

Phenomenological Writing – Essentials

“The Essence of Being”

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As I thought about this next Phenomenological Writing assignment, contemplating the “essentials” of my selected phenomenon, I was struck by the choice of the word “essentials:” essentials are descriptive of ‘essence,’ and, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii), phenomenology is “the study of essences.” Now I’m curious to learn more about this word ‘essence’ because, in many ways, it seems to be the heart of the matter.

My trusty *American Heritage* provides this definition: “the intrinsic or indispensable properties of a thing.” That’s a good start – though I do have objection to the word ‘thing,’ a concept intrinsic to objectifying cultures, turning the entire world (including other people) into a collection of objects. How about ‘phenomenon’? Then, essence is “the intrinsic or indispensable properties of a phenomenon.” That gives it more room, I think, a chance to de-objectify the world and begin thinking in terms of patterns and events and the phenomenology of direct lived experience.

The etymology of the word also is very interesting, for it can be traced back through Old French (with the same spelling) to the Latin *essentia*, which is derived from *esse*, “to be.” With that understanding, the title of this essay “The Essence of Being” becomes a double entendre, for it could be translated as “The ‘To Be’ of Being.” This is starting to sound very Heideggerian (1962)! No wonder he devoted his life to a search for ‘being,’ for he was attempting to get to the very essence of Dasein. (Is getting to the essence of a matter equivalent to getting to the heart of that matter? If so, would that imply that ‘to be’ is located in the heart region?)

So how do I apply all this to my selected phenomenon, which I’ve been calling a “Transformation Intensive?” It could be said that the purpose of a Transformation Intensive is to *uncover* essence; that is, the original, pure, clean face of Dasein gets obscured by “acquired conditioning” (Cleary, 1986). Acquired conditioning is the phenomenon whereby, during the process of daily living, the false begins to be accepted for the real. One of the biggest stumbling blocks here is to begin accepting Ego as in charge, as if it were directing affairs and producing results; whereas, from another perspective (Gyatso, 2001), it can be shown upon closer examination that Ego has no real substance but rather is only a series of identification with passing moments.

Nevertheless, it is quite common for people to take Ego as real – *as if this was their very essence*, their ultimate ‘to be.’ Once Ego is perceived to be in charge, much confusion can result: people start jockeying for position, attempting to advance their own interests at the

expense of others, vying for power and recognition, believing all the time that there is something permanent to be gained by these antics. This habit of accepting the false for the real is the source of much disharmony in the world. Ego certainly has a place in the daily maintenance of Life, but once the Body goes so goes Ego: it turns out to have been only a passing affair. We are told by reliable sources (pick your favorite Holy Book) that there are far deeper realities.

The Essence of the Transformation Intensive is to uncover Essence – to *recover* the original, pure, clean face of Dasein, the face that existed before the onset of acquired conditioning. This requires peeling back layer upon layer of superficial identification until a bright, shiny, sensitive and vulnerable inner core is revealed. This inner core is intimately connected to a Source. I would propose that this Source is the very essence of Dasein, the ultimate ‘to be’ – and, if “to be or not to be” is the question (Shakespeare, 1961, p. 86), I would propose that a Transformation Intensive is one way to find out.

References

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