideration of our experience pure and simple. Hence the battle cry of phenomenology: *Zu den Sachen selbst*, back to the "things" themselves, to our most concrete and immediate experiences in order to describe them from within, in their own terms rather than in terms of a vocabulary externally imposed on them, which detract from our

understanding the experience *as such*. It's a matter of letting things speak for themselves. The specific task here will be to find the *idiom* most proper to the experience under scrutiny, in order to manifest the experience *itself*. In short, phenomenology seeks to uncover the indigenous *logos* of the phenomenon itself, which in practice demands an articulation of the language which is most apropos to it.

The Epoché

Literally a "holding back" or "checking", more graphically a "bracketing", "putting out of play" or "switching off," the epoché has its historical roots in the Greek skeptic's attitude of suspending beliefs. Note that it is an attitude of abstinence and not rejection. The phenomenologist tries to abstain from:

1. The natural attitude, in which the individual takes the world in which he finds himself for granted to such an extent that he tends to forget the experiences which have constituted this world as it is now given *to him*. The reversal of this "outer-directed" attitude of considering the world as "out there" and "before us," will take the "to him" and "for us" into account, and invoke the *intentional character* of all the experiences of this world, where all the objects of this world are seen to be reciprocally correlated with and within the domain of the subject who experiences these objects.

Application of the epoché: A thing is perceived perspectively and against a background before it is a thing "in itself." Just what a thing in itself really means must be considered with this basic experience in view, as well as the attitudinal development which prompts us to speak of such a thing.

2. Scientific and metaphysical constructs. Science builds on the natural attitude in order to develop its attitude of objectivity. Classical metaphysics in various degrees did the same. Their explanatory constructs, symbolisms, and technical vocabulary take an external vantage point on experiences, and thus further away from them. This sedimented superstructure of our academic learning must therefore be re-duced to a vantage that places itself within these experiences and the descriptive vocabulary that directly reveal them. Ordinary language, and even our "vulgate", is usually more telling here. Use the Big Word with discretion and with a sense of its metaphorical suggestiveness, referring as it does to simple language.

Application of the epoché here: The physiological account of fear in terms of a vaso-constriction or dilation of the pupils, secretion of adrenaline, measured intensity of nerve

impulses, etc. is a derivative account based on a more original sense of what fear is, whereby we recognize this phenomenon as fear and not some other emotion. The red of an apple, the red of a girl's sweater, the red of blood and the red of a blush are different, even if the scientific instrument uniformly registers 7,000 Angstroms in every case. Even words like "response" and "motive" must be used discretely in phenomenological description, in order to keep them free from possible behavioristic connotations.

In short, the epoché is an attitude of precaution, of what not to do, which must constantly be kept in mind in the course of the attempt to describe in a phenomenological way. It's a matter of being on the alert for possible lapses into non-experiential vocabulary.

The Reduction

Etymologically a "leading back", the reduction expresses the attempt to re-call the more experiential tenor of our experiences. It's a matter of explicating the implicit pre-reflective knowledge that we already have of our experience, in order (among other things) to expose its meaningful structure, i.e. its "essence". This is the thrust of the *eidetic* reduction. Its application is an exercise in imagination, implementing a technique described as "free variation." As a first approximation, it can be taken as a free flow of ideas directed toward the kind of experience one wishes to explore, utilizing numerous examples as the constant base to be touched over and over again during the description, often invoking examples which this experience is not, but which are related to it, so that one can, by comparison and contrast more and more focus and delineate precisely what this experience is. The freedom of imagination which is brought to bear on such description means, among other things, that one is not tied down to just one's own experiences, present or past. Through empathy and vicarious role-playing, I can even imaginatively translate myself into experiences which I will never undergo, e.g. bearing a child. "Nothing human is alien to me." As Goethe once remarked, "I've never heard of a crime that I couldn't commit myself." Here, the phenomenological method meets with the Stanislavsky method of acting. In this sense, Husserl points to "fiction" as "the vital element of phenomenology," the element in which it lives and moves and has its being. By moving in this "as if" element, I can explore the range of possibilities which a particular kind of experience encompasses until I transgress the limits, beyond which such an experience is no longer possible, and this impossibility serves to delineate precisely what this experience is, or better, that without which it could not be what it is.

Practically speaking once again, the real issue is to find the language that will suitable and

adequately articulate the experience. The fancy of a Walter Mitty and the talent of a Richard Burton must be combined with the glibness of a teller of tales and the descriptive vocabulary of a novelist. Kierkegaard in his pseudonyms provides a good Instance of such phenomenologizing.

In what follows, various strategies that may come into play in the course of "imaginary variation" will at least be suggested through a relatively finalized descriptive outline of the experience of boredom.

An Eidetic of Boredom

I. Survey of field of examples using intentional object as guiding clue.

A. Bored with this class, course, semester, school, life itself.

B. This sequence suggests distinction between

1. Particular boredom- with this girl, movie, speech
 - a. Take away these objects, and you take away the boredom
2. Total boredom- with existence itself (Prototype example of boredom pure and simple)
 - a. Can't take away this "object" short of suicide
 - b. So all-inclusive, that it encroaches on the *self* of boredom, so that I *am* boredom thru and thru
 - c. Bored with it ALL, interested in No-thing, i.e. no particular thing, i.e. Nothing in particular, everything in general
 - d. Where the question is "What's it all about?", an ultimate question that goes beyond every particular thing to the meaning of life itself, which is my Being. In this sense, the interest in No-thing is really an interest in Being!
 - e. But too bored to even ask this question!
 - f. The meaninglessness of existence must be felt more acutely before this question is asked: Boredom must ripen into despair, the *explicit* moment of No meaning
 - g. Therefore, existential boredom is a transitional mood on its way to despair, where action may be taken to alleviate it
 - h. But existential boredom itself is total passivity, apathy, exhaustion, and emptiness. "It doesn't matter" "I don't care" ("I don't give a damn" is too energetic for the totally lethargic) "I feel Nothing" (!)

II. Intentional Structure of Boredom

- A. "It makes no difference to me" points to subject's attitude of indifference
- B. "It's all the same to me"
"The same old thing over and over again" points to objective sameness
- C. And sameness is non-difference: the intentional correlation, where object and subject agree in structure

III. Compared with its opposite

<u>Boring</u>	<u>Interesting</u>
Same (lacks zest)	Variety is spice of life
Old (and tiresome)	New (and exciting)
Uniformity	Uniqueness
Dull (i.e. flat)	Exciting (highlights and contrasts of a rich experience)
Mono-tone	Variations on theme
Suppresses me	Arouses me
Induces passivity	Self-activating
Indifference	Involvement
Dissipated ennui	Concentrated attention
"Hollow men" with surfaces only	Intensity of experience

III. The Tempo of Existential Boredom (where depth description comes in)

A. Repetitious uniformity without progression: The rut of life

1. Experiment: Repeat sentence over and over, until aware of surface externals and not depth of its meaning
2. Hypnotized by repetitive rhythm (hum-drum of routine task, sing-song of lecturer's voice, clickety-clack of train), span of attention is reduced, fixed on a uniform moment without tension of variations, to point of insignificance
3. Inattention---loss of inter-est---unconsciousness of sleep

B. Aimless "getting nowhere"

1. Aim unifies, and coherence is literally what makes sense
2. Multiplicity of moments without any real inner unity and direction: rut again
 - a. The only unity is external uniformity
 - b. And not intrinsic uniqueness of "doing own thing"
 - c. Or inner unity of self ("hollow men")
 - d. Time has fallen apart, dis-jointed "jerky movements of galvanized frog" (Kierkegaard)
 - e. Every moment flattened, equivalent to every other now: Mono-tone

C. Time drags, i.e. tempo slowed down; the pace of tedium: Life is so daily

D. Time thus becomes a burden, weighs heavy, its oppressive weight felt, very tiresome: the suffering of passivity

E. Excessive awareness of time, which normally falls into background consciousness

1. Techniques of di-ersion and dis-traction to "kill time," i.e. awareness of it
2. "Time is bearing another son. We must kill time" (Dylan Thomas)

3. Emptiness of time to be filled: moments without intensity
 4. Why heavy if empty? Its pace?
 5. And is this time so alive, that it needs killing?
- F. In truly human sense of creative charge, this time is already dead, inert
1. Sterile and mechanical repetition of moments (of rote drill, assembly line)
 2. Stagnation of getting nowhere, doing Nothing
 3. Hollow men in a barren wasteland
- G. No future in that, which is what makes the difference
1. No excitement of anticipation, which comes from looking ahead to goals; hence, lack of "inclination"
 2. No sense of direction; *Quo vadis?*
 3. It's time for a change
- IV. Placing in Context: Refinements of Finer Contrasts
- A. Existential boredom close to melancholy and despair
1. Melancholy; the heavy, black mood of bleakness
 - a. Ancient medicine considered it the mood of the element of earth
 - b. "Down in the mouth": downcast, depressed, dejected, discouraged, sullen
 - c. Blackness of gloom: Mournfulness of "woe is me"
 - d. Thus, melancholy suggests greater awareness of meaninglessness of situation
 2. Despair: where all abandon hope in face of meaningless and absurd existence
 - a. Acute awareness of "Nothing to live for, hang on to"
 - b. Approaching anarchy, chaos, pandemonium: Not even unity of uniformity here
 - c. Despair takes action, one way or other
 - d. The nadir of human experience: can't go anywhere but up —*in life*