

Phenomenology

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Phenomenology of Religion

Phenomenology is a systematic way of exploring and understanding the world through experience.

The phenomenological approach may be simply defined as one 'in which differing belief systems are examined as perceived in their own terms, rather than by adopting a reductionist stance' (Caird and Law 1982: 153).

The aim is the 'qualitative understanding of the forms of life of a religious tradition from that tradition's standpoint' (Twiss and Conser 1992: 27).

Phenomenological principles were first set out in 1913 by Edmund Husserl, who argued that it was essential that all inquiries into any area of human endeavour touching on consciousness paid due respect to the 'I' (Husserl 1972: 7), the individual's subjective experience, rather than attempt to explain it away or reduce it to quantitative measurement. Husserl argued that the task of the phenomenologist was not to judge the phenomena under investigation but rather the "'description" [of]...the realm of essential structures of transcendental subjectivity immediately transparent to the mind'.

In other words, the phenomenon - such as belief in astrology, voodoo, or voodoo economics - may be understood on its own terms rather, say, than as a variety of some other category, such as a form of religion or science.

Husserl noted (1965: 90-1) that the phenomenological study of consciousness is emphatically not the same as the psychological study of consciousness, for the researcher is seeking to observe and describe, not explain in terms of preordained categories. My fieldwork amongst the wider public, meanwhile, is more limited and is intended to cast light on existing research in order to suggest possible models for future research.

Husserl's phenomenological approach was incorporated into the new discipline of the study of religions, and in particular by Ninian Smart. It was Smart who largely defined the discipline's approach as one of 'methodological neutralism' or 'agnosticism' (Smart 1973b: 94, 108), as opposed to the personal religious commitment which, he argued, had once assumed to be a prerequisite of the study of theology (Smart 1973a: 12; 1973b: 4).

Husserl argued that the phenomenological process should begin with the investigator's reflection on their own 'I' (Husserl 1972: 7), the set of assumptions and biases which they bring to the investigation or in this case, as Smart would say, the researcher's own 'I-picture'. At the heart of this process is reflexivity, the ability to reflect on one's own motives and biases which is necessary if one is to avoid the possibility that these will unduly shape one's conclusions.

The paradox Smart noted in relation to phenomenological studies is of importance here: they must be value-free in the sense that the phenomenon is not subject to *a priori* judgements and the researcher's own subjective experience must be 'bracketed out', yet such an approach may actually evoke a 'value-rich' appreciation of the meaning of the religion being observed (Smart 1973b: 21).

Moreover, as Smart (1973a: 11) argued, reflexivity implies the existence of a dialectical relationship between the student of religion and the object of study, with the beliefs of both the student and the individuals studied liable to change.

The existence of such a relationship necessarily challenges what Charlotte Davies has defined as social science's 'implicit assumption that we are investigating something "outside ourselves"', an aspiration which she doubts is possible even in 'hard' sciences such as astronomy and physics, which still, like the arts and humanities, require the researcher to evaluate evidence and reach conclusions which can never be entirely separated from questions of personal conditioning or bias (Davies 1999: 3).

Reflexivity, which Davies defines as 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' is, in her opinion, vital to intelligent research, but nevertheless carries potential pitfalls: it may lead to a 'form of self-absorption...in which boundaries between subject and object disappear [and] the one becomes the other, a process that effectively denies the possibility of social research' (Davies 1999: 4-5).

Phenomenological method

Reflexivity

Empathetic understanding - imaginative experiencing - to try to experience what the practitioner/believer is experiencing

Epoché - the 'bracketing' of one's bias - intended to generate understanding of questions of truth, value and explanatory systems.

Criticism

(see Flood)

Reflexivity just a good part of ethnography

One can never truly experience another person's experience.

Can lead to self-absorption

Bracketing is impossible. All one can do is be aware of one's bias.

Phenomenology of landscape

On the experience of the solstice at Stonehenge, Ed Krupp wrote

One should make a point of being there. Celestial events take place in context. When you see what actually happens in the landscape, you learn a great deal

more about it. It is, of course, possible to determine the alignment of a building with instruments, but nuances of light and shadow details of the horizon, difficulties in practical observation, and many more subjective aspects of a site can only be appreciated in person.¹

Ruggles himself added, 'Similarly, by walking in the modern landscape we can try to appreciate patterns of relationship between monuments and the topographic elements of the landscape as experienced by people living in that landscape in prehistoric times'.² Ruggles, concedes that we can never exactly know that we experience the same feelings when watching an especially bright full moon as did a prehistoric observer, but he does argue that 'the idea deserves serious consideration in contextual interpretations'.³

Alfred Schutz argued that phenomenology is the source of all philosophical thinking: 'phenomenology, searching for a real beginning of all philosophical thinking, hopes when fully developed, to end where all the traditional philosophies start'.⁴

According to Helmut Wagner, phenomenology's

starting point is given in the experiences of the conscious human being who lives and acts in a "world" which he apperceives and interprets, and which makes sense to him. He deals with this world in the intellectually spontaneous yet active mode of intentionality: There is no phase or aspect of human consciousness which appears in and by itself; consciousness is always consciousness of something. The forms of consciousness are tied to the context of experiences.⁵

Davies, Charlotte Aull (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Ourselves and Others*, London and New York: Routledge.

¹ Ed Krupp, HASTRO History of Astronomy e mail list 8 August 1995, cited in Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

² Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

³ Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

⁴ Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed Helmut R. Wagner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, p. 54.

⁵ Wagner, Helmut R., 'Introduction' in Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed Helmut R. Wagner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, pp. 1-50., p. 5

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