



How I Came to Phenomenology

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Henri Bergson, Karl Marx, and John Dewey: that was the odd trio in which my philosophical life began. There was always imaginative literature, as well, helping me understand what it meant to break with mundane realities and enter alternative worlds. And there was the inescapable fact that I was female, aware that ordinary appearances presented themselves to me differently than they did to males, very deeply aware that there were indeed "multiple realities."

As a graduate student, I found Dewey seriously lacking in the tragic sense of life, even in an attentiveness to the human condition. When I was introduced to Soren Kierkegaard, the irony, the paradoxes, the idea of the "leap" made me deeply uneasy as they opened something entirely new. Then there was Jean-Paul Sartre (whose *Nausea* was all I had known), and there was the tension between the *en soi* and the *pour soi*. There was consciousness of the object-world; there was the need to resist objectness; there was the idea of transcendence; focally, there was the concept of intentionality. It seemed to me I *recognized* something in Sartre's work: perhaps, the pursuit of the "not yet"; perhaps the idea of "absence"; perhaps the anguish linked to the recognition of freedom. In any case, I could never think of problems of pedagogy again without pondering what it signified to choose oneself as teacher, how teaching might become one's "project," how one could turn attention to lived classroom situations in such a fashion that students would identify themselves in their freedom as they came up against a resisting world. I became aware as well of a utopian dimension in Sartrean thinking; the conviction that it is only when we can imagine a better social order that we can perceive the deficiencies in our lived worlds. Perceiving lacks and deficiencies, we are moved to surpass, to go beyond what is; this, too, I made focal to my thinking about what I was doing with my life.

Alfred Schutz came next for me; among his "leading concepts," there was the Husserlian concept of the "natural attitude." I became much interested in perspectives and constructed realities because of Schutz, much more concerned about the meanings of social realities, fascinated with the idea of the "stranger" and the critical vantage point that seemed to me to be part of that notion. Because of Schutz's view of the "paramount reality," I believe I widened my view of what "project" entailed. I became much absorbed with his description of the "provinces of meaning" and the "multiple realities" they disclosed. His description of the "jolts" we experience in moving from one reality to another confirmed some of my encounters with literature and what so often happened with me when I moved from the unreal world of *Middlemarch* or *Moby Dick* or *Anna Karenina* back to the intersubjective, common-sense world. And, yes, the description helped me understand some of the strains involved when I moved from playground or kitchen or bedroom to the public domain of the classroom or the seminar room or the library. I could understand, as never before, the problematic of the taken-for-granted, the illusion of an objective world defined by official or expert others. It was not long before I began associating objectivism

with the misuse of power, even with various kinds of domination and this had a great deal to do with how I worked to stir up critical consciousness with my students, to help them reflect on their own submergence, their own blindness to the noematic processes and the ways they were thrusting into the world.

Yes, I went on to read Husserl and (momentously for me) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose concepts of "embodiment" and the "primacy of perception" and perspectival viewing have become fundamental to my own thinking. His notion of determinateness and dialectic has helped me revise my own approach to human freedom, which I no longer think of as an endowment but as something to be continuously achieved. All this has inevitably fed into my political philosophy and (yes) my political commitments as I have become increasingly interested in aspects of what is called critical theory. I cannot but respond to the phenomenological dimension in the challenge to positivism and technological control; nor can I overlook the phenomenological significance in what is described as "emancipation" and what Jurgen Habermas talks about as reflection on one's own "self-formation." Yes, I am aware of the many currents of thought that have fed into critical theory, but I continue to see it as phenomenologically grounded and try to empower persons to understand it in that light.

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Lately, probably because of my enduring interest in imaginative literature, I have become deeply interested in hermeneutics and the rise of so-called "interpretive communities" when it comes to the understanding of literary texts. I struggle with certain of the structuralists, labor with the deconstructionists, try to make new sense of concepts like "power" and "desire," and, more than ever, I strive to hold to and understand the "leading concepts" that inform (I believe) the way I think and pursue my projects in a world that does indeed open "on to a common," a world where I have to keep resisting even as I remain in pursuit of Being.

I know I am a "perpetual beginner," trying to communicate in an idiom people can understand, trying to make the "futile passion" in some way meaningful for those I try to "let learn." It is difficult to categorize myself or to wear a label, even in a not very friendly place. I can only conclude that I will spend my life trying to find out how to "do" phenomenology, which must be linked to pedagogy on all levels if we are to stop robotization and technicization, if we are to halt the obliteration of the human world.