

## WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?

Simon Glendinning

*Simon Glendinning explains the mysteries of phenomenology.*

I am surprised that this question is not more often addressed. Phenomenology was arguably *the* most influential 'movement in the stream' of philosophical thought on the European Continent during the twentieth century, and the major phenomenological philosophers are also some of *the* major usual suspects of 'continental philosophy': Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Arendt, Gadamer, de Beauvoir. Moreover, when one begins to explore what phenomenology is, one also comes to see that it simply cannot be restricted to the work pursued under that title on the European mainland, but obviously picks out what is going on in some of the very best and most influential writings of analytic philosophy as well. So it is surprising that the question does not occupy us more than it does. In what follows I aim to develop an answer to this question.

We can begin to get something like phenomenology as a movement into view by noting that what holds it together is a shared commitment to the idea of 'phenomenology' as a legitimate heir to the subject that used to be called 'philosophy'. Meagre as it is, this formulation introduces a point of first importance about phenomenology: namely, that it relates to the method and not to the matter of an investigation. It is helpful to get this point out straight away since in recent analytic philosophy *the opposite would more often be thought to be the case*. In particular, 'phenomenology' is typically understood as 'the what' that is studied or investigated in the philosophy of mind: it is 'the passing show', 'the flux of experience', 'experience as it is undergone', it is 'the what' that makes it so that there is a '*what it is like*' to subjective experience. While we will see in phenomenological philosophy a distinctive commitment to something like an 'insider standpoint', phenomenology is definitely not philosophy which has a special interest in this

conception of subjective experience. In what follows I will advance five theses which seem to me to define the distinctive methodological orientation of phenomenological philosophy.

### **Thesis One: No theses in philosophy**

While phenomenological philosophers engage in self-consciously 'theoretical' activity, this activity invariably aims to eschew the kind of constructive theoretical work one finds in the natural sciences, work of a sort which endeavours to develop a theory that explains how some phenomenon comes about or is as it is. Such constructive theorising is centrally characterised by the effort to *advance a thesis*: making use of recognised research methods and often building on the work of others, one seeks to develop a convincing rationale for a particular position on some topic (something which might then be further explored, debated and tested), a position which could be made public as the 'outcome' or 'output' of one's research activity.

Phenomenological research is of a quite different character. While it certainly looks towards the production of a work of words intended to be made public — a text prepared with others in mind — it does not set out to develop a 'thesis' on some topic or to present a 'result' at all (even one at a higher level of abstraction and generality than those normally found in the natural sciences): it does not have in view the defence of a 'position', something which could, as it were, be carried away with one, quite independently of the work of words in which such summary fragments might be formulated. What you will *not* get from writings in phenomenology is a thesis that could be extracted and presented in a student textbook or introductory essay as a specific phenomenological position on some question.

### **Thesis Two: Description, not explanation or analysis**

Forgoing theses does not mean that phenomenology cannot make use of theoretical distinctions or create its own terms or concepts. However, in phenomenology what such conceptual innovation aims at is not a work of theoretical explanation but,

essentially, an effort or activity of *elucidation*: the bringing to concepts of something we (in some way) already know, rather than the attainment of or claim to new knowledge of some phenomenon. And if new concepts and distinctions are introduced in the course of such work their significance is inseparable from the purpose of the elucidations they subserve, they are tools for the achievement not of a new theory but of lucidity, of *clarity*. What the phenomenologist aims at, then, is not a theory of this or that phenomenon — a theory which would be characterised by its distinctive positions and extractable theses — but an effort to come reflectively to terms with something that is, in some way, already 'self-evident'. It is in this sense a work of 'explication', 'elucidation', or 'description' of something we, in some way, already understand, or with which we are already, in some way, familiar but which, for some reason, we cannot get into clear focus for ourselves without more ado.

### **Thesis Three: Re-look at the world without blinkers**

Taking up a descriptive stance, what phenomenologists will criticise most continuously in philosophy as they find it are features that they regard as inherited theoretical 'prejudices', descriptive 'distortions' and 'inadequacies', everything that prevents us from 'seeing' what (by the phenomenologist's lights) is there to be 'seen'. What is needed is a reflective re-visioning which frees us for what stands before our eyes.

For example, against the staples of philosophical and psychological theorising, phenomenology has consistently demanded that we re-look at the world without blinkers, and re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world. The idea here is not that we attempt to disregard the richly contentful ways in which 'that which appears' typically appears but, on the contrary, that we give theoretically unfettered regard to those ways: for they, unlike the staples of philosophical theory, actually express what is given as it is given, as phenomena. All the phenomenologists are thus united in their total rejection of the 'sensationalist prejudice' in the philosophy of perception: the idea that the 'primary data' of perceptual experience is a meaningless throng of sensations which are subsequently

endowed with meaning by the mind. Even the most cursory reflection on what is 'in the first instance' perceived is sufficient to remind us that awareness of colours and sounds belongs to modes of perception that are 'first' perceptions of phenomena as such: what is given is, for example, the sound of drilling and hammering somewhere outside, the hiss and hum of an old gas boiler, the happy twittering of kid's TV presenters audible from the next room, a passing taxi.

#### **Thesis Four: No view from the sideways perspective**

Not surprisingly, phenomenological philosophy meets with extremely strong resistance from philosophers with what one might call a *scientific realist* outlook. Such a philosopher might accept that the phenomena are, like pre-prepared meals, typically taken in stride without more ado. But then the phenomena include, among other things, those that are (given as) funny, fantastic, furry, fat, fit, floppy, flashy, foreign, flexible, foolish, fabricated, fateful, — just to take some familiar f-words — and whatever other kind of 'colourful' human packaging one can think of. Hence, the phenomena of interest to phenomenology are simply objects and properties '*for us*' or even '*for me*', and — it will be urged — what philosophy has to consider is how such exotic phenomena relate to or are in some way set upon the non-human reality which stands at the back of or at the basis of the world of phenomena as given. Indeed, *that* issue, it might be thought, is both what really matters to philosophy and what really does not matter enough to phenomenology.

If phenomenology does not touch on these issues (directly), then that is because, without wishing to compromise or slight our existing notions of objectivity, phenomenologists of all stripes are deeply suspicious of the 'world behind the scenes' idea which informs the scientific realist's conception. However, phenomenology is not a form of philosophy which denies that the attempt to take an external or 'dehumanised' position on the phenomena — and so to see them 'from sideways on' — is humanly possible, as if it urges us to give up trying to do something we are insufficiently powerful or insufficiently clever to achieve. On the contrary, the beating heart

of phenomenology lies in an attempt to rid us of the idea that 'a view of the phenomena from sideways on' makes sense. That is, the scientific realist's idea of getting sideways on is to be abandoned, *not because it is hopeless but because it is nonsense*.

### **Thesis Five: We must go back to the 'things themselves'**

Among the complaints one often hears directed against 'continental philosophy' is the perceived lack in its exceedingly demanding prose of explicit (or clear) arguments. While I do not think that *any* of the phenomenological philosophers pursue philosophy *without* argument, it is true that there is a lot going on in their writings that is not just 'developing an argument' in the narrow sense of presenting a series of valid inferential steps from premises to conclusions. On the other hand, in another sense, I do think that their writings really are *argument all the way down* — for they are all writing with the aim of *convincing* other people — but, yes, it is not only by way of argument in the narrow sense that they proceed. The worry, of course, is that in the absence of sufficient argument in the narrow sense their contribution is of limited philosophical interest. Even if their writings are persuasive, in the absence of sufficient argument they cannot be said to offer the chance of bringing *reasonable conviction*. Consequently, many reckon such writings philosophically weak or questionable, or worse.

Socrates is often cited as a model of philosophical objectivity and integrity, famed for his willingness to '*go wherever the argument takes us*'. The phenomenological inheritance of philosophy is often thought to have departed from that main line of the 'dialogue of reason' which takes Socrates as its model. On the other hand, however, Socrates is equally famed as the gadfly who *addressed himself to others*, who talked 'philosophically' (directly) to (the) people. And, whether one cares to think about it much or not, it is clear that *who one is actually addressing* makes a huge difference to one's prospects of 'convincing by argument', particularly arguments of the sort typically found in most philosophy today. As Cora

Diamond observes in the following passage, this issue is particularly acute in relation to our moral thinking:

When we engage in philosophical discussion about such a subject as abortion, or the moral status of animals, *whom* should we think of ourselves as trying to convince? For if we proceed by giving *arguments*, we presumably do not expect to be able to convince anyone who is incapable of following our arguments, or who is too prejudiced to consider them. And if we are talking about convincing *human beings*, surely it is a fact about many of them that one certain way of *not* convincing them is to try arguing the case... No one who urges another philosopher to give arguments thinks of arguments as capable of convincing everybody. When we put forward arguments, or urge someone else to do so, we have a conception of what it would be to succeed in giving genuinely convincing arguments, and also of those who would nevertheless not be convinced, even should they attend to the arguments. Now, argument is simply one way people approach moral questions, and there are other ways of trying to convince someone of one's view of animals or foetuses or slaves or children or whatever it may be. (Cora Diamond, 'Anything but Argument?' in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 292.)

This is not an argument utterly against argument. Diamond has no intention of suggesting any impropriety in the thought that developing arguments is what '*all* [philosophers] do some or most of the time' (ibid., p 293). Indeed, as I have suggested, there are arguments in all the writings of phenomenological philosophy too. However, what Diamond wants to encourage us to acknowledge is that it is actually quite perverse to think that this is *all* that philosophers can or should do, or that this is the *only* thing that philosophers can or should do which could lead others to be '*reasonably* convinced' of something, as if giving an argument was the *only* thing which would represent

a genuinely convincing expression of a philosopher's claim on people's attention.

On this view, what is at issue for a moral philosopher is not especially a concern with the evaluation of actions, or even the solution of practical problems, but is a matter of addressing others with the aim of bringing about changes to what Iris Murdoch calls 'the texture' of someone's being: something which shows up in *all* someone's reactions and conversation — and not just in their ethical statements.

Again, this is not an invitation to abandon argument. But the idea that something that is judged to be convincing must, if one is to be reasonably convinced by it, be capable of being presented in an argument seems, well, hopelessly unreasonable. This is perhaps obviously the case when moral matters are at stake — does it need arguing that our moral sensibility can be given an unparalleled working over by works of imaginative literature? — however, if we accept that the exercise of imagination that is involved in our moral life is involved in shaping the texture of our life '*simpliciter*' (ibid. p. 312), there is an emerging plausibility to the thought of extending something of the claim more widely in philosophy: to see that what is often regarded as a *problematic* lack of argument in a work of (not-specifically-or-exclusively-moral) philosophy may, in fact, be the most philosophically convincing expression one could wish for. And phenomenological philosophy cleaves to that assumption. Something else, something in addition to argument, is needed if we are to turn ourselves round and get ourselves *back in philosophy* to an understanding of the phenomena uncontaminated by theoretical prejudices, prejudices about, for example, the primary data of perception.

How each of the major phenomenological philosophers attempts to loosen the grip of scientific realism on our thinking resides in the particular and sometimes strikingly novel ways they put words to work in their work. And we should not expect that a talent for phenomenology will belong to everyone equally or that all who do attempt to pursue it will respond to philosophical questions in the same way or a (judged to be)

especially convincing way. Still, it seems to me that something Husserl articulated as his shorthand for the 'principle of principles' of phenomenology struck a chord with many thinkers who felt out of tune with the dominant scientific spirit of our time: namely, his 'thesis' that going *on* in philosophy requires that one 'go back to "things themselves"'.

When Husserl wrote this in 1900 the shift *back* was essentially a shift *against* the then-dominant school of philosophy in Germany, whose slogan was 'Back to Kant'. What Husserl had in mind with his alternative rallying-call was not a kind of thinking which would concern itself with (obviously very Kantian) things-of-which-we-have-no-experience but, precisely 'intuitions' of phenomena that can in some way be imaginatively or directly presented to us. Unfortunately, at the back of the Husserlian understanding of this shift back there is an unexamined theory of meaning that few readers of phenomenology today can be entirely comfortable with. But something of his call remains everywhere in the work of those who follow him: it is there in the effort to get rid of distorting presuppositions and assumptions not simply by argument — and not by writing a novel or a poem either — but by way of descriptions which offer some other kind of *in their way* (aiming to be) convincing appeal to people's attention, through writing whose distinctive discipline resides in its capacity to bring people back to what they already know, to turn people round so that they can see what (by the phenomenologist's lights) we typically find it hard to see.

It should now be clearer why phenomenological texts are so distinctive and also so demanding for their readers. For they are works of words whose capacity to work as philosophy is inseparable from their capacity to involve their reader's capacity to acknowledge the matter for thinking 'itself' for themselves. And specifically, since what is at issue is essentially an effort at self-explication, and hence an inquiry in which one is oneself (called) in(to) question, their work demands the involvement of their reader's capacity to bring imagination to bear with respect to whatever they are reading about, and also their capacity to recognise that that has been done in its writing. It



is a work of words that strives, then, not for new knowledge but your acknowledgement. Indeed, what characterises a phenomenological investigation is the development of a work of convincing descriptive words which, in an age dominated by science, aims to cultivate and develop your capacity faithfully to retrieve (for) yourself (as from the inside) a radically re-vis(ion)ed understanding of yourself and of your place in the world with others.

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