

True Beginnings: Experiential Process and Phenomenological Critique in Anthropology

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Edmund Husserl intended phenomenology to be a ‘science of true beginnings’. This sense of beginnings is not so much about temporal origins in the form of history or archaeology as it is about the human source of phenomena in themselves, as they are constituted in experience. Every time we undertake a phenomenological interrogation or project we begin again at this moment of existential beginning, penetrating to the essence of a phenomenon at its inner horizon or allowing the layers of that phenomenon to unfold to its external horizon. Every time a scholar begins thinking phenomenologically and using the method of phenomenology it is also a true beginning, not a “reinvention of the wheel” but the inauguration of a fresh perspective on the nature of human reality and the meaning of being human. Bringing a fresh perspective to phenomenological anthropology is precisely what Schnegg achieves in this article, as he explicitly acknowledges that he has only recently begun to work in this way.

In the first few lines Schnegg already previews concepts fundamental to phenomenological anthropology insofar as it defines a starting point or level of analysis and engagement: reality, how and as what things appear, the first-person perspective, experience, world. With respect to his summary of anthropology’s relationship with phenomenology over the last 75 years, Schnegg identifies more phenomenological sensibility in Geertz’s work than was recognized by most when his influence was in its prime. At that time in the 1970s and 80s, Geertz’s evocation of the experience-near in culture took a back seat to culture as public system of symbols in the same arena as Derrida’s texts, Levi-Strauss’ structures, and Foucault’s discourse. Regardless of this caveat, Schnegg’s goal is worthy of endorsement, namely to outline a phenomenological anthropology that can identify and make visible the traces of experiential processes that would otherwise be obscured, and to elaborate its critical potential for anthropology.

Schnegg introduces phenomenological method with its basic techniques of *epoché*, *free imaginative variation*, *Gelassenheit*, followed by suggestions on how to conduct phenomenological interviews. I am skeptical about the value of creating a special purpose phenomenological interview as opposed to adopting a phenomenological standpoint toward ethnographic interviews in general, but commend how Schnegg takes care to

define 'phenomenon' and practically engages a cultural phenomenology by means of concrete ethnography. Insofar as one can 'define phenomena as things as they appear in experience', I would add that a phenomenon is 'any thing, event, process, or relationship that we perceive'. Schnegg's case in point is how rain is constituted as a particular *meaningful* cultural phenomenon in the *lived bodily experience* of Damara pastoralists in Northwestern Namibia, *transformed* by context and differing from that of Schnegg as observer from a different culture. His strategy of repeatedly returning to the ethnographic situation to demonstrate the instantiation of phenomenological insight in concrete reality is a principal strength of the article.

This strategy is at its most effective in the interesting and innovative middle section of the piece, in which Schnegg outlines and ethnographically illustrates six approaches to *how* phenomena appear in experience, each identified with a specific thinker. He observes that these approaches 'partly overlap and partly contradict each other'. However, while it is the case that a phenomenological work can fruitfully begin from any of these approaches or thinkers, I would emphasize that what Schnegg achieves is to capture across this body of phenomenological work a shared level of analysis at which one can identify a constellation of complementary and intersecting dimensions of how humans constitute and engage the world of lived experience. These are what he calls of-ness, in-ness, embodied-ness, responsive-ness, between-ness, and with-ness. The suffix 'ness', like the near-ubiquitous suffix 'ality', transforms a word of whatever part of speech into an abstract noun of quality. In the present instance these qualities do not define distinct *modes* of being but *modalities* of the phenomenal world in lived experience.

What situates these modalities at a common level of analysis, and what I would add to help consolidate recognition of their complementarity, is their shared participation in another constellation of abstract nouns of quality that form an alliterative set of what I will call the five 'i's. *Immediacy* is about the here and now, presence spatially in a situation and temporally in the present moment. *Indeterminacy* refers to never completely coinciding with ourselves, but always running a bit ahead or trying to catch up from behind. *Intentionality* is the inherent tending toward the world and others that comes with being human, regardless of whether there is an explicit intention or motivation in play. *Intersubjectivity* and *intercorporeality* are not simply a fancy way to reinstate the duality of mind and body, partly because they are abstract nouns of quality rather than things or entities, and partly because the prefix 'inter' requires us to recognize the impossibility of solipsism in the human world. Taken together, these two sets of *abstract* nouns, ironically or not, contribute to defining the *concrete* nature of our human world.

Schnegg's final section takes up the idea of a 'critical phenomenology' that engages issues of politics, economics, and social justice. While this term is acceptable in a strict sense when it is a question of synthesis or dialogue between critical theory and phenomenology, in a more general sense it is redundant insofar as phenomenology is by definition inherently critical because it insistently and relentlessly calls into question ['brackets'] basic presuppositions. To be sure, phenomenology per se does not carry a political message, and it would be juvenile to imagine that reading Heidegger would

subliminally 'turn one into' a Nazi or reading Sartre would 'turn one into' a Marxist. It is also the case that a writer does not have the same purpose or audience in mind for every text: Merleau-Ponty's philosophical and political writings were distinct bodies of work, just as Fanon's clinical and political writings were distinct. For this reason, it is preferable from an anthropological standpoint to refer to 'cultural phenomenology' that can then be put at the service of phenomenological critique.

From this standpoint, what anthropology brings to the meeting with phenomenology is its concern with meaning, which is essential on three levels: the question of what it means to be human, the question of meaning as the outcome of interpretation and hermeneutic, and the meaning of any particular act or utterance. For anthropology, the meaning of being human has always been with reference to other humans in the face of our diversity and similarity, but also in recent years it has become increasingly evident that it must also be the meaning of being human in relation to other species of living beings and to the material world as such. With respect to the interpretation of cultures, meaning means a double hermeneutic of the meanings people constitute for themselves and the meanings we construct about their meanings. The meaning of a particular act or utterance situates us in the most intimate space of performative immediacy, the bodily site of meaning's generation.

Meaning, however, is abstract and alienated from the concrete if it is separated from experience, which is everything that happens to a person or people that has meaning for them. Cultural phenomenology not only brings a phenomenological sensibility and standpoint to the study of culture and cultures, but more importantly it underscores the recognition that human phenomena are always already culturally constituted. Given the many possible definitions of culture, the one I prefer is that it is everything we take for granted about the world, ourselves, and others. Bringing this taken for grantedness to light, or thematizing it, is the central movement that animates the method and allows phenomenological description to become phenomenological critique.

Phenomena, again, are whatever appears to us in the human lifeworld, from what is usually described as a 'first person' perspective – that of an I or ego as opposed to the perspective of him, her, or them. This methodological move means that our starting point, and central concern, lies in our immediate natural attitude toward the world rather than in anonymous process, natural law, institutional constraint, or social forces. Most importantly, the first person does not refer only to the anthropologist as phenomenological analyst, but to everyone else as well. From this standpoint another person is not him, her or them, but as Merleau-Ponty said, 'another myself'. To paraphrase the classic cosmological origin myth, the world is not built on elephants all the way down, or turtles all the way down, but 'I's all the way down', experience all the way down, other myselfs all the way down.

If all phenomenology entails critique insofar as it discloses the taken for granted and brackets presuppositions, and a phenomenon is any thing, event, process, or relationship that we perceive, then cultural phenomenology does not begin and end with a thick description of the anthropologist encountering their desk or picking up a utensil.

An encounter with a phenomenon takes place within two kinds of horizons that extend from the immediate to the distant spatiotemporally, and from the personal to the political with respect to relations of power and influence. Because they are all human phenomena, there can be a cultural phenomenology of race hatred and misogyny, climate change, gun violence, displacement of people as refugees, religion as practice and performance. In this respect I diverge from Schnegg's aim of reconciling first and third person perspectives, and suggest that the true challenge for phenomenological critique is to persevere in maintaining the first person perspective – that of immediacy in the lifeworld – even when addressing phenomena that appear more distant spatiotemporally and more constituted by broad relations of power and influence.

How, for example, would one develop a critique of a geopolitical phenomenon such as the current war in Ukraine (or any war, or war in general)? That which is taken for granted and presupposed in the first person perspective by those of us following the war from a distance in the media must differ dramatically from what is taken for granted by the combatants, by the civilian Ukrainians living in combat or non-combat areas within the country and those displaced internally or externally, and by political or military leaders and policy makers in Ukraine and other countries.

What would it mean to capture the first-person immediacy of this set of perspectives detached from their presuppositions? Leave aside the anonymous processes that appear to lurk behind how many tanks and howitzers are deployed in which cities, or the historical sources of Russian imperialism. Is the common thread among those perspectives perhaps a sinking feeling accompanied by the question 'how can this be possible, and how can anyone come to take this state of inhumanity for granted?'

In this potentially shared moment of indeterminacy – moral, political, existential – the phenomenon is not constituted as a flux or oscillation between anonymous macro-social processes and the immediacy of personal experience, but between the first person perspective as mine and as that of many other myselfs. Schnegg's elaboration of six modalities of how phenomena appear invites moving in this direction. His interpretation of rain in the Damara lifeworld captures the immediacy of first person experience framed by their postcolonial situation, yet it is worth pushing the point that colonialism can be construed as more than a third person quasi-anonymous contextual process, and not only a structural legacy but a legacy of lived experience. This methodological stance is at least implicit in Schnegg's thoughtful intervention into phenomenological anthropology, and it deserves further development as he pursues this line of thought.