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PHENOMENOLOGY: 'BACK TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES' (WITH REFERENCE TO HUSSERL'S IDEA OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND HEIDEGGER'S BEING AND TIME)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present how, in a bid to inherit philosophy philosophically, the methodology or 'phenomenological vision' of two phenomenological writers, early Husserl and early Heidegger, aim to take philosophical investigation 'back to the things themselves': to the world closest to us- as it is experienced by us-and to what is already only implicit in it. I aim to sketch out Husserl's methodology by applying his Phenomenological Reduction to the visual experience of a hammer in order to indicate how description reveals the essential structure of consciousness of visual experience; and Heidegger's Interpretation of Dasein's preontological understanding of being in his average everyday encounter with a hammer to indicate that the implicit essential structure operative in this understanding is the unitary phenomenon of being-in-the-world through which the being of these beings as ready-to-hand is manifest.

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INTRODUCTION

Inheriting Philosophy 'philosophically'

The intellectual atmosphere and philosophical tradition in the post-Enlightenment era was heavily influenced by the spirit and methods of the natural sciences. "Science had presented itself as the very exemplar of access to objective truth,"¹ and so anything short of rigorous naturalism in philosophy was considered suspect in trying to smuggle in something intellectually unrespectable. Ordinary philosophy, at this time, was in the 'grip' of the thought that the only intellectually satisfactory 'conception of ourselves' should be given exclusively in terms that belong to a natural-scientific depiction of nature. It looked for its inspiration and in some respects even its method in the "intellectual achievements of the sciences of the natural sort."² It concerned itself with the problem of getting to the real, objective, permanent, intransient, world that lies behind-the-scenes of the ever-changing, dynamic, transient view of the world that appears before us; aiming to get a picture of the world or 'reality' as it is whether or not humans (or any other living things) are around to get a glimpse of it. The starting point adopted was a *dehumanized*

representation of phenomena from which theories were constructed to explain how our (natural philosophers and scientists) construal of the world and reality *as it is* may fit together. Eschewing the realm of reality *as it is experienced by us*, and attempting to define reality *simpliciter*, natural-scientific philosophy distanced the world closest to us –the realm of human experience.

Disillusioned by how philosophy was being conducted, philosophers, for whom this kind of naturalistic philosophy was their immediate inheritance, resolved to reclaim and hence inherit philosophy *philosophically*.³ They construed phenomenology as a 'methodological conception' or 'a way of philosophizing' as the only legitimate heir to the discipline of 'philosophy.' Expressed by the maxim 'back to the things themselves,' phenomenology does not argue but through its methodological tools of description is able to explicate or make clear the world closest to us-- *the world* (including ourselves) *as it is experienced by us*. By explicating an understanding of ourselves and the world denied to us by ordinary philosophy's naturalistic standpoints, phenomenology is able to bring us back to something we (in some way) already know, it makes explicit what is evident though only implicit in experience. Through its descriptive tools, it explicates *the sense this world*

¹ Glendinning., *In the Name of Phenomenology*, p. 2

² Attributed to Husserl in *Ibid*.

³ *Ibid*. p. 10

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has for us all, "a sense which philosophy can uncover but never alter."⁴

Even though a 'phenomenological vision' is common to the early works of Heidegger and Husserl, their agendas as well as the realm of experience their respective investigations focus on are vastly different. "[F]or Husserl, phenomenological reduction...is the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness...For [Heidegger] phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being...to the understanding of the being of this being."⁵

Husserl's project being primarily epistemological inhabits the realm of consciousness (as experienced). Speaking in terms of conscious attitudes, of turning from the 'natural attitude' to the 'philosophical attitude,' his concern is the revelation of the essential structure of consciousness or the structure underlying all acts of consciousness, through which the 'objects' of consciousness can be directly given and their essence intuited. Heidegger on the other hand is concerned with ontology, with the general question of *Being*. Decrying the talk of intentional attitudes and consciousness as the chosen modes of being, he invites us to investigate our understanding of being as it is expressed in our practical dealings and responses to the entities we encounter in our average everyday activities. His concern is disclosing the structure of *Da-sein* (our being as 'being-there')⁶ *preontological understanding of being* as the unitary phenomena of being-in-the-world through which the *being* of beings (ourselves as well as the entities we encounter) are manifest.

Husserl's 'Methodological Tool' for description: *Phenomenological Reduction*

Husserl's Phenomenological Reduction begins by bracketing out the natural attitude. The phenomenologist or investigator adopts a policy of confining herself to what is directly given and abstains from making judgements about anything further. Our judgements are narrowed down, 'reduced' to what is self evident or immanent in the flow of consciousness. Questions concerning beliefs about the sources (causes) and successes (whether it truly corresponds with an objective existence) of experience as well as our psychological dispositions, urges, desires etc. are suspended so that description of this 'purified' experience may reveal its essential structure. Thus, in the perceptual experience⁷ of a hammer I may begin describing it by noting that it is in the foreground of my visual field but that it isn't an isolated object. It lies on a table with other things beside it. By concentrating on my experience of the hammer alone, the rest is only dimly perceived. However, if it weren't for this background, the form of this 'hammer' wouldn't be viewed as the figure in the foreground of my perception. Thus figure and ground (the idea of space) is essential to the

possibility of visual experience. Again, concentrating on my 'act of consciousness' I may note that while I perceive the hammer, I only see one side of it (I have one perspective on it) -from a particular angle and a particular distance. Immediately, I also realize that even this one perspective is not flat or isolated: my present consciousness presents a three dimensional entity (as opposed to say when my consciousness is of a photograph of a hammer). The other sides are hidden from me at the time, but are intimated to me in my present experience: were I to turn it around or walk around it, another side of the hammer would come into my view and this one would get hidden. When I see the hammer from one side, say the front, the back and sides are intimated to me, both as hidden as well as 'already there' to be seen. These different perspectives are predictably arranged and organised (I am not surprised when the other sides, which were till now only intimated to me, come into view). And though different sides of it come into my view, my perception is of *one* hammer. This experience then has a unity as well as a plurality to it. My unified experience of the hammer, given one side at a time, is given via what Husserl calls *adumbrations*.

The adumbrational presentation is part of *what it is* too see or visually experience things like hammers, they are what make up my experience. They're not free floating standing images but are intricately interconnected with each other as each presentation intimates or points to me other possible adumbrational presentations. These other adumbrational presentations (before and beyond the one currently given in experience) are part of the *horizon* of my that one current experience; and as my experience continues to reveal those other intimated but hidden sides, they form a *series* with the current adumbrational presentation. The formation of this series of different adumbrational presentations that are of *one* hammer is what Husserl calls *synthesis*. This *horizontal-synthetic structure* is essential to the possibility of visual experiences like hammers; if this structure were broken or deleted, our experience would never be *of* or *about* material objects.⁸ For instance, if I were to forget each preceding presentation as the next one comes or if there were no predictable connections to the next presentation, the experience wouldn't add up to being about a transcendent object. This retention of memory and prediction is also essential to perceptual experience of entities like hammers, melodies etc. and makes up the necessary temporal retention-protection structure.

The first reduction concentrates our energies on pure phenomena and acts of consciousness, bracketing out physical as well as psychological concerns. At this stage the Ego is just an observer, a bare perspective on the phenomena. The second reduction, *eidetic abstraction* requires the investigator to actively intervene in her consciousness of the object; she 'freely varies' her experience, using her imagination to introduce a series of changes in the course of her experience. Initially the hammer showed itself in a particular way with various features already manifested as *actually* as being that

⁴ Attributed to Husserl in *Ibid.* p. 16.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 21.

⁶ 'being-there' denotes the 'situatedness' or 'embeddedness' of our being or existence. We (*Da-sein*) are always already intrinsically 'in' the form-of-life that surrounds us.

⁷ Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p 16-18

⁸ Consciousness or experience of say the idea of non-material entities like Santa Claus or Mermaids or my imagining them is not given via this adumbrational presentation. Other sides are not intimated to me, but the image is given exhaustively. I cannot imagine any other perspectives of it.

one way. We begin the eidetic reduction with treating actualities (such as colour, shape, size) as *possibilities* in order to determine which are essential to the act of consciousness. For example trying to delete shape altogether or interposing two colours on the same spot would break the experience of visual perception whereas changing colour wouldn't affect it. These essential aspects then fix the necessary parameters of visual experiences, thereby removing the arbitrary or contingent features of such experiences. This then isolates and makes explicit the necessary form or essential structure of visual experience behind my consciousness of the hammer. In explicating my experience of the hammer using the phenomenological reduction to concentrate on pure experience and the eidetic reduction to make 'evident' the essential structures (horizontal-synthetic and retention-protection) of visual experience (as consciousness) that were always there but only implicit in my experience, phenomenology has taken us 'back to the things themselves.' To my experience of the hammer and brought out its essence (which was implicit in it) as well as to the essence (that was till now only implicit) of the hammer.

Heidegger's 'Methodological Tool' for description:

Interpretation

Heidegger's phenomenological vision primarily concerns the general question of *being*. Because *Da-sein* (our way of being-there) is the only being that (always) has an understanding of being (though in a non-thematic way and which is not underwritten by something we think or have in our minds) which expresses itself in our ways of dealing with and responding to entities we encounter in our ongoing everyday activities, Heidegger chooses *Da-sein* and this preontological *understanding of being* in the ways we act as his starting point. Since being is always a being of entities⁹, and only when *Da-sein* encounters these entities is any kind of being manifest, the (existence of) entities encountered cannot be isolated from the non- thematic, preontological understanding of being implicit in practical day to day activities the way Husserl's 'bracketing' implored us to do.¹⁰ It is this very engagement with entities that Heidegger seeks to interpret so as to make manifest the implicit structures of intelligibility that inform that activity¹¹. The phenomenological description is to be regarded as an attempt to interpret the relationship of man to his world from within that relationship.

According to Heidegger, the entities we encounter in our day to day lives-a hammer for instance-are manifest as useful things, as *equipment* in the sense that they don't appear as free-floating substances with their own intrinsic properties (as Western Modern philosophy had interpreted them to be), as 'mere things' i.e., the hammer I encounter is not presented to me as an isolated mere object, nor do I think about them as such. Instead the basic characteristic of such entities is something-*for-something*. These entities (as useful things) are manifest only in *circumspection*¹² (the 'sight' involved in dealings with equipment) and must be understood in terms of the activities wherein they are put to use.¹³ "The less we just stare at the

thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, *as a useful thing*."¹⁴ However, these entities have a tendency to withdraw, in the sense that they are not the focus of one's ongoing experience when they are being skilfully put to use. "[I]t withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy."¹⁵ Also, never is the useful thing or equipment ever presented as a single useful thing, as an isolated object of use. There always belongs to the being of a useful thing, a totality of useful things in which this useful thing can be what it is, i.e., it is always manifest in terms of a 'totality'. The *being* of a hammer is presented to me in my practical experience when I reach out for it *in order to* hammer in a nail in the wall *in order to* hang a chosen painting *in order to* beautify my room *for the sake of* expressing a self understanding about myself as a person with aesthetic sensibilities. Thus the entity-hammer-I encounter is what it is only by standing in a number of 'referential' relations to other entities like nails, wall etc. as well as various activities, projects and purposes-hammer-nails-hammering-wall-painting *for my room*. The italicized terms are the 'referential relations' in which items of equipment must stand in order to be the equipment that it is. It belongs to a 'totality' of equipment, which in turn is informed by *Da-sein's* activity and is bound by *Da-sein's* self understanding. Thus the *being of equipment* (ready-to-hand) as a referential totality is bound by *Da-sein's* self understanding, in this case the hammer in its referential totality is bound by myself understanding as a person with aesthetic sensibility. It is 'for the sake of' such self understanding that the ready-to-hand shows itself. Such self understanding can be numerous and diverse and conditions *what and how* things show up in everydayness.

Though this account of what shows itself in everyday activity sounds inherently subjective,¹⁶ and as constrained only by my purposes, interests, and desires but considering the referential relations constituting the ready-to-hand, we notice a normative dimension to these relations. That the hammer is *for hammering for...* indicates that there are proper standards or purposes involved in these relations. Even though I may only use the hammer to, say, open a jammed door, this would constitute a deviant use of it. That useful things have a standard use points to the anonymous character of these normative relations. The particular ways in which I encounter the hammer as normatively structured is not something I or anybody else in particular decided on. I did not imbue it with the significance of being for hammering but found them as already endowed with such significance. "[D]as Man [the anonymous dimension in everyday existence] articulates the referential totality of significance."¹⁷ This shows that we are always already in the anonymously articulated normative structure of our everyday experience (and that the world we encounter is a public world and not something inherently private or subjective).

The significative structure of the 'referential totality' is known as *signification* and is what constitutes the structure of the

⁹ Objects as well as other *Dasein* that one encounters in our natural day to day lives.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p 24-26.

¹¹ Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*, p.45.

¹² Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed.*, p .37

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 65.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This discussion of anonymous dimension and normative structure in Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*, p.48-49.

¹⁷ Attributed to Heidegger and quoted in Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p .41

world in which Da-sein as such always already is. The relational character of useful things helps to make explicit not only that Being-in-the-world is a unitary phenomenon but also that it is the essential structure of the world in which the several referential relations that constitute equipment relate to other equipment as well as to Daseins activities, goals and roles. They are all mutually interdependent.¹⁸ There are times when the tendency of useful things to withdraw in circumspection is reversed, when what is usually handy (ready-to-hand) shows up as not handy. Suppose my hammer goes missing, in occasions such as this, the useful thing comes into our awareness explicitly as what it is *for*. “[I]n a disturbance of reference,--in being unusable for-the reference becomes explicit.”¹⁹ These breakdown situations serve to articulate more explicitly the kinds of referential relations that are constitutive of useful things. ‘In breakdowns the context of useful things appears not as a totality never seen before, but as a totality that has continually been seen beforehand in our circumspection. Disruptions in the referential totality serve to bring structural aspects of that totality into view, i.e., in breakdown situations the world announces itself.’²⁰ In the breakdown, we become aware of ‘referential totality’ that constituted the being of the equipment in the first place, the referential totality that terminates in my self understanding thus making explicit just how situated my being is. The phenomena of being-in-the-world gets manifested when my hammer goes missing as I am then made aware of a chain of referential relations that lead to my self understanding as concerned about aesthetics and therefore about my being as connected and dependent on the world— entities, other Da-sein and the anonymously articulated norms that inform my practical dealings and activities.

Concluding Remarks

Using Husserl and Heidegger’s respective ‘methodological tools’ of description I have tried, in the context of my experience (as *consciousness* and as practical *activity*) of a hammer, to show how the ‘phenomenological vision’, without arguing in the narrow sense of inferring from premises to a conclusion, but as a descriptive discipline takes us ‘back to the things themselves’, in the sense of (a) explicating the *world as we experience it* instead of offering us an objective picture of the world and us as isolated substances, as subject and object that sometimes interact from a detached, dehumanized perspective, a world devoid of human significance. And (b) bring to the foreground not some sort of hypothesis of how and what the world might be but ‘evident’ aspects that are only implicit in our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world i.e., in our understanding of experience.

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¹⁸ Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p .41

¹⁹ Attributed to Heidegger and quoted in Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p .44

²⁰ Ibid.