

# PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is the philosophy of perception. An individual sees the world from within her own being, with her own two eyes and with her five other senses, all filtered through her brain and mind. As Merleau-Ponty points out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, however, sensation is not perception, nor is experience nor memory perception. And it is with perception and the link between the individual and the social that I am concerned here.

## Phenomenology of perception – a project

I do not intend to spend too long on my thinking or interest in phenomenology at this stage. I will do that at the very end of this document. First I will consider the philosophy of phenomenology. Whether you should consider following my path into a consideration of the wider use of phenomenology might be answered by considering the following extract of conversation and deciding for yourself whether or not it seems familiar from one or more incidents in your own life:

'What colour do you think that is?' she asked, holding out the sleeve of a jacket.  
'Blue,' I answer, tilting my head, 'but at that turquoise end of blue – but a dark turquoise, if you see what I mean.'  
'No, you're wrong,' she answered without a heartbeat's pause, 'it's green.'  
Breathe in deeply a couple of times and then ask calmly: 'What do you mean "I'm wrong"? All I said was "it looks blue to me". How can I be wrong if I think it looks blue.'  
'Because it's green,' she answers without looking up.  
'But that means it looks green to you, whereas it looks blue – albeit with a bit of green – to me.'  
'No, it's definitely green.'  
Drop it. Don't carry on anymore. Accept that your worldview is coloured differently in some minute details from other people's.

Now, a number of things appear to me out of this little vignette – it's something which has happened to me in varying forms, although often about colour, with a number of different people over the years. The first thing is that it shows me that perception of colour is something which could – at the edges – be different to different people: what I might consider to be blue might be green to someone else. The second thing is that it is very surprising to me that perfectly lovely people, as well as dreadful people, find it so difficult to accept the notion *instinctively*, without needing to have it brought to their conscious attention, that other people might perceive things differently from them in a range of different arenas. The third thing is that the original question could only have arisen if there was some initial doubt as to the colour of the garment: had it been obviously totally blue or totally green, then the question would not have come up at all. The fourth thing is the only galling one: how on earth can I be *wrong* because I see

something differently from someone else? Why am I not just of a different view, always assuming there is nothing irrational nor any lack of knowledge of observable facts necessary to form my view?

The fifth thing is that I misquote myself when I claim that I said originally “All I said was it looks blue to me”: because of course what I actually said was “it’s blue”. But as soon as this discussion arises I either feel defensive and so qualify in my own mind what I said originally so as not to seem as doctrinaire as I am about to criticise my companion for being, or else because I feel deep inside myself that I always consider matters of perception to be capable of different understanding by different people of necessity and therefore that the qualification was implied in my own understanding of my answer.

The most important point, however, is that it demonstrates to me not only that people can perceive things differently but also that they can instinctively and automatically defend their view of the blueness or the greenness of an object because that is how it seems to them and therefore they have no active sense which can perceive it in any other way – albeit their intellect might assimilate information indirectly that others seem to see it differently. The difference in perception might be due to some minor difference in wiring between the two people’s brains (maybe the faculty of sight is different making colours seem different as though seen through a lightly coloured lens), or perhaps it is the expression of what is seen that makes us *say* we see a difference even though inside our brains we perceive the same colour but then verbalise it differently, or perhaps hearing someone say “blue” triggers some automatic response which makes us think harder about the greenness of the object and so come to favour that explanation.

What is notable is that there is no particular rancour in this discussion nor is the issue an important one. But if there can be such differences in perception over the minutiae of life, how does that add up to a difference in perception about such a large number of minor or major factors that we come to think of the world entirely differently? How does this result in entirely different worldviews? How should we think philosophically about perception and about phenomenology as adding up to attitudes about social institutions?

*From the file titled “My socialism” elsewhere on this site...*

My socialism, as opposed to being merely a cuddly affection for human rights, is based on the idea that our principal obligations are moral obligations to other people. Whereas our perception of the world is from the inside of our own heads – so that it is easy to think of the world solely in terms of our own survival and our own desires – it is important to see that our perception is located in a world full of other people. Significantly, being located in the world means that from the moment we are born the world and all of the people in it have been there before us: we land in an already existing world. Once we arrive we are entirely dependent on other people – we take language from those other people, we are weaned by those other people, we develop as people in reaction to other people. So, my socialism is built of this

necessary connection of individuals into society: see Norbert Elias in *The Society of Individuals*.

For my understanding of phenomenology it is always important to remember that we are necessarily linked to other people. While it may seem to us that we are subjectively insulated from the outside world – because no-one can read our minds, that our thoughts are private, that our dreams are private – we may lapse into the assumption that we are unconnected to other people. However, we are linked to other minds – other minds do influence our minds profoundly. The faculty of language shapes how we think about the world, our rhythms of speech (which were absorbed from other people) are central to how our mind deals with the world. Think about how immediately and instinctively you take into your own mind things which are written in a language you understand (on a web-site, on posters, on television) compared to how alien are ideas expressed in another language and especially in another alphabet (Russian perhaps, or Arabic, or Hebrew, depending on your heritage). If those words in your language can penetrate immediately into your mind and summon up immediate mental pictures (or how else would novels or advertising or newspapers have any effect on you) then think how much your mind has been shaped by those ideas. And that's only the start. Your family, your schooling, your friends, the TV you watch, the films you watch, the music you listen to, the adverts which are beamed at you from everywhere in your world, the other adverts which are beamed at you from everywhere in your world, the clothes you see other people wearing, etc., etc., all are leeching into your mind to a lesser or greater extent.

You are not separate from the world – you are in it. Even though it seems to you that you are separate from it because no-one can read your mind, nevertheless it is possible to guess from your surroundings and lifeworld what thoughts are probably in your mind. So, when we think about how minds perceive the world we must recognise that those minds are private but that they are situated in the world. And more than that, within that privately-situated mind are impulses, ideas and instincts which have been absorbed from the world outside so as to have become part of the composition of that particular mind. Those instincts are found in lots of other minds, but they only feel like they are yours alone because your mind makes you feel that you are experiencing them uniquely and separately.

## **Phenomenology**

As Husserl said:

‘If walking begins, all worldly things therefore continue to appear to me to be orientated about my phenomenally stationary, resting organism. That is, they are orientated with respect to here and there, left and right, etc., whereby a firm zero of orientation persists, so to speak, as absolute here.’

## **Perception**

As Merleau-Ponty points out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, sensation is not perception, nor is experience nor memory perception. As he put it:

‘We commit what psychologists call the “experience error”, which means that what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world. If we did we should see that the quality is never experienced immediately, and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Nor is this “something” necessarily an identifiable object.’ [p.5]

### **Phenomenology and our understanding of the self**

So let us restate our assumptions.

The inter-action between “I” and “we” must be understood.

I inhabit my own mind but many of the things in my mind may have come from external inputs which are common to all people. I am a chemistry set and therefore I have my basic chemistry in common with all other people. Inhabiting my self, however, leads me to believe that all that I see is unique to me. One form of life project (in a post-scarcity society) might be to find other people with whom I can have a sense of connecting with other people those sensations which seem to me to be unique to me. So perhaps we seek a mate who is in some indefinable way compatible with our unconscious or conscious understanding of the world, or else we cherish friends with whom we feel some connection of an indefinable quality or of a quality forged in some common life experience.

The mind seeks to connect with and to understand the world outside itself. The eyes take in far more than the brain ever brings to the conscious mind. So the mind-brain is always filtering and interpreting the world through the immediate experiencing of it through the five senses and through the longer term processes of memory, emotion and so forth. The world “out-there” becomes [, or is experienced as,] the world as understood “in-here” by the mind-brain.

The human being is embodied and hence fragile, even though the sense of self appears to the individual to transcend the corporeal (except during times of illness and pain). We must ingest, digest and excrete just to survive. Our selves are therefore dependent on this absurd cycle.

I am because I think.

What makes me human is difficult to describe. It is said by some that it is language which makes humans unique. This ignores the fact that other animals are able to communicate with one another in ways necessary to their survival by communicating warnings of impending danger, the need for food in an infant and so forth. Human speech, however, is much more complex than animal cries or birdsong or even the subtle communication which is effected by scent and so forth. The very fact that you are reading these words which I have written on a sophisticated word processor indicates that there is something different about the means by which I communicate from the ways in which animals communicate. However, when we try to define the unique features of human communication in the abstract it is necessary to reach into layers of specificity before the differences become clear because all animals communicate pain, need, fear, hostility and so forth in some way. Alternatively, it is said that what is unique about humans is that they feel compassion for other animals. However, in watching any wild bird mourn the loss of its partner we can see something akin to compassion. In domesticated dogs there is clearly distress when harm is caused to one of the humans with whom it lives. We can distinguish both of these cases on the basis that the bird or the dog is doing something qualitatively different from a human being. This is the key again: in the abstract – in relation just to the two examples taken thus far of communicating or feeling compassion – animals perform actions broadly equivalent to human beings and therefore we cannot say that human beings do something unique which is not done by other species. Rather it is something *qualitative* about the way in which these things are done which marks out the human being. What makes me most human is probably simply the fact that I am human – there is something innate in this species which makes it different from other species although that is difficult to define in the abstract.

Qualitative difference is important. If we suggested that the human being is unique for using found objects in the world around her to fashion new objects, then we could point to birds who fashion nests from found material or to monkeys who use rocks to smash open nuts. The qualitative difference is that human beings have built power stations to burn found materials like coal and motor cars to burn found material like oil in a way that is totally unlike any other animal. If we suggested that human beings were unique for having a mind then we would need to explain what is meant by the term “mind” and how it differs from a mere brain, and then we would need to acknowledge that we do not know what mental activity is being carried on by the blackbird which sits in my garden with its eyes fixed upon nothing staring into the near distance, nor do we know what my mother’s dog is dreaming about when he lies asleep on the hearth rug kicking his hind legs and growling. The difference between humans and other animals here is qualitative: it is unlikely that non-human animals are considering the works of Immanuel Kant or are deciding what to cook for supper or are imagining a love affair in a far-off land.

What is distinct about humans is that they are human and different in the ways that humans are different from other animals. No other animal has covered so much of the world in concrete nor found time to worry about the precious things about which humans worry nor to invent the things which humans have invented. Humans are different not just because of the fact of their big brains but rather because of what goes on inside those big brains.

The meaning of life is probably the purpose of life. Or rather the meaning of life might rest in each individual finding a purpose for her own life because there does not appear to be such a purpose or meaning imposed a priori. The purpose of life might be to understand the world and one's own life. The only thing which could possibly be consoling at the time of death would be a sense that one had settled one's account with the world and understood both one's own world and one's place within it.

In evolutionary terms, the [better educated] the individual the more aware of the needs of other people. Thus arbitrary cruelty towards animals, for example, may be expected from a peasant class who are careless of the pain suffered by animals almost, perhaps, as a result of their physical proximity to the harsh, speechless life of animals. Subsistence living induces a mindset very different from those who live in post-scarcity societies and who are able to focus on their own comfort, their own patterns of consumption and their own life projects.

### **Phenomenology of equity**

*[to come ...]*