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Facticity and Transcendence Across the Disciplines: Phenomenology and the Promise

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Facticity and Transcendence Across the Disciplines: Phenomenology and the Promise

Abstract

This paper begins from one of the most commonly found questions in phenomenology, “What *is* Phenomenology?”, to argue that phenomenology is a trans-disciplinary approach to engaging with the products of human culture. This approach is characterized by paying particular attention to the distinction between facticity and transcendence within “lived experience” so as to help us better articulate and evaluate the promises that animate every human institution. Such a task necessarily requires inter-disciplinary input and helps us engage in our lives—in our shared cultural life—differently.

Keywords

facticity, transcendence, phenomenological method, the promissory discipline, inter-disciplinary

Disciplines

Christianity | Philosophy

Comments

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**Facticity and Transcendence across the Disciplines:
Phenomenology and the Promise**

“What is Phenomenology?” I’ve been asked this question numerous times—as I’m sure all of you have as well—and I’m never quite sure how to answer it. I usually go the historical route: it’s a branch of philosophy that began in Germany in the early 20th-century, blossomed in France in the middle parts of that century, and is now practiced throughout Europe, and in some pockets in North America as well.

But of course this does not really answer the original question. As we kick off the conference here this morning, I thought it might be good to begin with the most basic question about phenomenology to remind us all what we’re doing here—and to show that the conference theme, “Facticity and Transcendence,” is central to the very practice of phenomenology itself. Once we see this, I think we will see, too, that inter-disciplinarity is also inherent to phenomenology itself. As such, I hope to show that, in a certain sense, this conference—the Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists’ meeting with the theme “Facticity and Transcendence”—is a lived response to the question “What is Phenomenology?” The only thing missing, I will argue, is the promise—which hopefully we can begin to recover in this talk.

Facticity, Transcendence and the Phenomenological Method

To call this conference a ‘lived response’ to the question “What is Phenomenology” is to say something very particular, for this notion of ‘life’ is a central trope for understanding

phenomenology.¹ The most basic element, perhaps, of the entire phenomenological method is that it begins with everyday life.² Husserl first embarked on the phenomenological enterprise as a way of making sense of mathematics; more specifically, how can it be the case that numbers, and especially higher numbers that we cannot immediately intuit as such (i.e., any number over 12?), have an objectively valid meaning, though we can only arrive at that meaning by way of specific subjective acts. That is, how can math be ‘universal’ despite the fact that it is carried out, essentially, by particular living beings in particular states of affairs? (And here already you have the fundamental question of transcendence and facticity contained, *in nuce*.)

Husserl’s key methodological breakthrough comes in the reduction: the ‘natural attitude’ of everyday life is bracketed (not denied, but simply put into parenthesis, as a way of saying ‘that lies outside the scope of this paper’), and attention is instead reduced or narrowed down to how we constitute, experience, or live out a particular element of our everyday life. With the reduction, we take for granted the integrating factor of our ‘naïve experience’³—the fact that we experience the broad diversity of our multiple interactions with the world as one unified experience of our, or ‘my’, life—and step back to analyze *how* we are able to have such an integral experience. Doing this requires at least two steps: 1) an understanding of the multiplicity of (possible and actual) relations I have to, with, and within the world around me; and 2) an

¹ A point made most obviously in the work of Michel Henry, but operative already in Husserl (as shown by Derrida [in *Voice and Phenomenon*] and Steinbock [in *Home and Beyond*]) and throughout the tradition.

² Please forgive the simplified, almost remedial, nature of the following reflection on the phenomenological method. While I realize I am among friends and experts here, I’m still trying to work out an answer to the “What is Phenomenology?” question that would work for the non-experts who ask me the question. My hope for you is, in part, that you will evaluate how well the following works as an answer to that question.

³ I take this terminology from the Dutch phenomenologists Herman Dooyeweerd. See especially *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 volumes (trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young; Philadelphia: The Reformed and Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1953).

account of how those multiple relations are able to be brought together (subjectively and objectively; that is, as a matter of constitution and as a matter of givenness) in lived experience.

We see, then, inherent in the reduction—that pillar of the phenomenological method—the necessity of both the everyday life of a particular empirical person at a particular time and place, and the fact that there is more at work in that ‘everyday life’ than just a recording of empirical events: lived experience is not merely videography.⁴ As such, we can see that at the very heart of phenomenology—because it is at the very heart of everyday life—is the relationship between facticity (i.e., being located in one particular empirical circumstance) and transcendence (i.e., not being merely confined to, contained by, or ontologically ‘stuck’ in that empirical circumstance). Granted, the essential nature of the relationship between these two—the *Verflechtung* that characterizes their necessary interlacement—thoroughly complicates each one: facticity goes beyond mere ‘placement’ in an ongoing drama that would otherwise go on equally well without you, and transcendence moves beyond being merely ‘outside’ of a particular empirical circumstance. The factual is not *merely* empirical (Deleuze will speak of a transcendental empiricism), and the transcendent is not *purely* transcendent (Derrida will speak of quasi-transcendentals), and both of these precisely because the factual and the transcendent are inextricably wound up with each other, not merely in the phenomenological method, but in everyday life. Phenomenology always begins with life.⁵

⁴ And videography, I will acknowledge, is not merely ‘neutral’ representation—but exploring this further lies outside the realm of my paper. Hopefully someone else will explore the relationship of film and phenomenology more elsewhere at this conference.

⁵ Even if this life is always in necessary relationship with its own absence, and hence with ‘death,’ as Derrida discusses, e.g., in *Voice and Phenomenon*.

Life, Promise and Tradition

The intertwining of facticity and transcendence has implications for how we understand the historical unfolding of cultural and societal institutions (by which I mean the products of human culture, ranging from academic disciplines to political concepts to banks and schools). This is a point that has been made repeatedly in the history of phenomenological thought, but what I would like to bring to the surface here is the way in which these implications are not merely ontological, but ethico-political, insofar as the outcome of this intertwining is a series of animating promises that drive the various cultural and societal institutions.

To begin to uncover the ethico-political implications of phenomenological methodology, we must first explore the notion of a tradition. The tradition is one implication of the intertwining of facticity and transcendence. Once I acknowledge the necessity of my empirical circumstances—i.e., that I must be situated in a ‘here’ and a ‘now’—I can no longer think that I fell, fully formed, into life as the person that I am. I am constituted by the situation I find myself in. But this situation is itself constituted by its own empirical conditions, most notably the condition of historical unfolding. That is to say, the empirical conditions I find myself in did not themselves fall fully-formed from some Platonic heaven either; they, too, were constituted by the interplay of factual circumstances and subjects that emerged from—but were not trapped in—those circumstances.

Our ‘empirical’ or ‘factual’ condition, therefore, not only shapes or constitutes our present experiences, but it is also itself constituted by other previous experiences, and provides the horizon out of which we will approach future experiences. That is, our factual condition is not merely a ‘condition’ at all, but is rather a project (to use Heideggerean terminology), an

unfolding, a process. We call this project a tradition—and it is something that we are not only born into, but something that we live out of.

Arising from, and operating within, a tradition (and set of traditions), each institution (including the ‘institution’ of the ‘subject’) is therefore animated by a particular promise and set of promises: as X, it will seek to do Y by way of Z. This is not merely a claim of essence, or a neutral descriptor, but an ethical, social and political promise: as X, it *will* seek to do Y by way of Z. The tradition promises us (and every institution) to certain courses of action, and constitutes us (and every institution) as a promise.⁶

But we are a very complex promise, or series of promises, arising out of a very complex tradition or series of traditions. Inhabiting our life as a promise is neither simple, nor easy. For one thing, we use the word ‘tradition’ in multiple ways: we can speak, for example, of the political tradition, of sports-related traditions, of the Church tradition, of ‘traditional’ scientific belief, and so on. This is the first multiplying of tradition—we can see a tradition at work in each and every social institution, from academic disciplines to the banking system to zoos. That is, we can acknowledge that each and every social institution is itself the (temporal) product of an historically unfolding series of events that combine to produce a particular manifestation of that institution in the present circumstances. Every social institution we live in today is the product of its own unique tradition, and hence is animated by its own unique promise.

But each of these unique traditions is, itself, multiple. That is, we must be careful in using the definite article in regards even to these individualized traditions: can we rightly speak of *the* philosophical tradition, for example? Of *the* tradition of banks, or of zoos, or of higher

⁶ See Derrida’s “Nietzsche and the Machine,” as well as my *Futurity in Phenomenology* for more.

education? The hesitancy towards the definite article is not merely a matter of geographic location, either, for we cannot even rightly speak of *the* Western philosophical tradition, or of *the* French philosophical tradition,⁷ for the tradition is multiple, even within a particular geographic location.

But can we not speak of *the* philosophical tradition as the totality of individual philosophical traditions? Can the promise of philosophy not be distilled from the totality of particular philosophical promises? If we collect the multiplicity of traditions, do we not come to a grand master Tradition that is unfolding through the play and interplay of the multiple traditions at work in each cultural institution?⁸ And can we not hope to achieve this Hegelian dream, not only with the totality of cultural institutions, but within each institution as well?

The answer to this question is complex, probably too complex to be adequately explored here (though perhaps we could take it up again in the Q & A). On the one hand, there is something not only appealing, but necessary, in recognizing a guiding promise or impulse at the heart of each particular tradition or institution (e.g., a philosophical impulse at the heart of all philosophical traditions). This would be precisely what makes them particular (e.g., philosophical) traditions, rather than other particular (e.g., psychological, sociological, or mathematical) traditions.⁹ Yet, defining the nature of that (philosophical) impulse is often precisely what is at stake in the various traditions that consider themselves part of that (philosophical) tradition. To use the most obvious contemporary example, someone from a

⁷ Cf. Derrida's "Ends of Man" for a discussion of this theme.

⁸ Here we broach on themes that are often pursued in relation to Gadamer's work.

⁹ Here we obviously have a gesture in the direction of Husserl's eidetic phenomenology.

‘Continental’ background will likely have a very different account of *the* philosophical tradition than someone from an ‘Anglo-American’ philosophical background.¹⁰

Each tradition, therefore, unfolds itself in some sense against the background of the other traditions that are ‘like’ it, but are not it: Continental philosophy is constituted, in part, by its relationship to Anglo-American philosophy, whether that relationship is one of indifference, active hostility, or humble learning.¹¹

In this sense, every (philosophical) tradition is constituted, in part, by its relation to other (philosophical) traditions. But even this is too simplified without an adequate conception of what is meant by ‘relation’ here: how is it that various traditions come to be in relation to each other (especially if neglect or ignorance are types of relationships, rather than evidence of no relationship)? And are there traditions that are *not* in relation to each other?

Here we come to the question of the relationship between the traditions inherent to each societal institution and the traditions inherent to other societal institutions. Again, we have a multiplying of traditions, while at the same time a certain gesture toward an integrated Tradition: surely the relationship between Daoist philosophy and Chinese history is different in kind than that between Daoist philosophy and Greek democracy. In fact, there is likely more affinity between the Daoist philosophy-Chinese history relationship and the Platonic philosophy-Greek history relationship than there is between either of those philosophies and its ‘other’ history.

¹⁰ I can vouch for this at least in regards to modern philosophy; see, for example, the difference in importance cast on someone like Spinoza between, say, Deleuze and Roger Scruton.

¹¹ To use another example of this, several scholars in the last half of the 20th century have shown that ‘traditional’ philosophy was defined, in large part, by the way it had marginalized other philosophical traditions, especially those carried out by people of other genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, and vice versa.

Let me draw a few provisional conclusions from the preceding discussion: 1) every societal institution is the result of a tradition inherent to that institution; 2) that tradition is not merely a content, but provides an animating impulse; it is a promise, because a tradition is a project, not merely a 'setting'; 3) each inherent tradition/promise is itself constituted by a complicated web of multiple traditions/promises, both interior to that institution and those belonging to other societal institutions; and 4) the traditions/promises inherent to particular social institutions are brought together in various ways to form other, cross-institutional traditions/promises.

From these conclusions, we can further conclude that, if we want to come to understand a particular social institution, we have to examine: a) the various traditions that have historically come together to constitute that institution in its present form; b) the 'guiding thread' or animating promise that enables us to cast some of these traditions as inherent to that institution, while others—that still remain formative of that institution—are viewed as at least partially external to that institution; and c) the relation of those 'external' traditions to other traditions that are 'internal' to the social institution from which they themselves arise.

So, if we want to come to understand the present state of the discipline of philosophy (as the particular social institution that we are trying to understand), this would entail that we would have to come to understand: a) what are the various traditions (philosophical and otherwise) that have come to shape the current state of philosophy; b) what is the inherent animating force that makes something 'philosophical' rather than 'historical,' 'psychological,' 'neurological,' etc.; what does philosophy promise to be and to do; and c) the relation of some of the non-philosophical traditions that have shaped philosophy (e.g., history, ethnography, etc.) with other traditions within their own specific disciplines (e.g., how does 'intellectual history', as it relates

to philosophy, also relate to ‘political’ history, ‘military’ history, socio-ethnographic history, etc.).

This complex interplay of traditions and promises results from the necessary interplay of facticity and transcendence at the heart of everyday life. It is because our lives are an integration of a variety of distinct social and cultural institutions that we can examine, theoretically, both the difference between the traditions and institutions that shape our current life, as well as the way those different entities are integrated together into coherent ‘wholes.’ And because phenomenology is premised precisely on the ability to distinguish between—without fully separating—the factual conditions of everyday life and the transcendentals that arise from those conditions but are not strictly confined to them, it should not be surprising that phenomenology has a central role to play in our understanding of any (and every) social and cultural institution.

The Task and Promise of Phenomenology

We come now, then, to the task of phenomenology. On this articulation, that task is to discern the second element listed above: the animating principle that makes each social or cultural institution what it is. Given the (historically, culturally, phenomenologically etc.) constituted nature of each institution, however, recovering the animating principle is not a matter of distilling ahistorical ‘essences’ or eternal ‘eidos’. Rather, the task of phenomenology is to recover the inherent *promise* operative in each institution that makes that institution what it is, and gives it a role/task alongside other institutions (which have their own inherent promises) in service of other inherent, animating promises.

When I speak of the inherent ‘promise’ I do not mean merely some content that is what the institution ‘does’ or is ‘supposed to do.’ Rather, I’m talking about the impulse or desire that

causes people in their everyday life to be drawn to that institution, to take up that institution, re-work it and keep it going into the future—to make the ‘project’ of that institution a part of the ‘project’ of their lives. The language of ‘promise’ captures the ethical, social, and group dynamics of this complex interplay between inheritance and future living: our tradition is not just something we inherit, it is something that therefore sets us up on a trajectory of what things we will value, what actions we will (or won’t) undertake, what directions we will (or won’t) pursue, etc.¹²

The phenomenologist is called to recover the promise¹³ that functions at the heart of each cultural institution, each science or discipline. That is, the task of the phenomenologist is to uncover, from within each institution, science or discipline, the aims, goals, and methods that have been inherited from its tradition and which constitute that thing, which make it what it is. In doing so, we seek not just the ‘essence’ of the thing itself, but also an understanding of the way that essence has been historically and socially constituted. The (quasi-) transcendental power of that ‘essence’—of the aims, goals and methods that make an institution or discipline what it is rather than something else—cannot be divorced from the historical and social power in which and by which it was constituted.

The first task of phenomenology, then, is to recover the aims, goals, and methods that have come to characterize a particular social and cultural institution, and to do so for each social and cultural institution. This does not elevate phenomenology to a position above the other

¹² This is true, not merely of social institutions, but of the very subjects that constitute (and are constituted by) those institutions. This is a key theme of the work of both Levinas and Derrida.

¹³ Husserl discusses this under the rubric of the ‘reactivation of sense’ in his appendix to *The Crisis*, ‘The Origin of Geometry.’ Derrida then famously takes this up in the Introduction to his French translation of that work.

sciences because phenomenology does not dictate the promises to the other sciences, but is merely tasked with helping us all recover the sense of what we're already doing, implicitly.

By making explicit what is happening implicitly in institutions, we are then able to enter what has been made explicit—the promises that function at the heart of these institutions—into the contemporary discourse. This, then, is the second phenomenological task: to evaluate these promises vis-à-vis contemporary actions, and vis-à-vis other promises we inherit from other parts of our tradition. That is, we must evaluate both “do our current actions live up to the promises that constitute this institution?” and “do we still want to live up to those particular promises, in light of ‘promises’ laid out for us elsewhere?”

Phenomenology and Interdisciplinarity

These two tasks of phenomenology—recovering the promise at the heart of a particular matter/institution and evaluating current actions in light of that promise and other promises related to it—must be carried out in an interdisciplinary fashion, because phenomenology itself is, by definition, interdisciplinary.

Phenomenological evaluations must be internal to the institution/matter under consideration if they are to be legitimate. Phenomenology cannot merely bring its own answers to the party, but rather must evaluate the actions of an institution in light of the promises that shape that institution, and it must evaluate those promises in light of other promises shaping and constituting that institution. This can only be done by taking adequate account of the institution itself, on its own terms and in how those terms are defined in relation to other terms in the broader ‘tradition’ to which that institution belongs. To say this is to say nothing else than that

phenomenology must concern itself with both the self-givenness of the thing *and* the way the thing is constituted by its position/role in the lifeworld.

These two movements—and it would be hard to find two movements more essential to the phenomenological method than givenness and constitution—are both inherently interdisciplinary, and are so because phenomenology itself is necessarily trans-disciplinary.

Let me take these claims in reverse order. When I say that phenomenology is necessarily ‘trans-disciplinary,’ I mean to say that, by its nature, phenomenology is always deployed or used in the context of another discipline. As such, it is one distinct discipline—with its own rules, aims and methods, living out its own promise and tasks—that must necessarily be used within the context of at least one other discipline.¹⁴ If phenomenology’s task is the recovery and evaluation of the promises inherent to particular institutions/disciplines/matters, then it has no choice but to be employed within a field that is somewhat foreign to itself; this employment in a field not its own is precisely the purpose of phenomenology. The very promise of phenomenology, then, is that it will be used trans-disciplinarily.

This trans-disciplinary nature of phenomenology entails that its investigations will be interdisciplinary in ways that exceed merely: “phenomenology + some field under investigation.” Because part of the phenomenological investigation is to recover the promises at work in the traditions that constitute the institution, and because those traditions are, by necessity, both internal and external to the institution under investigation (both philosophical and historical

¹⁴ This is arguable in relation to ‘phenomenology of phenomenology’ types of phenomenology. Such meta-phenomenologies might still be trans-disciplinary insofar as they are attempting to offer a phenomenology (i.e., employ a method) of a particular branch of the discipline of philosophy or the history of philosophy; they may not be trans-disciplinary if they only examine historical texts without attempting to do a genuine phenomenology of them (i.e., to employ the method)—but then it is arguable whether they are practicing phenomenology at all.

traditions shape the tradition of philosophy), every rigorous phenomenological investigation will involve input from a variety of different institutions being investigated from a variety of disciplinary angles. A true appreciation of the historical unfolding of an institution requires input from, at least, historians, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, geologists, and philosophers, in addition to whatever disciplines may have to bear on the particular institution under investigation (economists, biologists, zoologists, physicists, etc.). Recovering the promise inherent to an institution requires awareness of the multiple traditions at work in the constitution of the present condition of that institution, which in turn requires multiple disciplines to best understand those multiple traditions in their own right, and in relation to each other.

Conclusion

For these reasons, rigorous phenomenological reflection cannot help but be inter-disciplinary. An ‘inter-disciplinary coalition of phenomenologists,’ then, is precisely what should result as soon as we try to *practice* phenomenological inquiry: lived phenomenology is, by definition, interdisciplinary. And it is so because of the intertwining of facticity and transcendence at the heart of lived experience—the centrality of this intertwining to phenomenological method is the result of its centrality to lived experience. Without that intertwining, there would be no phenomenology.

By now, hopefully my main thesis can be considered adequately explained: this very conference, on this theme, is, in a certain sense, the lived response to the question “What is phenomenology?” Phenomenology is a specific (trans-disciplinary) way of investigating social and cultural institutions. It seeks to recover the animating promise inherent to a particular institution, and evaluate that promise in light of the various traditions that make up that promise and that institution. Doing so requires inter-disciplinary investigation, since every institution is

shaped by traditions that exceed its own boundaries and must be investigated from a variety of perspectives. That every institution is shaped by multiple historically-unfolding traditions is the result of the intertwining of facticity and transcendence at the heart of lived experience. As such, the relation between facticity and transcendence creates the need for phenomenological reflection, which in turn requires inter-disciplinarity in order to be properly lived out.

One last point may remain unclear, and it is from this point that I would like to wrap up this talk and so launch us into the question and answer period. This last point has to do with my claim that the language of the ‘promise’ should be central to phenomenological investigation. My reasoning for that is that using the language of the ‘promise’ to carry out these investigations helps us remember that phenomenological evaluation is first and foremost a question of trustworthiness: first, can we trust the thing to do what it says it will do, to be what it says it is; second, can we trust the thing to ‘get along’ with other promises the larger tradition has made? The question is not just whether the thing is inherently trustworthy, but also whether we can trust it as a part of something larger (the tradition, lifeworld, etc.).

This trustworthiness is itself central to the very ‘project’ of our lives (or institutions) as they unfold in and through history. The ethico-political nature of a word like ‘trustworthiness’ is then not accidental to phenomenological exploration because it is not accidental to life itself. To live is to be launched into a variety of ethico-political communities and called to take up those communities in some sense as your own and in and as your own self.

As phenomenologists, if we miss this ethico-political context—which is so much more than a content—we risk phenomenology becoming merely an academic enterprise, with no direct bearing upon life itself (as the integrated totality that is living). Purely subjective or academic phenomenology is, I would argue, not only bad phenomenology, it is bad science: it repeats the

Crisis of the (European) Sciences that Husserl railed against, and against which he sought to deploy the full breadth of phenomenological resources.

The notion of the promise reminds us that phenomenological investigation is not merely about ‘understanding’ something better, or getting a more accurate picture of ‘the ways things are’; rather, it is, first and foremost, about how we inhabit the ethical, social and cultural positions within a tradition, a tradition that shapes us as much as it is shaped by us.

Phenomenology is about life, and living. This is the promise inherent to phenomenology, which we cannot forget, if we are to be trustworthy inhabitants of this tradition.

Thank you.

Questions for Discussion period

- 1) Evaluate both: a) whether ‘the promissory discipline’ is the best internal understanding of phenomenology; and b) whether conceiving of it as such is the best way of achieving larger social/cultural goals (of living up to other promises).
- 2) Is my summary of the phenomenological method an adequate account of it? Is it accurate and will it communicate? That is, does this provide a good way of answering the question “What is Phenomenology,” and will that answer ‘play’ well to other audiences?
- 3) can we get *the* Tradition by adding together all the little traditions? Does a collection of ‘little-stories’ constitute a meta-narrative? Much of the reaction to postmodernism hangs on this question.
- 4) how do traditions ‘relate’ to other traditions? What does it mean to be ‘in relation’?