

Phenomenology: a historical perspective

The purpose of this session is to explain the historical context in which phenomenology arises as a philosophy in the twentieth century. Etymology is the study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history. Phenomenology means literally the study of phenomena, which are the object of a person's perception. The word phenomenology gets its origins from the ancient Greek word *phainomenon*, which means that which appears or is seen, and also *logia* or *logos*, which is an important term in philosophy meaning a speaking, dialogue, discourse, treatise, doctrine, theory, or science. The term would come to stand for a philosophical system which studies of the structures of experience and consciousness early in the 20th century. ¹

Phenomenology has been practiced in one form or another for many centuries. The ancient Hindu Vedas, some of the world's oldest texts, expound on different states or *avasthas* of consciousness. There are four states in which man perceives the world, jagrut (waking), swapna (dream), sushupti (dreamless sleep) and turiya (the fourth state), which is a state of pure consciousness achieved during meditation. ² Similarly ancient Buddhist texts speak of the 9 *jhanas* or states of consciousness that can be achieved during *Samadhi*. Someone practicing at high

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology_%28philosophy%29

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http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Consciousness_Studies#Avasthas_28states_of_consciousness.29

level of *jhana* will detach from several qualities of the mind, allowing for a high level of mental concentration and power.³ The different ways the mind can perceive things has been an interest of mankind for thousands of years. This is phenomenology.

In ancient Greek philosophy we see the topic of appearance vs reality being discussed, as in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Plato believed in a world of forms that was not perceptible by the common senses, every material thing is a particular sensible instantiation of a property to its form. Plato's theory of Forms or theory of Ideas asserts that non-material abstract (but substantial) forms (or ideas), and not the material world of change known to us through sensation, possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality. Plato speaks of these entities as though Forms are the only true objects of study that can provide us with genuine knowledge. Plato spoke of Forms in formulating a possible solution to the problem of universals, which is the question of whether properties exist, and if so, what they are.

For Plato true knowledge consists of knowledge of the forms. In his allegory of the cave, Plato likens those untutored in the Theory of Forms to prisoners who have been chained to the ground in a cave their whole lives. These prisoners have never seen anything but a cave wall, which has shadows projected on it from a lit walkway behind the prisoners, a hallway they cannot see. Since the shadows on the wall are all they have ever known the prisoners believe that the shadows are reality. They

³ <http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=Jhanas>

are unaware of the “real” world that exists behind them and outside of the cave. ⁴ In both the ancient Eastern and Western world the study of experience has been a ever present topic.

In the 17th century British Empiricism was born in response to the rationalists who claimed real knowledge could be gained independent of our sensory experience. Empiricism in contrast claimed that in fact all or most of our knowledge was gained from experience, and emphasized the role of experience and evidence. ⁵ While empiricism centered on the role of first person experience in the acquisition of knowledge, the empiricist tended to downplay the role of subjective first person experience in favor of objective 3rd person accounts of the world. Empiricism was not a scientific study of consciousness. That would not come about until the late 19th century.

Use of the term phenomenology began in the 18th century with Johann Heinrich Lambert . Lambert was a Swiss mathematician, physicist, philosopher and astronomer. He is best known for proving the Irrationality of π . In his main philosophical work, *Neues Organon* (*New Organon*, 1764), Lambert uses the term when describing ways for distinguishing between subjective and objective appearance. In 1807 George Friedrich Hegel, a German Idealist philosopher, wrote the book *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (phenomenology of spirit, or mind). The book, about the three stage dialectical life of spirit, would become Hegel’s most important

⁴ <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>

⁵ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>

work.⁶ In 1889 psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano uses the term what he terms a descriptive psychology. One of Brentano's students was Edmund Husserl, who would use the term phenomenology for his new science of consciousness. It is here the term acquired its modern meaning.

Edmund Husserl, who was highly influenced by Rene Descartes, sought to make philosophy a rigorous science, a science upon which all the knowledge of the other sciences could rest securely. Husserl was impressed by Descartes method of Cartesian doubt, which questions all of ones beliefs and requires a person to draw into themselves in order to rebuild their own knowledge from an absolutely secure foundation. Descartes was concerned with proving the existence of the outside world, based on his subjective experience. Husserl says it is not of central importance if there exists an outside world or not. The objects of our experience are certainly real, and they are the only thing which the mind has direct access to, and we should study them as such.

Husserl wanted phenomenology to be a rigorous science which studied the structure of consciousness as experienced by the first person self point of view. He wanted this science to be descriptive rather than explanatory, such as psychology. The times leading up to Husserl were characterized by huge advances in science and its method, and Husserl wished to utilize a scientific methodology for phenomenology, one which subsequent scientists could build from.

⁶ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/>

At this time in history scientific methodology was becoming more and more detailed and thorough, and the results achieved in scientific experiments were more and more reliable and were allowing people to understand the world in ways that were not possible before. As a result of the rise of science there was a decrease in religion and of church authority around the world. At the same time there was a new emphasis placed on the individual, the subjective experience was being prized in the arts and sciences and social life as never before.⁷ As a result of this global current of thought, there was a revolt against those philosophical doctrines that were systematic and complete, and claimed to have all the answers. This is not the way science works, science is a collaborative discipline that relies on the work of many. Bertrand Russell was a prominent contemporary of Husserl who also called for a piecemeal scientific philosophy. Husserl is noted as saying “I do not say that philosophy is an imperfect science; I say simply that is not yet a science at all, that as science it has not yet begun.”⁸

Edmund Husserl had a great appreciation for the empirical natural sciences, he just thought that they had left something out. They seemed to take for granted the way the objects of our experience manifest themselves. Conscious experience has a unique theme: we *experience* it, we live in it and act in it. Other things in the material world we may perceive and engage. But we do not experience them. Husserl thought this extremely important, and he wanted phenomenology to be the

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernity>

⁸ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/10268771/Husserl-Philosophy-as-a-Rigorous-Science>

cornerstone for which all subsequent truth rested. Husserl believed that all the other sciences were dependent on phenomenology, even if they did not recognize it.

Husserl launched the historical movement of phenomenology early in the 20th century. His student Heidegger, and others such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre were its most famous practitioners. They held phenomenology, with its strong emphasis on subjectivity, to be the proper foundation of all philosophy. Whatever we know about the world, all objective truth, begins with and is based in consciousness.