

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXISTENTIALISM

Manas Roy

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As good a place to begin as any is the meaning of the term 'phenomenology' itself. It is indeed a reasoned inquiry which discovers the inherent essences of appearances. But what is an appearance? The answer to this question leads to one of the major themes of phenomenology: an appearance is anything of which one is conscious. Anything at all which appears to consciousness is a legitimate area of philosophical investigation. Moreover, an appearance is a manifestation of the essence of that of which it is the appearance. Surprising as it may sound, other philosophic points of view have refused to make this move. One can characterize phenomenological philosophy as centering on the following basic themes: a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy, the search for a philosophy without presuppositions, the intentionality of consciousness, and the rejection of the subject–object dichotomy.

Phenomenology, beginning with Edmund Husserl, urges that the world of immediate or 'lived' experience takes precedence over the objectified and abstract world of the 'natural attitude' of natural science. Science as such, thus, is secondary to the world of concrete, lived experience. Phenomenology, therefore, engages in a process known as 'bracketing' in which the 'natural attitude' is placed aside such that the researcher may begin with 'the things themselves,' as Husserl said – or, in other words, in the phenomena as they show themselves in experience. In Heidegger's terminology, phenomenology involves letting things 'show themselves from themselves in the very way in which they show themselves from themselves'. By definition, phenomenology never begins with a theory, but, instead, always begins anew with the phenomena under

consideration. Husserl brings to this understanding something unique, his phenomenological method, which is characterized by Husserl's 'epoche.' As mentioned previously, 'epoche' is a 'bracketing' or, to me it is 'photo' of the 'natural attitude' so that one can attend to a phenomenon as it shows itself. Once the 'natural attitude' is 'bracketed', one can then attend to what, according to Husserl, are the two poles of experience, noema and noesis. Noesis is the act of perceiving, while noema is that which is perceived. Through this method, for Husserl, one can perform an 'eidetic reduction'. Noema can be reduced to their essential form or 'essence'. Husserl's phenomenology, in this sense, is a form of idealism, since it aims toward discovering the ideal form of phenomena, the essence or Eideia (such as with Plato and Hegel). Further, Husserl shares with the idealist a tendency to stress a priori conditions of knowledge (such as with Plato and Kant).

Existentialism is well known in this country (India) both as a literary and philosophical movement, but its roots in phenomenology are not as widely understood. Historically, the roots of existential philosophy can be traced to the nineteenth-century writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Central to the work of this figures was an emphasis on the existing individual, and a call for a consideration of man in his concrete situation, including his culture, history, relations with others, and above all, the meaning of personal existence. The very notion that existentialism is something that can be defined in a catch phrase, or that one can merely know about it without understanding it from within, has made it, for some people, into an intellectual fad and robbed it of its proper seriousness. Yet existentialism is not merely a fad any more than it is a single, well-defined movement within philosophy. It is a powerful stream, welling up from underground sources, converging and diverging, but flowing forward and carrying with it many of the most important intellectual tendencies and literary and cultural manifestations of our day. 'Existentialism' is not a philosophy but a

mood embracing a number of disparate philosophies; the differences among them are more basic than the temper which unites them. This temper can be described as a reaction against the static, the abstract, the purely rational, the merely irrational, in favor of the dynamic and concrete, personal involvement and 'engagement,' action, choice and commitment, the distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' existence, and the actual situation of the existential subject as the starting point of thought. Beyond this the so-called existentialists divide according to their views on such matters as phenomenological analysis, the existential subject, the intersubjective relation between selves, religion, and the implications of existentialism for psychotherapy. Insofar as one can define existentialism, it is a movement from the abstract and the general to the particular and the concrete. The root of 'existentialism' is, of course, 'existence'. That might seem to include just about everything, and by the same token to say nothing, were it not for the traditions in the history of religion and the history of philosophy which have tended to look away from the 'passing flux' of existence to a realm of pure 'Being', unchanging and eternal, a world of ideal essences or a formless absolute beyond these essences, in comparison with which the particulars of our earthly life are seen as merely phenomena – the shadows in Plato's cave which at best reflect in wavering and unsteady fashion, and more usually obscure, that essential reality which is not directly accessible to man through 'the life of the senses'. Insofar as any philosopher has turned away from the tendency to locate the really real in a separate metaphysical sphere of essences in favor of the greater reality of personal existence in the here and now, he stands for an existentialist trend within the history of philosophy. It is in [the] emphasis upon the existential subject that the crucial distinction is found between existentialism and the various brands of empiricism, positivism, and instrumentalism that also emphasize the particular, the concrete, and the here and now. For these latter the particular is still seen from without,

from the standpoint of the detached observer, rather than from within, from the standpoint of lived life’.

The origin of existentialism is typically attributed to the work of Kierkegaard. However, the precursory thinkers who influenced this school of thought are varied, including Pascal, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky, to name a few. One can just as well point back to the Greeks as influences, since Heidegger emphasized a return to the central themes in philosophy – questions pertaining to Being (the ontological) as opposed to beings (the ontic). Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that Kierkegaard is the ‘father’ of existentialism. By ‘existence’, Kierkegaard meant the particular form of human existence which is unique. Each ‘individual’ human being is cast into the world unfinished and finite, yet, nevertheless, must take responsibility for his or her choices. Responsibility as such is the result of the ‘individual’s’ free choice, yet, characteristic of human beings, these choices are always made in the face of the unknown, our finitude, and, therefore, they lead to ‘dread’. ‘Dread’, in this sense, is the recognition that one’s choices are one’s own, despite the fact that one can never know for certain whether these choices will bear out in the end. Kierkegaard held great contempt for those who relied on the ‘crowd’ to take responsibility for individual choice. For Kierkegaard, one must answer to God as an individual, naked and apart from the ‘crowd’. Thus, ultimately, our faith must involve a ‘leap’, since the human being is precluded from finality and certitude.

Existentialism, as such, is actually a twentieth-century movement, despite its roots in Kierkegaard and others. While Kierkegaard philosophized existentially, which influenced the existentialists of the 20th century, he did not hold to the existential axiom that ‘existence precedes essence’, as Sartre asserted. With all of the existentialist thinkers of the 20th century, there are common themes, despite great diversity. Whether one looks to Heidegger, Sartre, Buber, Merleau-Ponty, or De Beauvoir, to name a few, one finds a basic attitude, despite the major differences among these

thinkers. These commonalities, which bind these theorists together, can be flushed out – and this, in essence, is what one may call ‘existentialism’. There is some justifiable irony in the fact that most of these thinkers rejected the term ‘existentialism’. This tendency to reject any simple definition is descriptive of existentialism as a whole, since existentialism, as a movement, resists simplistic categories and abstraction. For the existentialist, ‘truth’ is found ‘in-the-world’ and, thereby, always begins with the concrete; that is, in existence. And grounded in existence as such, this means that one’s thought must necessarily be perspectival and limited. Despite these limitations, the common themes of existentialism include:

1. The human being is a ‘being-in-the-world’. That is, the human kind of being is always already involved in meaningful projects with others and alongside things. As Heidegger would say, the human being is ‘there being’ (Dasein) – meaning that the human being exists as the projection of possibilities which open up as a world. In this sense, the human being is not ‘in the world’ like a match is in a matchbox. Rather, the human being is ‘in-the-world’ in the sense that one is ‘in trouble’ or ‘in a relationship’.
2. As ‘being-in-the world’, the human being is ‘thrown’ into that ‘world’ such that she finds herself in the midst of the ‘givens’ of existence. One does not choose one’s parents, the place of one’s birth or the fact that one will die, yet, despite these circumstances, the human being is faced with the freedom to respond to these ‘givens’ of existence. In this sense, human beings can be said to be ‘response-able’.
3. As ‘being-in-the-world’, the human being is always ‘with others’. Even being alone can be said to be a mode of being-with-others, since

one cannot be alone unless this is first understood secondarily as a being-away-from-others. Moreover, our being-with-others is always as a relationship of some sort, and, being so, we are both shaped by others and shape those others with whom we relate.

4. Human beings are always 'in-the-world' alongside things. Things, in terms of existence, are not mere extension in space. Rather, things exist as meaningful entities which, in one form or another, call to the human being as significant in terms of the human being's projection of possibilities. A thing is a thing when it matters to me in one form or another — when, as a thing, it enters into the clearing by which I am either helped or hindered on my way toward realizing my projects 'in-the-world'.
5. Human beings are not things. A thing does not exist as a 'being-in-the-world', since, as a thing, it has no world. For a thing, nothing matters. Things can only matter for a human being, since it is only in the world of the human being that things can have meaning. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to treat human beings as 'things', such as with biology. To provide an example: A corpse is a thing. A dead person is not a thing, but rather a human being who no longer lives. One can treat a corpse like a thing, but not a dead person. This is clear in terms of our relating to others. When I am with another human being, I fully recognize that I exist as an other to the other person. However, with a thing, say a rock, I do not exist for it — for I fully recognize that the rock does not exist in the sense that a human being exists. The rock is not 'in-the-world'.
6. Human beings are finite. As a 'being-in-the-world', we recognize that death is a 'not-to-be-

outripped' (inevitable) possibility. Death as such is the possibility of the end of all possibilities. Existence, therefore, is not limitless, but inevitably must face up to the mystery of the 'nothingness', that which lies beyond what can be known as a 'being-in-the-world'. As a 'being-towards-death', as Heidegger would say, the human being becomes aware that she cannot have all the possibilities. Faced with the recognition of one's finitude, one also recognizes that one is always faced with choices. In making a choice, I simultaneously eliminate thousands of other possible choices. And, yet, making such a choice, I can never know with absolute certainty that I have made the 'right' choice. With this freedom to choose, I am faced with the responsibility for my own existence.

7. Faced with such freedom, responsibility and finitude, I am confronted with anxiety and guilt. I am anxious in the face of the fact that my choice may render a death to my world. Further, in recognition that with my choice I eliminate other choices, I am 'guilty' as because, I am not presenting justice to myself with the universal life world or the God's life world.
8. Immediate experience has priority over theoretical assumptions.
9. All experience is both physical and mental: How this is so varies greatly from thinker to thinker.

Failure to see [the] intimate connection between phenomenology and existentialism will result in thinking of existentialism as only a subjective reaction against systematic thinking and not as a philosophic movement with its own set of problems and methods'.

Whereas Husserl saw the task of transcendental phenomenology to be that of describing the lived world from the viewpoint of a detached observer, existential phenomenology insists that the observer cannot separate himself from the world. Existential phenomenologists followed out more rigorously the implications of the doctrine of intentionality of consciousness. Since consciousness is always consciousness of 'photo' of the world; and the world is not only the correlate of consciousness but that without which there would be no consciousness. Consequently, for existential phenomenology, the modalities of conscious experience are also the ways one is in the world. This shift of the notion of the *Lebenswelt* (lived-world) to the emphasis upon being-in-the-world expanded phenomenology in a way that allowed it to consider the totality of human relationships in the world in terms of the individual's concrete existence. The very terminology itself, being-in-the-world, is existentialism's attempt to avoid reference to human reality in terms either of a thinking substance or a perceiving subject closed in upon itself facing physical objects which may or may not be knowable. Being-in-the-world refers exclusively to human reality in contrast to nonhuman reality, and although the specific terminology has varied among existentialists, common to all is the insistence that human reality is situated in a concrete world-context. In short, man is only man as a result of his actions which are worked out in the world. But there is still the reciprocal relationship that phenomenology insists on: The total ensemble of human actions-including thoughts, moods, efforts, emotions, and so forth-define the context in which man situates himself. But, in turn, the world-context defines and sets limits to human action.

Also central to an understanding of being-in-the-world is the existentialist insistence that this is not a concept that arises only in reflection. Even prior to reflection upon one's awareness of being-in-the-world there is already a prereflective grasp of the basic modalities, which are his ways of being-in-the-world. In prereflective experience, the subject

and world are not distinct; they are rather the givens of concrete experience which can only be separated by a process of abstraction. Any reflection—whether theoretical or practical—already assumes man's prereflective experience of the world and his activity in the world. The word 'existence' is usually used by existentialists to refer only to human reality, for what it means to exist is to be always engaged in tasks in the world.

The way in which Kierkegaard and Husserl resisted that view differs: Kierkegaard speaks of man, while Husserl practically limits himself to consciousness or knowledge. Kierkegaard conceived man as 'existence', as a subject-in-representation-to-God. Man is not a self-sufficient spiritual 'atom' but, as a subject, is only authentically himself in his relationship to the God of revelation. According to Kierkegaard, 'existence' is absolutely original and irrepeatable, radically personal and unique. His emphasis on the uniqueness of 'existence' implies that a thinker's assertions are applicable only to the thinker himself: in principle, they do not claim validity for others. Thus, Kierkegaard's position is deliberately anti-'scientific': it cannot do justice to the dimension of universality claimed by any 'science' (we do not use the term here in the sense of positive science). As a matter of principle, Kierkegaard's way of thinking cannot go beyond monologue, the 'solitary meditation'. Kierkegaard's followers resolutely countered the reproach of being 'unscientific' by saying that existentialism may not be a 'science'. Their objection to being called 'scientific' appeared to be largely based on a particular sense of the term 'scientific' as used with respect to man. In scientism and in the philosophy of Hegel—man was 'scientifically' discussed in such a way that the original and unique character of human subjectivity simply disappeared under verbiage. Yet this kind of speaking was supposed to be 'scientific' par excellence. The need to reject a particular conception of 'scientific' thinking, however, does not entitle anyone to claim that philosophical thinking about man must not be 'scientific' in any sense whatsoever. The philosopher can

hardly avoid the use of universal and necessary judgments to indicate the universal and necessary structures of man. In this sense he is 'scientific'.

This difficulty hardly existed for Husserl. Originally a mathematician and physicist, Husserl, like Descartes, was disturbed by the confusion of 'language' as 'Concert-o-Déconcert' (a Derridian Déconstructionist approach) and the welter of opinions existing in philosophy. Clearly, philosophy was 'not yet a science', and this made Husserl launch his phenomenology as an attempt to make philosophy also a 'rigorous science.' He was clever enough to avoid the trap of ascribing to philosophy the same scientific character as belongs to the positive sciences. Philosophy cannot allow physics or any other positive science to dictate its methods, for the simple reason that philosophy is not a positive science. It has to become scientific in its own way in its expression of intersubjective and objectively general truth. To realize this ambitious plan, Husserl investigated man's consciousness or knowledge. He conceived consciousness as intentional, oriented to something other than itself. Whereas Husserl addressed himself to problems in the theory of knowledge, Kierkegaard tried to answer theological-anthropological questions. The distinction between existentialism and phenomenology consisted primarily in the different directions of their concern.

The two streams of thought merged in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where they served as the foundation of the philosophy now known as 'existential phenomenology'. Heidegger's philosophy of man does not lapse into the illusions of either idealism or positivism. Influenced by the phenomenological theory of knowledge, existentialism gave up its anti-scientific attitude. Phenomenology, on the other hand, enriched itself and developed into a philosophy of man by borrowing many topics from Kierkegaard's existentialism. In this way there arose the unified movement of existential-phenomenological thinking of which Heidegger, Sartre – though not in every respect – Merleau-Ponty and the Higher Institute of Philosophy of Louvain are the principal exponents.

Heidegger accepts Husserl's definition of phenomenology: he will attempt to describe, he says, without any obscuring preconceptions, what human existence is. But his imagination could not let the matter go at this, for he noted that the word 'phenomenon' comes from the Greek. The etymologies of words, particularly of Greek words, are a passion with Heidegger; in his pursuit of them he has been accused of playing with words, but when one realizes what deposits of truth mankind has let slip into its language as it evolves, Heidegger's perpetual digging at words to get at their hidden nuggets of meaning is one of his most exciting facets. In the matter of Greek particularly – a dead language, whose whole history is now spread out before us – we can see how certain truths are embedded in the language itself: truths that the Greek race later came to forget in its thinking. The word 'phenomenon' – a word in ordinary usage, by this time, in all modern European languages – means in Greek 'that which reveals itself'. Phenomenology therefore means for Heidegger the attempt to let the thing speak for itself. It will reveal itself to us, he says, only if we do not attempt to coerce it into one of our read-made conceptual strait-jackets. Here we get the beginning of his rejoinder to the Nietzschean view that knowledge is in the end an expression of the Will to Power: according to Heidegger we do not know the object by conquering and subduing it but rather by letting it be what it is and, in letting it be, allowing it to reveal itself as what it is. And our own human existence too, in its most immediate, internal nuances, will reveal itself if we have ears to hear it. In ways that, perhaps, are already clear to the reader, existentialism and phenomenology lend themselves to one another quite nicely. With Heidegger, phenomenology, as the study of mental acts (noesis) and their intentional correlates (noemata), becomes grounded in his ontological analysis of Dasein (the human kind of being) as a 'being-in-the-world' as photoconscious existence and 'human-language' as photosyntagmatic existence, as they appear to me. Ultimately, Heidegger breaks from the Cartesian,

subject-object split, still operative in Husserl's thought; as Macann (1993) writes:

In place of the Husserlian procedure which moves from the world of the natural attitude up to a higher, transcendental plane with a view to bring to light the transcendental structures constitutive of the objectivity of the entities encountered in the natural attitude, we find an alternative procedure which moves from the ontic level down to a deeper, ontological plane with a view to bringing to light the ontological structures constitutive of the being of the entities in question'.

Heidegger, like Husserl, begins with the human being's pre-reflective, pre-ontological, lived understanding of the world, but, rather than seeking the essence of the phenomena and is concerned with the ontological ground of the phenomena; that is, what makes the phenomena possible. With this methodology, Heidegger aims to ask the question of Being, the ontological, though he must begin with beings, the ontic. Heidegger's method, therefore, is hermeneutic rather than transcendental. He holds that the human being always already understand the meaning of Being, yet this has been forgotten or 'covered over'. Beginning with the pre-ontological, Heidegger aims to discover what the human being already knows pre-reflectively, yet which must be made explicit through the method of phenomenology. For Heidegger, too, Being is not exhausted by beings and so Being is sublime and elevated in this sense for him. It remains hidden in its essence in its revelation of beings. But for Heidegger the rational process of thought remains necessary in the sphere of beings – where Being reveals itself – insofar as this process 'fixes' the order of beings. The giving of grounds establishes and defines beings as the particular things found here and now that announce Being. Beings belong to the revelation of Being and must be 'held to' in their particular historical form, but always in

the sign of the 'opening' of Being. Only by remembering Being is the way to the 'new' open, the way to hope. Our success or failure to hold ourselves open to the new gives us the possibilities for beginning or ending historical process. 'When the unhiddenness of Being does not present itself, it dismisses the slow disappearance of all that can offer healing to beings. This disappearance of what heals takes with it the openness of the holy. The closed nature of the holy darkens the luminescence of the divine'.

Manas Roy is a Guest Faculty of Philosophy, N.S. Evening College, Silchar, India. (mchristophroy.com)

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