

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Summary/ Abstract: I came across the term phenomenology more than 40 years ago and was intrigued by it: how can something so general become an academic discipline? Some fellow students went to Germany to study it after graduation from CUHK. My faintest idea is that it is related to philosophy, can be applied to sociology and is founded by Husserl, Heidegger, etc.

Recently I decided to solve this personal puzzle. Below is my initial impression after some reading / thinking.

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My Initial Study of Phenomenology

Based on

- (1) Wikipedia
- (2) Hergenhahn (2014), 264 – 271
- (3) Schultz (2008), 111 - 117

(A) Personal Note

I came across the term phenomenology more than 40 years ago and was intrigued by it: how can something so general become an academic discipline? Some fellow students went to Germany to study it after graduation from CUHK. My faintest idea is that it is related to philosophy, can be applied to sociology and is founded by Husserl, Heidegger, etc.

Recently I decided to solve this personal puzzle. Below is my initial impression after some reading / thinking.

(B) Historical Roots

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness (wiki). It actually started from 19th Century German psychology with its roots back to Kant. The major issue is the study of consciousness.

(1) Wilhelm Wundt (1832 – 1920)

His experimental psychology on the study of consciousness by reducing consciousness to elements became a main paradigm. It was later challenged by his contemporaries and students.

(2) Franz Brentano (1838 – 1917)

He is interested in the mind's process more than its contents or biology (HH 264). He studied priesthood, Aristotle and Kant, proposing Act psychology.

- Mental act: (judging, recalling, doubting, loving, etc.)
- Mental content: (red color, a face, etc.)
- Intentionality: every mental act has its 'aboutness', an intended object

(e.g. see an apple)
 ↑ ↑
Mental act Mental content

- Phenomenological method is to attain intact, meaningful experience
- Influence: Freud (psychoanalysis)
 Stumpf (Gestalt psychology)
 Husserl (existential psychology/ phenomenology)
- He believes in an active mind and supports empirical method, (observation, objective study of subjective experience), but not experimental method (artificial conditions).

(3) Carl Stumpf (1848 – 1936)

- Priesthood → quit; became professor of psychology at University of Berlin; attended Brentano's lecture.
- Publish *Psychology of Tone* (1883)
- Lab in Berlin rivalled with Wundt
- Challenges Wundt's introspection: who's introspective report (Wundt's

trained subject or a trained musician)

- A whole mental event as a meaningful unit, the mental phenomenon, not the consciousness elements.
- Stumpf's chair was succeeded by Wolfgang Kohler. Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka also studied with Stumpf (Gestalt school)
- Clever Hans phenomenon (HH p.266) shows his critical, experimental scientific inclination, (Prof. Li: He seems to have less relevance to phenomenology, only a supporter of Brentano.)

(4) Oswald Kulpe (1862 – 1915)

- Wundt's student for 8 years (PHD 1887)
- Teaches in Wurzburg (Wurzburg School)
- Against Wundt (1): all thoughts are with referent (sensation, image and feeling)
- Against Wundt (2): higher mental process (thinking) can't be studied
- Proposes systematic experimental introspection
- Imageless thought (doubting, searching, confidence, hesitation, judgment – no image)
- Mental act of judging is a pure (imageless) process – followed up by Husserl's pure phenomenology.
- Mental set (Einstellung) with determining tendency (to solve a problem) at an unconsciousness level.

- Narziss Ach's mental set

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 (HH 273)
- Motivational issues in problem-solving (Max Wertheimer's PHD under Kulpe)
- Higher mental process can be studied experimentally.
- Distinguish between thought and thinking
- Wurzburg school led to downfall of voluntarism and structuralism

Prof. Li: In other words, imageless thought is the discovery that mental act (such as judging) is thought without image. The image itself, if any, is the mental content only. My point is that the argument or deduction may be imageless; often it is linguistic. One form of thought is the operation of linguistic content (Logic).

(5) Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938)

- Czech philosopher, studied under Wundt (1876 – 1880?), worked with Brentano (1884 – 1886) and Stumpf.
- Focus on math and logic, (*Logical Investigations*, 1900) dedicated to Stumpf.
- Starts from intentionality and mental acts.
- Focus → outward (intended object describes the intention and direction of the object)
 - ↓
 - Inward (internal subject describes the pure experience of seeing experience)

- Whole, intact, meaningful experience.
- Against psychology as experimental science (based on science model).
- Try to find ultimate nature (essence) of the mental process.
- Try to create a taxonomy of mind (mental essences).
- Try to understand meaning via investigation.

(C) Husserl's Major Ideas

(1) Rejecting the Western Rationalist Bias

As envisioned by Husserl, phenomenology is a method of philosophical inquiry that rejects the rationalist bias that has dominated Western thought since Plato in favor of a method of reflective attentiveness that discloses the individual's "lived experience." [7] Loosely rooted in an epistemological device, with Sceptic roots, called epoché, Husserl's method entails the suspension of judgment while relying on the intuitive grasp of knowledge, free of presuppositions and intellectualizing (Wiki, Overview – paragraph 5)

Prof. Li: It can be seen that Husserl questioned the very fundamental rationalist philosophy tradition.

(2) The science of experience – intentionality and consciousness.

Prof. Li: Husserl built on Brentano who built on Kant (Structures / Content)

Husserl countered that consciousness is not "in" the mind; rather, consciousness is conscious of something other than itself (the intentional object), whether the object is a substance or a figment of imagination (i.e.,

the real processes associated with and underlying the figment). Hence the phenomenological method relies on the description of phenomena as they are given to consciousness, in their immediacy. (Wiki, Overview – paragraph 5)

Prof. Li: In other words, the target of study has shifted from 'mind' to 'phenomenon'

(3) Bracketing – take nothing for granted

to take nothing for granted and to show the warranty for what we claim to know." In practice, it entails an unusual combination of discipline and detachment to **bracket** theoretical explanations and second-hand information while determining one's "naive" experience of the matter. (To "bracket" in this sense means to provisionally suspend or set aside some idea as a way to facilitate the inquiry by focusing only on its most significant components.) (Wiki, Overview – paragraph 6)

Prof. Li: This sounds critical but we use concepts / experience / categories shared by society to understand and interpret reality. Can you really bracket and get something pure? What is it like?

(4) Suspension of belief – look for new ways.

According to Husserl the suspension of belief in what we ordinarily take for granted or infer by conjecture diminishes the power of what we customarily embrace as objective reality. According to Rüdiger Safranski (1998, 72), "[Husserl's and his followers'] great ambition was to disregard anything that had until then been thought or said about consciousness or the world [while] on the lookout for a new way of letting the things [they investigated]

approach them, without covering them up with what they already knew."

(Wiki, Overview – paragraph 6)

(5) Epoche (bracketing)

What we observe is not the object as it is in itself, but how and inasmuch it is given in the intentional acts. Knowledge of essences would only be possible by "bracketing" all assumptions about the existence of an external world and the inessential (subjective) aspects of how the object is concretely given to us. This procedure Husserl called epoché. (Wiki, Transcendental phenomenology after the Ideen (1913) – paragraph 2)

Prof. Li: It appears Husserl wants to explore Kant's phenomenal world (things-in-appearance) by bracketing our assumptions of the external worlds and our subjective views. After bracketing out, we may reach the noumenal world (things-in-themselves) (?) But then he wants to be "objective", to create a knowledge discipline to be shared by his students. His goal is "objective", but he used his 'subjective mind' to find out an 'objective' solution.

(6) Transcendental Phenomenology: Pure transcendental ego

Husserl in a later period concentrated more on the ideal, essential structures of consciousness. As he wanted to exclude any hypothesis on the existence of external objects, he introduced the method of phenomenological reduction to eliminate them. What was left over was the pure transcendental ego, as opposed to the concrete empirical ego. (Wiki, Transcendental phenomenology after the Ideen (1913) – paragraph 3)

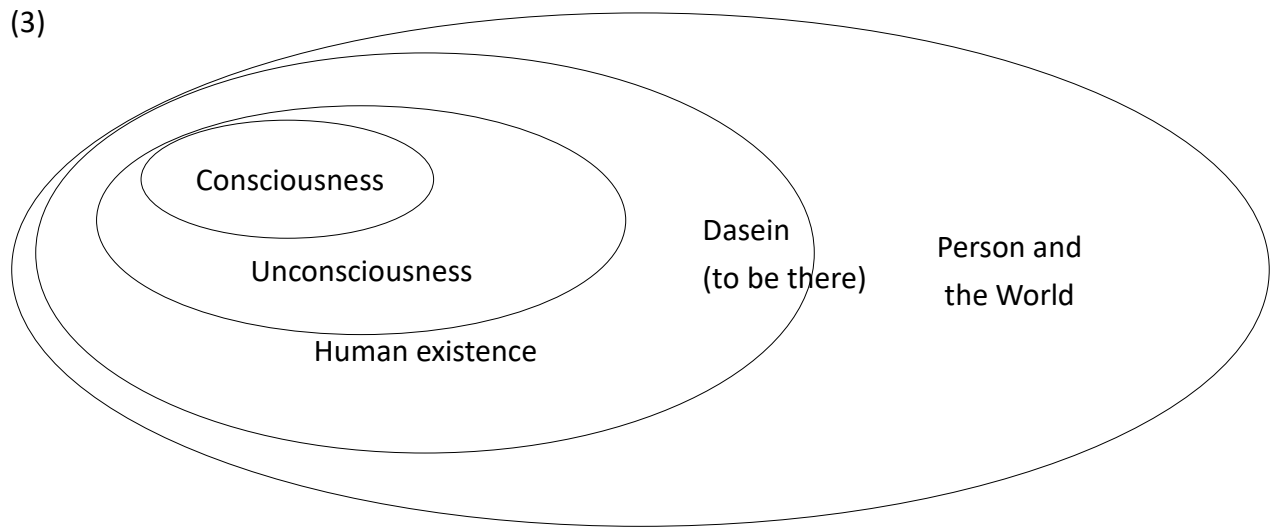
Prof. Li: Real curious what he meant by real, essential structures of consciousness, and pure ego and phenomenological reduction.

(D) Martin Heidegger's Move to Existence

(1) Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) studied under Husserl and dedicated his book, *Being and Time* (1927) to Husserl.

(2) He examined the totality of human existence

(3)



(4) His ideas of authentic life, awareness of death, becoming.

(5) Anxiety, guilt and courage, Thrownness

- Awareness of death
- ↓
- anxiety; without choosing freedom
- ↓
- guilt; choose
- ↓
- courage; Thrownness
- ↓
- birth

Heidegger believed that if we do not exercise our personal freedom, we experience **guilt**..... Because acceptance of the fact that at some time in

the future we will be nothing causes **anxiety**, such acceptance takes courage. Heidegger believed that choosing one's existence rather than conforming to the dictates of society, culture, or someone else also takes courage. And in general, living an authentic life by accepting all conditions of existence and making personal choices means that one must experience anxiety. For Heidegger, anxiety is a necessary part of living an authentic life. Entering the unknown causes part of the anxiety associated with an authentic life. Heidegger did, however, place limits on personal freedom. He said that we are thrown into the Da, or there, of our particular life by circumstances beyond our control. This **thrownness** determines, for example, whether we are male or female, short or tall, attractive or unattractive, rich or poor. (Hergenbahn and Henley, 2014: 538 – 539)

Martin Heidegger modified Husserl's conception of phenomenology because of what Heidegger perceived as Husserl's subjectivist tendencies. Whereas Husserl conceived humans as having been constituted by states of consciousness, Heidegger countered that consciousness is peripheral to the primacy of one's existence (i.e., the mode of being of Dasein), which cannot be reduced to one's consciousness of it. From this angle, one's state of mind is an "effect" rather than a determinant of existence, including those aspects of existence of which one is not conscious. By shifting the center of gravity from consciousness (psychology) to existence (ontology), Heidegger altered the subsequent direction of phenomenology. As one consequence of Heidegger's modification of Husserl's conception, phenomenology became increasingly relevant to psychoanalysis. Whereas Husserl gave priority to a depiction of consciousness that was fundamentally alien to the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious, Heidegger offered a way to

conceptualize experience that could accommodate those aspects of one's existence that lie on the periphery of sentient awareness. (Wiki, Overview – paragraph 7)

(E) Phenomenology's Terminology

(1) Intentionality – distinction between mental act and mental content.

(2) Intuition –

To see, know and understand an object,

Intuited (Filled intention) – the object occupies your intention

Emptily (Empty intention) – the object implies / signifies another idea / object.

(3) Evidence –

“Subjective achievement of truth”

(4) Noesis (noetic) and noema (noematic)

Noema – ideal content, complex ideal structure

Noesis – real content of the act of a particular sense (seeing, judging, etc.)

(5) Empathy and intersubjectively

(6) Lifeworld

(F) My Comments

(1) Phenomenology does not come out of the blue. It follows the modern Western philosophical tradition starting from Descartes and Kant.

- (2) It can be seen as a result against Wundtian psychology and is against reductionism (against science and rationalism)
- (3) Brentano is instrumental to inspiring phenomenology by his mental act, which is inspired by Kant's thought and content idea (I postulate).
- (4) Generally phenomenology starts from psychology; it tries to be more encompassing, thus rejecting the narrow experimental / "scientific" approach and favor a broad / empirical / observation approach.
- (5) For my understanding, phenomenology did not seem to gain popularity in American psychology nor philosophy, and Dewey rarely mentions it.
- (6) It looks like psychology is making progress thru phenomenological ideas, such as Wurzburg School, Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis.
- (7) I'm not sure how 'bracketing' is done; where phenomenology is now and where it is going. Any vigor? Any outcome? Surely I'm just scratching the surface.
- (8) Question: when Husserl tries to get essence, pure consciousness, will he find anything? Consciousness, life, action are all in one.
- (9) Maybe comparative anthropology and comparative biology can give us insights on bracketing. I tend to postulate that phenomenology with pure introspection can be a dead alley. Maybe there are some discoveries by Gestalt psychology and cognitive psychology inspired by phenomenology.