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Phenomenology, the Spirits of the Age, and the (Religious) Task of Philosophy

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Abstract

The presenter states that philosophy in general—and phenomenology in particular—remain predominantly academic endeavors, done by professional philosophers, to professional philosophers, for professional philosophers and that the key to changing this situation and so to recover the public nature of the phenomenological enterprise is to reconceive the task of philosophy as the 2 discernment of the spirits of the age in which we find ourselves. To do this, he highlights two distinct elements of phenomenological methodology that enable it to perform such a task: first, its epistemological claim that the matters to be investigated must be both taken on their own terms (the given) and taken within the context of how those terms are constituted by things outside of themselves; and second, the way it uses rigorous analytic tools in service of clarifying the common, integral life-world. He uses philosophy of religion as a test case to show how these two elements of phenomenological methodology help us recover the spiritual nature of the phenomenological enterprise, and so help us recover the cultural force and relevance of the philosophical task in a way that traditional philosophy of religion fails to do.

Keywords

phenomenology, religious philosophy, phenomenological methodology

Disciplines

Christianity | Philosophy | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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With phenomenology, philosophy tries to break out of the mold of the 'pure academy,' where knowledge is pursued by experts, for experts. Descartes tried to create a method whereby philosophy could again be done by (and for the benefit of) the common person, and so break out of a system where philosophy had become so technical, so 'scholastic,' that only the learned "schoolmen" could do it. His attempts were only moderately successful, and within 150 years the system of modern philosophy that was to be 'clear and distinct' to any rational person had become lost in the dense technicality of Kant's critiques. Hegel tried to recover the connection of philosophy to the life of the everyday person through his emphasis on the intertwining of the ideal and the concrete, but the systematic nature of his 'phenomenology' of Geist ultimately remained too technical to be of immediate service to everyday human living.

In the early 20th century, Husserl again tried to break free from the overly technical, academic and 'scholastic' nature of philosophy. Appealing to some of the insights—and terminology—of Descartes, Kant and Hegel, Husserl tried again to recover a philosophy that was not only practically effective, but was widely practicable: phenomenological investigation was supposed to be, in principle, open to anyone. Of course, the subsequent 100 years has shown that this attempt at re-opening philosophy as a cultural (rather than merely academic) endeavor has met with mixed results, at best: for all the cultural cool of existentialism, or the ubiquity of talk of hermeneutics and interpretation, philosophy in general—and phenomenology in particular—remain predominantly academic endeavors, done by professional philosophers, to professional philosophers, for professional philosophers.

The key to changing this situation and so to recover the public nature of the phenomenological enterprise, I will argue, is to reconceive the task of philosophy as the

discernment of the spirits of the age in which we find ourselves. To do this, I want to highlight two distinct elements of phenomenological methodology that enable it to perform such a task: first, its epistemological claim that the matters to be investigated must be both taken on their own terms (the given) and taken within the context of how those terms are constituted by things outside of themselves; and second, the way it uses rigorous analytic tools in service of clarifying the common, integral life-world. Using philosophy of religion as a sort of test case, I will show how these two elements of phenomenological methodology help us recover the spirit-ual nature of the phenomenological enterprise, and so help us recover the cultural force and relevance of the philosophical task in a way that traditional philosophy of religion fails to do. This helps remind us of the genuinely philosophical nature of the 'cultural studies' work that flourishes at conferences like SPEP (and its satellites), while simultaneously pushing that work toward more philosophical depth and more culturally relevant articulation[1].

Method

I begin, then, by making clear the relevant elements of phenomenological method. To do this, I draw on the notion of phenomenology as the 'promissory discipline.'[2] Its basic claim is that phenomenology investigates a matter (a *Sache* rather than a *Ding*) according to what that matter says about itself, implicitly or explicitly, and to the role that matter plays in our broader social (inter-personal) world. A phenomenology of music, for example, is interested both in what music claims to be and to do (again, implicitly and explicitly) and what role music plays in human living (how it relates to other matters within and transcending the human subject). Matters [*Sachen*] are both self-given and externally constituted, and both of these elements must

[1] This is not merely making traditional philosophical arguments with smaller words, but is about using philosophy to help us better navigate and inhabit the world in which we live.

[2] See Neal DeRoo, *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas and Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), especially the concluding chapter.

be examined if a matter is to be properly understood. In looking at what a matter says about itself, phenomenology seeks to determine what *promise* is being made within that matter by that matter itself; in looking at the role the matter plays in our broader social world, phenomenology seeks to determine how well the matter is living up to its own inherent promise. Crucial here is that phenomenology seeks to balance what is true of the matters themselves (so as to avoid extreme idealism, nominalism, and relativism) and what is contextually determined about the matters themselves (so as to avoid naïve realism, essentialism, and absolutism).

Part and parcel of this balance is its constant recourse to the broader picture of the world of naïve, pre-theoretical experience—the life-world, the world in which we live. In service of this broader picture, phenomenology seeks to balance the analyticity necessary to understand the parts with the synthesis necessary to relate them to the whole. The various elements or institutions of the life-world have their characteristics differences—but there is also something that connects them. That is, the life-world is a *world*, precisely because it is *a* world, a singular thing, composed of parts, but tied together. The 2-fold promissory nature of phenomenology, then, enables it to use analytic rigor (to understand the various distinct parts, the distinct internal promises) in the service of a broader integrality that is not merely synthetic but spiritual: the life-world does not just tie disparate parts together into a single thing, but rather it betrays an integrality that comes from being animated by some motivating drive(s), impulse(s) or spirit(s) that are expressed variably in all the disparate parts and elements of the life-world.

Spirituality

To speak of 'spirit' here is not to veer into a theological detour from phenomenology,[3] nor is it to return to a Hegelian idealism or Romantic mysticism. Rather, it is to take seriously the later work of Husserl (e.g., in the *Crisis* and the "Vienna Lecture") as an essential (if historically-contextualized) outworking of the project of phenomenology, and of its conception of the philosophical task. The notion of 'spirit' at work here, then, does not denote a super-natural, personal entity, but something more like the way we speak of the 'spirits of the age' as a certain cultural mood, a felt disposition that leads in certain directions and away from other directions. Hence, we can speak of the "spirit of 1968" as a certain felt disposition, widespread during the late 1960s, toward free love and away from power hierarchies and inter-personal violence. But this spirit does not just describe a certain feeling; it articulates a force that helps shape and constitute the world. The 'spirit of 1968' was not a mystical aura, but an economic, political, societal, and interpersonal power that helped shape the world in particular ways.

At work in the two elements of the phenomenological method outlined above (its promissory nature and its integral [analytic and synthetic] nature) is the attempt to distinguish (while simultaneously showing the connection between) the animating spirit and the cultural forms and institutions it animates. This distinction is central to the phenomenological method itself.

The ability to articulate the connection between cultural institutions and their animating 'spirits of the age' is not only of interest to scholars of phenomenological method, but also pinpoints precisely what enables phenomenology to be helpful both within and beyond the bounds of academic philosophy: articulating the operative 'spirit of the age' provides

[3] Contra Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, by Dominique Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16–103.

philosophical depth, and showing that spirit's connection to various kinds of cultural institutions enables that philosophical depth to be usefully deployed in a variety of disciplinary contexts, insofar as those institutions can be political, sociological, artistic/architectural, juridical, ethical, and so on. If this helps show the possibility of, and need for, philosophical depth in 'cultural studies', it also opens the possibility of, and so the need for, culturally relevant articulations of that depth. As long as the 'spirits of the age' are not merely descriptive, but also constitutive, their articulation is not merely a matter of 'academic' concern—they don't need to be known just for the sake of being known, but rather in the hope that knowing them better helps us constitute a certain kind of world, constitute a world in certain kinds of ways. But this is possible only if the spirits of the age are not only articulated, but also influenced and employed. For this to happen, their articulation cannot remain confined to a small cadre of experts who have, by and large, little cultural power. Rather, philosophical (and phenomenological) articulation has the potential to be effective theoretically and politically, but also socially, ethically, artistically, and beyond—if its articulations can be meaningfully deployed in those realms.

Religion: A Case Study of Phenomenology as Inter-Disciplinary Method

As a case study of how that might work, I will now turn to look at the example of religion. In doing so, I hope to illustrate concretely how phenomenology can make philosophy culturally relevant again, by emphasizing that the task of philosophy is the discernment of the spirit(s) of the age.

Phenomenology of Religion

The phenomenological examination of religious life began relatively early in phenomenology's history.[4] In order to honor Husserl's now infamous claim in *Ideas I* that God

[4] At least as early as 1920-21, when Heidegger presented his lecture course on *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*.

was outside the epoche, phenomenology of religion shifts the focus of philosophy of religion away from talk about God and God's predicates (all-PKG) and toward the manifestations of religiosity in the life-world.[5] These manifestations can then be analyzed both according to what they inherently promise to be or to do, and the ways in which they succeed or fail to live up to that promise within the cultural milieu in which they are expressed. This focus on manifestation enables the phenomenology of religion to posit the distinction between religion (or faith or beliefs) as the concrete actions of a historical, socio-political institution, and a certain religious impulse that drives those actions.

One key difference between this and more 'theistic' accounts of philosophy of religion is the difference role it assigns to reason in religious life, and in human life more generally. Where theistic philosophies of religion tend to be very rationalistic in nature (presuppositionalism, religion as a properly basic belief that can foundationally establish other epistemological claims, etc.), phenomenologies of religion discuss the extra (or, better, supra-) rational features of human living that are partially constitutive of theoretical thought. This contextualization of reason in a broader social, political and religious scheme, in turn, provides an alternate account of the connection—but also the distinction—between religious and other cultural practices. Animating both is some motivating force or 'spirit,' and that spirit is made manifest in ways that are predominantly 'religious'—but also in ways that are predominantly political, social, aesthetic, etc.

This distinction between the motivating (religious) impulse and its manifestations in various cultural realms is present in thinkers like Derrida, Marion, and Heidegger, but it is

[5] This shift spawned two distinct manifestations of a phenomenology of religion: the one popularized in religious studies departments through the work of people like Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (among others), and the other popularized in philosophy departments through the work of people like Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and John D. Caputo. Our focus will remain on the latter stream.

perhaps nowhere more explicitly articulated, and systematically developed, than in the work of the Dutch phenomenologist, Herman Dooyeweerd. Dooyeweerd's magnum opus, *The New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, begins with an in-depth investigation into the nature of theoretical thought itself.[6] Using some inherently (if somewhat implicitly) phenomenological methods, Dooyeweerd argues that all theoretical thought necessarily has, at its basis, supra-theoretical commitments that determine the (genetic) origin, unity, and (transcendental) source of all meaning, and hence of all possible theoretical thought. Dooyeweerd designates these supra-theoretical commitments as "religious"—but he emphasizes the supra-theoretical, supra-rational character of these commitments. My 'religious' commitments, then, have theoretical implications, but are not themselves primarily theoretical. Religion is not primarily doctrine- or belief-based; rather, it is a motivating, driving force (a 'ground motive' [*grondmotief*]) that is manifest throughout temporal reality.

This force is distinctly not a super-natural force, but rather a supra-natural one: it constitutes the "natural" realm (which includes, for Dooyeweerd, the realms of culture as well) in much the same way the supra-theoretical commitments constitute the theoretical realm. The dominant metaphor for how this works is that of a light shining through a prism: just as a white light, when shone through a prism, becomes a rainbow of color on the other side, so, too, this supra-natural force, when "shone" through the prism of temporal reality, becomes a multiplicity of distinct ontological modes, distinct ways for temporal beings to relate to each other (the 'temporal order'). But, just as the rainbow is nothing else than diffracted white light, so, too, the modal ontology is nothing other than the supra-natural motivating force temporalized.

Hence, the religious impulse is something that manifests itself in every avenue of human living, from the spatial to the pistic, the biological to the aesthetic, the physical to the linguistic.

[6] An investigation carried out more succinctly in his *Transcendental Problems in Philosophic Thought*.

Therefore, one can discern this impulse in the work, not merely of traditionally 'religious' institutions (those qualified by the 'pistic' or faith mode, like Christianity, Islam, or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster), but in every cultural institution. To do this, one must be careful to always distinguish sharply between the religious impulse (the ground motive) and the pistic institutions (Christianity, etc.), between *foi* (to use Derrida's terminology) and *croyances*. A phenomenology of the religious can never be reduced to a study of religions, because the religious impulse manifests itself far beyond the realms of religion.

Cultural Relevance and Spirit-ual Significance

While Dooyeweerd's philosophy is most systematically laid out in the *New Critique*,[7] his explication of the ground motives is most clearly explained in a book entitled *The Roots of Western Culture*. This book is a collection of newspaper articles Dooyeweerd wrote in a Dutch newspaper, *Nieuw Nederland*, between 1945 and 1948. Dooyeweerd's purpose in writing in such a popular venue was to help shape the Dutch elections in 1946 that would, by and large, determine the course that the Netherlands would take following its liberation from Nazi rule after WW II. Dooyeweerd argued passionately for the notion of distinct ground motives, each offering distinct accounts of the nature of the world, the problems it faced, and the solutions to those problems. The options facing the Netherlands in such a critical time in its history were, according to Dooyeweerd, more than merely political options or social options—they were spirit-ual options that were vying to be the shaping and operative spirit that would dictate the future of the Netherlands. They were competing visions of the spirit of the age, and Dooyeweerd wanted this to be acknowledged and debated down to this core, and not merely on the surface level of public policy.

[7]Which includes, for example, an entire volume devoted to the relationships between these different 'modes of relating', and another volume to how those various ways the mode of relating have of relating to each other are uniquely embodied in distinct social institutions.

This ‘spirit-ual’ struggle was not a question merely of religion that could be relegated to its own private sphere and resolved there alone. The ‘spirit’-ual struggle that Dooyeweerd sought to explicate in the *Roots of Western Culture* articles was a deeper issue that resounded in every social and cultural institution. Resolving it could neither be avoided, nor achieved by one type of social institution alone. Instead, it was a struggle that had to be tackled head-on. And this could be done only if people were given the tools and language to articulate the precise nature of the struggle, and then encouraged to employ those tools in public discourse. Dooyeweerd sought to provide the former, as a way of embodying and encouraging the latter.

Because the significance of these spirit-ual ground motives was not merely political, but extended to every realm of societal relationship, the impact of Dooyeweerd’s work was felt far beyond academic realms. His ideas were used to affect immigration patterns (especially in Canada), educational policies, ecclesial unions (and fractures), labor rights, agricultural production (through both farming and horticulture), economic consumption, urban (and rural) planning, industrial developments, and more in the Dutch nation (and the Dutch diaspora) in the late 40s through the 60s. His name was invoked in church councils, school boards, governmental institutions, labor negotiations, and in neighborhood coffee klatches.

Dooyeweerd was able to have this cultural cache because he gave the people who read his work a way of making sense of the deeper significance of the choices they faced in the Netherlands’ post WW II rebuild. By providing people an articulate (if somewhat flawed) account of the deep, ground-motive level forces operating in their culture, Dooyeweerd was able to succeed, to some extent, in fulfilling one of the visions Husserl had for phenomenology: to engage the spirit-ual struggles of our time.

Conclusion

I hope you'll forgive my foray into history here. But I use it as a case study to illustrate the potential of phenomenology to have broad social and cultural impact in a relatively direct way. This happens best when phenomenologists engage the general public by offering it a deeper understanding of the 'spirits' or forces that drive social and cultural development. The example I chose here was taken predominantly from the philosophy of religion (religious v. religion, perhaps even the language of spirit-ual struggle itself), but this could work in other venues as well.

Social philosophy seems, today, to be a particular promising field. It would include not just political thought, but also the ability to analyze and explain what is going on, for example, in places like Ferguson, MO, as well as in popular culture. On the latter score, Zizek would probably be the most prominent example—but his predominantly psycho-analytic rhetoric, I think, has less popular appeal than a phenomenology of spirit-ual discernment could have.

What is needed are people capable of discerning the deeper forces that tie our life-world together, as well as an articulation of how those forces manifest themselves in distinct cultural institutions. Phenomenological training gives us the ability to do precisely this kind of work. If we put our training to this use, I think we can provide an immense service to our current culture, which faces a crisis of its own.