

The Art of Phenomenology

Manu Bazzano

"Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism" (Merleau-Ponty)

Who is the other?

Each one of us has a beating heart. And each one of us will die one day. On hearing this, what is your response?

One way of responding to the question is to attend more fully to what we are doing: by being attentive, for example when listening to another. Is this an *obligation*? In a way it is, but one that is not necessarily dictated by a religious code, a moral 'categorical' imperative, or by utilitarian motives. It may simply be an adequate response to the presence of the other. By paying attention to the phenomenal world, we observe and become aware of our own thoughts, of voices and sounds in the street. I notice the presence of another and this relating prompts me to respond more fully.

Being with another: being present. Allowing myself to be seen. Tuning in to the other's presence. What is her/his unspoken request? I cultivate spaciousness in my heart/mind so as to make room for the presence of another human being.

Not-knowing is the most intimate

Who is the other? A possible answer is 'I don't know'. But is this the rational, Socratic not-knowing or the kind we find, for instance, in Zen? There is a difference between these two: rational 'not-knowing' can be simply used as a clever way designed to pre-empt any criticism from an interlocutor. It also betrays an implicit reverence for knowledge. There is another form of not-knowing, condensed in a famous Zen dialogue:

The teacher asks a monk: "Where do you come from?"

The monk replies: "From a pilgrimage"

The teacher asks: "What is the meaning of 'pilgrimage'?"

The monk replies: "I don't know"

The teacher replies: "Not-knowing is the most intimate"

Suspension of Judgment

Not-knowing is the most intimate. Of course one could say that we arrive at this kind of not-knowing only after having travelled far and wide, exhausted all possibilities, left no stone unturned. But perhaps we can also get there by practicing the phenomenological discipline of *epoché*, variously translated as suspension of judgment, reduction, as well as bracketing. *Epoché* has a long history. The first thinkers to use the term were the Pyrrhonists, and Sextus Empiricus in particular. They were students of Pyrrho, a Greek philosopher who lived from 360 BC until around 270 BC. Pyrrho accompanied Alexander the Great on his voyage to India. There he met some “naked wise men” (*gymnosophistai*), his philosophy developed as a result of this meeting¹. It is very likely that the ‘naked wise men’ belonged to the Buddhist school *Madhyamaka*, for the two philosophies strongly resemble each other. Pyrrho was a radical skeptic. *Epoché*, the practice of phenomenological reduction, is an attempt to access things as they are, by putting aside assumptions, prejudices, and any notion that might get in the way of direct experience. Of course it is only by trying to practice *epoché* that we realize how truly difficult is to suspend our judgment entirely. Nevertheless, the practice is useful in all areas of life. How can we practice *epoché* or bracketing? Is there a method, a technique, a way of cultivating it, a way of being in the world that can facilitate this aspiration towards openness and more genuine experience? That answer is: meditation.

Nothing Special

Listening to sounds in the room, in the street, in the sky above, I perceive myself as embedded in this vast phenomenal world, as part of this very moment as it unfolds: a multifaceted, rich and complex totality; even to call it “the present moment” seems inadequate. I feel perplexed, and unable to come up with any satisfactory explanation of it. I decide to introduce a question that reflects and highlights my perplexity. The question is simple: “What is this?” This: not the single phenomenon. Not the car engine in the street, the birdsong, or this rumble high above (a thunder? A plane?) or the passing thought that I mustn’t forget to phone a friend later ... This addresses the totality of the experience as it unfolds. Being alive right now is as puzzling, as astonishing, and as unlikely as any mystery ever contemplated by the human mind. An experience I habitually take for

¹ Kuzminski, A. (2008) *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*. MD: Lexington Books,

granted, discard, look at with boredom and all too often fail to appreciate. I ask the question wholeheartedly, and I wait in the silence that follows. "Answers" of all sorts do come up, but they are all unsatisfactory. Instead of appeasing my perplexity, the question deepens it; for an instant I perceive the unfathomable nature of *this*.

What is Phenomenology?

In 1945 Merleau-Ponty asked "What is phenomenology?" - a question already formulated by Husserl 50 years before. In responding to that question, he challenged the way we think about the body, sexuality, meaning, sensation and perception. In suggesting the notion of *embodiment*, he perceived the human body in the world as the heart in the organism: an idea that is even more urgent today, in the world of virtual reality and high speed information technology. Similarly Nishida, a practitioner of Zen Buddhism and a phenomenologist influenced by Husserl, wrote: "I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience" ²

One way to think of phenomenology is a way to re-learn how we look at the world. We start by observing the self, then seeing how we relate to others and finally getting a sense of our worldview. The more we do this, the more there is a chance of a confluence of self/world/other in ways that can enhance our appreciation and understanding of life.

The Art of Phenomenology a one-day seminar facilitated by Manu Bazzano

Saturday 18th February 2012 10am-4pm at the Albany Centre, 4 Victoria Street St Albans AL1 3JD www.thealbanycentre.com Cost £65 incl. VAT call 01727 834910 for more details

The above is an introduction to a six week post-graduate course starting in March 2012 dates tbc

² Nishida, K. (1990) *An Inquiry into the Good* Yale University Press

