

Phenomenology and Existentialism

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM

THERE are so many valuable things in Professor Spiegelberg's account of the relationships between phenomenology and existentialism and so many things with which I agree that it may seem contentious to add that perhaps in the end I do not agree at all. Professor Spiegelberg has argued in effect that existentialism and phenomenology do not represent alternatives; existentialism should rather be looked upon as supplying in its own careless way certain themes which Husserl caught glimpses of toward the end of his life: the *Lebenswelt*, and the structures of human existence in that world. Now all that remains is to discipline existentialism, urge it to concern itself more with epistemology, clean itself up with more caution and probity, not publish so many of its bright ideas, and in general let itself be domesticated into the sobrieties of Husserl's *Strenge Wissenschaft*. Meanwhile, phenomenology, for its part, must be careful in handling these new themes to avoid contamination from what Professor Spiegelberg judges to be a "mess of existentialist pottage." The ideal result would be a phenomenological existentialism, with phenomenology keeping the whip-hand.

Now as Professor Spiegelberg makes clear, he is talking about *contemporary* existentialism, that is to say, the ideal intentions in back of the work of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. It is this contemporary existentialism which he would like to clean up into a disciplined phenomenology. He has listed some central contentions of phenomenology and of existentialism, and then tried to show that there is no incompatibility in principle; on the other hand, my own conviction is that the two movements are *incompatible*, and can be shown to be so even from Professor Spiegelberg's final list. Professor Spiegelberg finds contemporary existentialism *almost* phenomenological but not quite, and would like it to fertilize phenomenology with its themes, learning discipline meanwhile. I agree that contemporary existentialism is not quite phenomenology; but where I differ, I suppose, with Professor Spiegelberg is in his wishing to push it toward a more disciplined phenomenology. My own view is that contemporary existentialism is a mish-mash of phenomenology and an older and more authentic existentialism represented by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The degree to which contemporary existentialism is pushed toward phenomenology is the degree to which it has utterly forgotten its own original intentions. Hence we agree in thinking contemporary existentialism is a half-way house; Professor Spiegelberg wishes it to go toward phenomenology, I wish it to go toward what I regard as its roots, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, by purging itself of all

aspirations toward being a phenomenology of human existence. And I should like to add in passing that in my opinion the contemporary thinker who has remained closest to these original roots is a thinker who had the smallest role in Professor Spiegelberg's account, Karl Jaspers, who is neither a phenomenologist nor an existentialist in the style of Heidegger or Sartre.

I should now like to substantiate these contentions by some comments on the existential-phenomenological marriage contract, drawn up by Professor Spiegelberg. First, he says, it is false to oppose the two on the grounds that phenomenology is rationalistic whereas existentialism is irrationalistic: phenomenology need not "reject the insights based upon non-theoretical, notably emotive phenomena," so phenomenology need have no opposition to emotion; whereas, for its part, existentialism need not shy away from phenomenology, since "thought is an essential feature of Heidegger's philosophizing," and the Cartesian *cogito* is stressed by Sartre. To the contrary, it seems to me apparent that there is a radical opposition precisely here on the roles of passion and thought; I grant that the issues are smudged in Sartre and Heidegger, but they are not in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For phenomenology, emotions can only be a subject-matter for a non-emotional, transcendental analysis. To *live* the passions is to relapse into the natural standpoint; the light of truth is to be had only when the intentionalities which animate the passions are de-activated in order to activate that reflection *upon them* which at last is to see their true structure. The phenomenological standpoint is most definitely not itself a passion; it aims at an ultimate clarity about the naive lived experience of consciousness with its beliefs, passions, and assumptions. It aims, in short, at absolute intuitive truth about lived experience and its world; and that ultimate intuitive truth is not itself the intensification of any passion but rather a reduction to rational intuition. Its presiding aim is clarity. Now the presiding aim of the older existentialists, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, could hardly be called intuitive clarity, or truth *in any sense* acceptable to Husserl. For Kierkegaard, objective truth was existentially irrelevant, and for Nietzsche truth is an edifying name for what are really vital lies. Against reason, objective truth, philosophy, and science they upheld *existence itself*, passion, decision, life, vitality, and self-affirmation which they identified with human existence. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche commented upon the sickness of reflection: to think was to retreat from the passion of existence with its existential problems, i.e., *decisions*, into the sphere of what in principle is an endless debate of reason with itself; the problem of man is not to think *about* existence but rather, *thinkingly, to exist*, and we do not exist insofar as we reflect but rather

insofar as we live passionately. Subjective existence for Kierkegaard was passion, and for Nietzsche it was that exuberant self-affirmation which he called the will-to-power. Hence Kierkegaard's contempt for men who substituted theology for belief; and Nietzsche's contempt for the "scholar," invariably a pitiful figure in his pages, pale, confused with too much reading, his mind a waste-basket filled with scraps of two thousand years of thinking, incapable of action, and discharging his resentment by showing the "mistakes" of Alexander and Napoleon in his classroom. Opposed to this thinking *about* existence was a thinking existence, a lucidity which was itself engaged in the risks and problems of existence and had *no* superior standpoint from which life was intuitively clear. Kierkegaard's hero was not the theologian or philosopher but rather Abraham, whose faith passed all reason, was inexplicable, unique, and absurd. For Nietzsche, also, the hero was not a philosopher in the old style but a yea-sayer, and the problem of life was not solved by achieving a correct theory of it, but in living it, that is, in finally achieving the inner health which could affirm everything: guilt, crime, death, and, hardest of all, joy. It culminates in *amor fati*, which is not a *theoretical* view that "everything is necessary" in the manner of LaPlace, but an affirmation pushed to *love* of what is. The love of fate, of what must be, of what one is, is therefore an existential attitude, and not a suspension of passion and love in favor of an insight into their structures. If Superman, then, is not a super-phenomenologist, and Abraham not a rational theologian, the question remains whether their existences can be themes for a phenomenological reduction to intuitive clarity. I shall return to this point later on; but, for the moment, I wish to express doubts about the first clause of Professor Spiegelberg's marriage contract. Thought about passion and passionate thinking are not the same; the older existentialists argued for passionate thinking and existence; Husserl's phenomenology suspends these intentionalities which are then regarded as naive, in favor of a transcendental clarification of their structures; the contemporary existentialists are muddled precisely in their wish to do both, to be phenomenologists but of human existence in its most authentic moods; I find them, therefore, hanging like Mahomet's coffin between heaven and earth.

An analogous comment could be made about the second clause. Existentialism is concerned with human existence in the world; and, argues Professor Spiegelberg, this too can be absorbed by a sufficiently enlarged phenomenology; for human existence in the world must have its structure or essence, and thereby it offers itself to phenomenological inspection. And so say Heidegger and Sartre; but is it so? Professor Spiegelberg adds that being in the world

can be described like any other reduced phenomenon, and that Heidegger has already grasped it in his phrase, "the essence of *Dasein* is existence." With this step we move to a second problem, a problem I believe of a more radical character, namely, whether human existence is *susceptible* of phenomenological reduction; in short, whether, as Professor Spiegelberg says, following Heidegger and Sartre, human existence *can* be described like any other reduced phenomenon. I shall now argue that human existence cannot be described like any other reduced phenomenon, is insusceptible to phenomenological intuition, and remains therefore a black cloud in the clear heavens of phenomenology. First of all, we might notice that Heidegger's phrase that "the essence of *Dasein* is existence" is of course quite true; that's just what *Dasein* means. But having said this, it is *quite another matter* whether the essence of *man* is *Dasein*; and so equally with Sartre's formulations in terms of *pour-soi* and *en-soi*; we can certainly grant that *pour-soi* has the structure and destiny Sartre sees in it; but am I *pour-soi*? My contention here is that neither Heidegger nor Sartre exhibited the essence of man, that there is no such essence, and that their work should rather be interpreted as the analysis of two *possibilities* open to man. Heideggerian man is *one* structural possibility open to our choice; it is *not* our essence and *we lie under no essential necessity to live up to it*. I should now like to support this contention that man has no essence, and that as a consequence there can be no phenomenological investigation of it, by considering Heidegger's analysis as a sample. Analogous considerations would be true of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. In Heidegger, the first thing to be noticed is that the phenomenology given in *Sein und Zeit* is controlled *in the view of the author* by another consideration, namely, the question *What is Being?* Hence the philosophical anthropology developed is not an independent investigation but is presented as a propaedeutic to an ontological investigation, which moreover, as we all know, has never appeared. Thus the anthropology is not initially presented as exhaustive; it is rather those considerations of human being *relevant to the question of Being itself*. Consequently there is some justification in *Sein und Zeit* for the rather rapid identification of man with something called *Dasein*, an identification which otherwise would appear profoundly questionable. Secondly, it is clearly *inadequate* to argue that man *is Dasein* on the grounds that men do indeed exist, or that they have existence. For men have many attributes besides existence or *Dasein*; but for any such objective attribute to be relevant, it must be shown not merely that men, for example, exist but that existence is *essential*, that is, that existence is their nature. But, still following existential arguments, it is also granted to be the case that what is essential to men and

what is essential in human life is *its goal*, or its *Entwurf, projet*. Since, then, men are also granted by the existentialists to be free precisely at this point, in the ultimate decisions and choices which constitute their goals, and in the light of which the rest of their lives take on significance or insignificance, it follows that we are, as free beings, free precisely to give significance or insignificance to existence itself as well as any other attribute. Free man gives himself his own significance and essence. Hence existence, *Dasein*, or *Existenz* is not *the* structural essence of human being, but simply one possible feature which we may *choose* to make essential or inessential. Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, then, is the analysis of that human life which chooses to make existence essential; *and that is all*. Consequently *Sein und Zeit* is not a phenomenological anthropology, but rather the structure of a very particular and distinctive choice. As such it is an analysis in depth of one possibility; but the analysis of a possibility in life is not the science of man, nor does it offer anything but a single choice which we are free to make or not. We then remain free in our own subjectivity to become Heidegger's man or not; there is no fatality hanging over us in this regard. For example, insofar as a man is a mathematician, it is still true that he exists for so long as he does; but his central intentions, *qua* mathematician, are directed to a non-existential and ideal realm of objects. Similarly, the stoic who repeats the ancient argument "death is nothing, for while I am death is not, and when death is, I am not"—such a choice of significances reduces existence and non-existence from the status of the essential to the irrelevant. Now, as we know, Heidegger has considered these alternatives to man as *Dasein*, and his judgment is that these others are inauthentic; but the category of the authentic and inauthentic only returns us to our own freedom. If we are free, as the existentialists assert, and I certainly agree, then indeed we are free to make *anything we choose* authentic or essential; which means, as far as I can see, that there can be no essential *doctrine* of which among the infinite possibilities open to us is *really* our essential or authentic nature. And with this meaning given to Heideggerian or Sartrean man, we are returned to ourselves, concrete man, the being which in its freedom can dispose of its life as *it decides*, can create whatever meaning it wishes, and is not encapsulated within any phenomenological structure whatsoever.

Another consideration which, while not decisive, still, I believe, carries some weight, emerges from the comparison of Heideggerian man with Sartrean man and the other images which emerge from Binswanger and Merleau-Ponty. The strict science of phenomenology, which should reduce man and his essence to description, ends up with rather divergent images. For Heidegger, man is dropped

into a world which is meaningless in itself, and falls toward his own future extinction; he comes from nothing into nothing and is falling toward nothingness. For Sartre on the other hand, *pour-soi* is thrown up by a metaphysical event which is inexplicable in order to ground the *en-soi*, which otherwise is groundless and gratuitous; but the dominating feature of his analysis is not death but rather the absence of God, God representing an impossible synthesis of the *pour-soi* and *en-soi*. Now these two images, particularly when bodied out with their respective details, are, in spite of occasional similarities of phrase, rather different, and while diversity of doctrine is no argument against doctrine as such, I think in the present case it is not difficult to see the *origin* of these divergent analyses of human life. Both in fact present suspicious likenesses to their authors. I should say that *Sein und Zeit* as well as *L'être et le néant*, far from being phenomenologies of the human essence, are in fact ontological confessions by their authors. They are not, if properly understood, doctrines of the human essence, but rather analyses in depth of the choices made by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. I should like to add that this is most certainly not what Heidegger and Sartre suppose themselves to be doing; but I am arguing that not merely is it what they *are* doing, but what they *must* do; and in a moment I shall give some reasons for believing that far from destroying their value, this interpretation of their work as autobiographical endows it with a greater significance.

My second contention, then, is that if man in his core is free and has creativity in his being as the existentialists say, then there can be *no* phenomenology of it, that is, we cannot hope to imprison that free creativity within a phenomenological essence or structure. But, it will be argued, have you not already done so? You have simply substituted one essence for another; if it is meaningful to attribute "freedom" to man, then *that* freedom constitutes his essence, and we are back again amongst the essences. But I believe this is entirely mistaken. If freedom and creativity are to retain their senses, we cannot surreptitiously proceed to give them some determinate essential meaning. Our entire intuition of freedom and creativity is exhausted in negation; freedom is what is *not* determined, and creativity is what is not merely its own conditions and causes; now to pretend that in these negations we have seized the essences of freedom and creativity is to be misled by words. To say man is free is to say that there is in man that which is *not a determinate essence* or nature or character from which consequences must follow as heat from a flame. To suppose that there can be a significant *phenomenology of freedom and creativity* is comparable to supposing that by staring into the word "discovery" one can discover the cause of cancer, or that one can create a new work by

knowing the meaning of "creation." Freedom is precisely, in contrast to finite determinate essences, that Nothingness which Sartre found it to be; but if that is true, there can then be no phenomenology of Nothingness. Hence Sartre's confusion. There *can* be phenomenological descriptions of determinate choices made by a particular individual free man; but that would simply be an analysis of one possibility open to freedom, and *that* is what I claim Sartre and Heidegger have done. Their work is ontological autobiography.

And therefore, some will suppose, of no philosophical value. My third comment then will focus on the value which ontological autobiography might have under the assumption that such autobiography is not the phenomenology of the human essence, but rather the analysis of one single man's choice. If, as philosophers, we are interested in a conscious encounter of Being in its ultimate and deepest form, we must certainly turn away from the universal toward the individual and the concrete. For all their profound differences, Hegel and Kierkegaard both contended that Western philosophy was vitiated with the universal, with categories which were valid of everything and for everybody; with Being *qua* being, or the One, or the Good, or more physically with spatiality and temporality. But the universal, the common, that which is true of everything and for every rational mind in its pure rationality is precisely that which is thinnest, has least determination, which is least evolved, least developed, which is merely the potentiality for something concrete. For Hegel the Being which is the eternal common ground of everything is as good as non-being. And, in contrast, what is *interesting* both existentially and ontologically in any man and his spirit is certainly not "humanity," nor what he shares with every other man, let alone with every other possible thing; nor is it his eternal essence, nor anything but what is *uniquely his*, his own unrepeatable, individual, fragile, and poignant life. And so with all the *expressions* of the human spirit; what is of value in *The Brothers Karamazov* is not what it shares with the *Mill on the Floss*, but what is uniquely its own utterance. A good share of what has been called the "dreariness" of esthetics results from its misguided effort to find not merely what is common to all works of literature, but common to literature, music, painting, dancing, landscape gardening, and no doubt finally cooking. And what emerges is something very common indeed. Similarly in human history; can one possibly begin to comprehend it from the standpoint of what every event has in common with every other event, perhaps *The Essential Historical Event*, along with its laws and principles? Isn't the universal essence here precisely what we are *not* interested in? For the universal can very well take care of

itself, and since it is embodied in any event, any man, any work of art, any human expression, we have need of only *one* such instance; the remainder of the human scene becomes idle. If there *were* a universal human phenomenological essence, expressed in the phrase "The Essence of *Dasein* is Existence," then would not those of us who are still alive be dispensed from the task of living? What would our individual lives be but an accidental embroidery upon such an essence?

The first result of trying to universalize the historically unique, then, is that Heidegger and Sartre and all those who are engaged upon similar projects fall into contradiction. Heidegger, for example, regards the Anyone, *Das Man*, as the inauthentic, the impersonal, the real fall and degeneration of *Dasein*; nevertheless, *he* speaks of authentic *Dasein* impersonally, never for an instant saying "I," Martin Heidegger, but invariably *Dasein*, any *Dasein*, in fact, the same Anyone he considers inauthentic. If he is to escape from the anonymity and impersonality of *Das Man*, he can hardly do it by the equally impersonal *Dasein*, nor can he add that *Dasein* when *eigentlich* is personal, since all these terms form merely a new set of impersonal categories. He can escape only by saying "I"; and then he would be expressing that ontological autobiography I mentioned earlier.

If the deepest and most profound encounter with Being is an encounter with a unique, historical, unrepeatable human spirit, then we must *abandon* any effort to develop a dogmatic science or phenomenology of man, an essence which would cover everybody, every life, every act, and *recover* what Kierkegaard and Nietzsche urged, namely, communication not in the form of science, but in the form of *dialogue*. For *universalistic* philosophizing, dialogue is a second-best form of communication, which we resort to either because we wish to give the appearance of courtesy, or realize that no one is willing to put up with an endless monologue, or because we run out of breath and can't avoid an interruption. Or because we wish to *persuade* another to the truth which we suppose is in our possession. But persuasion here is the intention to *prove* a truth to the other, to *refute* his errors, and establish *the correct doctrine in a universal agreement*. Universalistic philosophy, of which phenomenology is a branch, aims at expressing a common true doctrine and the sole function of the *persons* of the dialogue is agreement or disagreement, that is, they must bring themselves into alignment with an objective and eternal truth. But, in contrast to this notion, there is *genuine* dialogue where each expresses something to the other, each listens to the other, and where *the question of agreement or disagreement is wholly irrelevant*. Communication now has the

role of expressing each man's own unique ontological situation, and of enabling us to become in an encounter with another's uniqueness. To encounter another unique human being is *not* an invitation to agree or disagree but rather to *listen* and *become*; as Jaspers says, each man becomes himself in dialogue with others. Both are altered now, not merely a supposed pupil. To become oneself is not to become the other, nor to further entrench oneself in one's own idiosyncracies; it is to become oneself through others.

And this is indeed the way friends talk, although certainly it is not the best description of philosophic argument, where friends become transfigured into opponents, and the fanatical desire for agreement nullifies the value of the dialogue. This is the way we do and ought to read history, not with the intention of agreeing or disagreeing with Napoleon, of pronouncing approval or disapproval of him, let alone siphoning off some supposed essence of history and man's historical being, but rather with the intention of comprehending concretely and intuitively what this unique record reveals. The truth is, in my opinion, that agreement and disagreement have absolutely no role whatsoever in authentic human relations or in our attempt to comprehend ourselves and one another; agreement and disagreement are nothing but a necessity of public action; to work together, to act in common, we must come to an agreement about what is to be done and how. But existence is not a public task; each man exists *with* others, that is, with other unique existences with their own unique free choices; but no two men work at the same life; each works at his own in the company and presence of others. Again, to borrow a phrase from Jaspers, we live with our eyes on others, in their presence; but this means neither imitating them nor *not* imitating them, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with them. If this ultimate situation of each existing man is unique, individual, unrepeatable, and if we live in the presence of other uniquenesses, the properly philosophic task is not to boil it all down to a common doctrine, but rather to deepen our sense of the uniqueness of what is happening, its irreplaceability, its undeducibility. And it is here that the *poignancy* of existence manifests itself; I can detect no trace of the poignant in the absolutely pure and transcendental ego in Husserl, which Professor Spiegelberg finds equal to that of existence. We die, even though the essence of death is eternal.

To conclude, then, I should argue that (1) the phenomenological and the properly existential standpoint are not prepared for a happy wedding. They differ profoundly, as profoundly as looking at life differs from the living of it. (2) I do not believe, as Professor Spiegelberg does, that there is any significant sense in which

freedom and creativity form subject-matter for essential insight. Freedom and creativity are always posed before something open in life; and they are always concerned with the ineffably concrete. They are what make life, or are perhaps identical with it; we can have a concrete intuition of that which *has been made*, which *has been done* and lived; but the center from which life proceeds, and which is free to endow life with meaning or meaninglessness is not itself one more essence, nor is it inspectable by phenomenological intuition, nor does it issue forth in essential patterns called "living in the world," which would be nothing but a name for an open problem. Phenomenology, therefore, cannot clarify the living of life into an essence, but only, at best, a life already lived. And finally, (3) the mode of consciousness which does function and should function in life is not that of the phenomenological reduction or transcendental intuition, but rather a consciousness which conives with freedom and creativity, supplying them with whatever lucidity they have; it is what Marcel calls a "participating consciousness" as opposed to consciousness as spectator, and it is a consciousness which remains lucid precisely concerning its own lack of lucidity; it shares the weight and opacity of existence, cannot survey the whole of the human essence, but can through dialogue with others help human beings to come to whatever existential clarity we might achieve. Whatever participating consciousness we have of human life is most appropriately an expressing and a revealing; it cannot make the pretention to have inspected it and ferreted out its eternal structure, least of all a structure valid for and of everybody, present, past, and future. And this impossibility is not the result of some difficulty arising from complexity or detail; it is, I believe, an impossibility grounded in freedom and creativity. Nor is this impossibility itself *now* the desired phenomenology of life, unless we wish to give a name connoting knowledge to what is simply the knowledge that we have no knowledge. If there is any phenomenology of human life, its first and last result is the simple insight that there is none.

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BOOK REVIEW

Western Aesthetics. KANTI CHANDRA PANDEY. Banaras (India): The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1956. xxxvii, 612 pp. Rs. 20-0-0.

Western Aesthetics is Volume II of a three-volume work by Pandey under the general title of *Comparative Aesthetics*. Volume