PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology was inaugurated by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the first edition of his *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901), and became one of the most influential philosophical movements of the twentieth century. Understood in its etymological sense as “the study of appearances,” phenomenology has a long history going back to Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte and G. W. F. Hegel, among others. Yet it was Husserl who pioneered phenomenology as the study of how things appear to the mind from a first-person perspective. By avoiding all presuppositions, whether derived from culture, religion, common sense or experimental science, Husserl sought to engage concrete lived experience on its own terms, especially through close, descriptive analysis. This desire—typified in Husserl’s famous call to “go back to the ‘things themselves’”—has remained the animating gesture of phenomenology throughout its many subsequent iterations.

Inspired by the empirical psychology of Franz Brentano, Husserl rejected Cartesian and Lockean ideas of a solitary, self-enclosed mind, and argued instead that the essential structure of consciousness is intentional, meaning that it is directed toward an object. Consciousness is always of something, just as experience is always for someone. To study consciousness itself, Husserl introduced the phenomenological reduction, or *epoché,* a method by which the philosopher “brackets” external concepts and ideas in order to consider the given of experience. Employing this method, Husserl produced important accounts of temporality, spatiality, perception, memory, intersubjectivity and, in his late work, the *Lebenswelt* (life-world), in which all conscious experience and activity are embedded.

Subsequent thinkers have extended and revised Husserl’s ideas in important ways. Martin Heidegger sought to explore our being-in-the-world through engaged, practical activity rather than through conscious thought. He believed that phenomenology required a turn to what he called “fundamental ontology,” an inquiry into the conditions of Being. In the 1930s, the locus of phenomenology shifted from Germany to France when Emmanuel Levinas translated Husserl into French. Levinas’s own ethical re-interpretation of phenomenology prioritized the face-to-face encounter with otherness, while Jean-Paul Sartre developed an existentialist account of the freedom of the conscious self and the alienating gaze of the other. At the same time, Maurice Merleau-Ponty foregrounded the dynamic, pre-cognitive capacities of the lived body in his pivotal reconsideration of Husserl’s accounts of intentionality, perception, time, space and intersubjectivity. Finally, though often placed in direct contrast to phenomenology, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction extends many phenomenological insights beyond the movement’s metaphysical presuppositions.

Phenomenology remained the dominant influence on European philosophy until the rise of structuralism in the 1960s. Thus phenomenology has influenced many different philosophical fields and movements, including aesthetics, ethics, theology, philosophy of language and mind, as well as deconstruction, poststructuralism, and feminism. In the immediate postwar period, phenomenology played an important role in social and political thought, through Merleau-Ponty and Sartre’s contributions to Western Marxism, Simon de Beauvoir’s account of female subjectivity, Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the public sphere, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, and Franz Fanon’s theory of racism. And more recently, it has contributed to new theories of queer identity, affect, media, ecology and cognitive literary studies.

Bibliography:

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