

Towards a Phenomenology of Reading Phenomenology: Notes on a Required Text E. Christopher Mare – KA*719 – Winter 2011

The required text in question is Helmut Wagner's *Phenomenology of Consciousness and Sociology of the Life-world*, an excellent account tracing the evolution of thought of Alfred Schutz, Wagner's mentor. The book is adapted from a couple of seminars given in a university setting; thus it has the character of a perspicuous, sequential unfolding of terms, concepts, and theories as they are needed in the process of arriving at the grand synthesis of ideas that marks the culmination of Schutz's thought.

Since this is my first formal introduction to "phenomenology," that is, the study of "what is experienced inside consciousness" (p. 9), I thought it would be appropriate to describe my experiencing of the book as I was experiencing it. In this way, I might hope to gain an understanding of the activities of consciousness while involved in this kind of activity.

First of all, I like to 'engage' with a book like this, so full of good ideas, not simply 'read' it. Engaging means having a pen in hand while moving through the text, underlining those sentences or passages that appear to me particularly well-stated. Sometimes a whole paragraph will meet this criterion, or perhaps said paragraph will be a summation of a significant train of thought, in which case it will be accented with a bracket alongside, so as to bypass the need to underline every single sentence. Sometimes a sentence or phrase will appear so important that a block arrow is placed alongside, pointing to that particular conception so as to give it added prominence. In very special cases – and these appear to be those that are poignantly contributing to the ongoing evolution of my own thought processes – a conception will deserve to have a star placed beside it; only a few times in my life, two stars have been placed! Meanwhile, notes are added in the margins, or at the top or bottom of the page: these could be questions that were raised, references to other texts or authors, or sometimes the graphic re-articulation of a new word or phrase that I especially want to remember. I also have a yellow and an orange highlighter close by in case additional emphases are desired.

I take the time to describe all that here because the resulting pages amount to a record of the workings of consciousness as I move through the text. When I said above that certain moments in the reading will "appear" to be important than others, these moments are accompanied by a palpable cognitive-feeling event, a state of heightened awareness that causes me to focus extra attention on the ideas being presented. These moments no doubt require a more careful second or third reading until a desired state of comprehension has been achieved – this comprehension probably being the *integration* of the new ideas into *existing*

consciousness. Needless to say, pages without much marking did not register significantly. For whatever reason, attention did not deem that discussion worthy of integration. During these times, I find myself half-reading, often with wandering thoughts or a kind of 'split' attention with one half going through the motion of reading the words while the other half is working on some other problem – until such time, that is, another moment of heightened awareness rises and I need to re-focus single-mindedly on the new material being presented.

With that kind of background, I can say that Wagner's book has a fair amount of deliberate markings (i.e. significant engagements with consciousness) – especially Chapter 2: Approach to a Phenomenology of Consciousness. Here, I finally found the articulation of ideas that only had been alluded to before. For example, on a page with three arrows, I learned this important conception: "Conscious mental activity replaces spontaneity whenever it is necessary to correct apperceptive errors. Apperception, then, yields to deliberate appraisal, to a redefinition of the object...Neither the eyes nor any other sense organs are the human window to the world: apperception is. What is perceived is but the raw material to be utilized selectively in fashioning apperceptive images" (p. 54). This is exactly the kind of language I was looking for to support my ongoing project of attempting to describe the effects on consciousness of people moving through various environments – so no wonder it got three arrows! My notes wonder if it might be possible to *educate* for apperception? This ties in with a simultaneous argument in this section, that of Gestalt: "[C]onfiguration itself is organized in such a way that its whole is perceived prior to all its details. Its parts are determined by the whole, but the whole is more than the sum of its parts. We get the *Gestalt* immediately. Details have to be sought out in a more or less deliberate effort" (p. 52). Perhaps you can imagine how important this conceptualization is for a designer of the built environment? Another one of my notes asks if it is possible to educate for the Gestalt? I guess I was thinking that if people had some understanding behind the purpose of an environmental ensemble they would more readily identify its meaning and so turn their attention to the awareness of finer details – all this influencing the consciousness of the perceiver at ever more subtle levels.

Many other ideas in this chapter offer useful contributions to the competence of a designer: "eidetics," "intentionality," "vantage point," "life-world," "multiple worlds," etc. I only hope I read these specific sections enough times that they were indelibly integrated into consciousness! If not, there are ample markings on the pages to redirect me to my points of concern. In that sense, the subtitle of this posting, "Notes on a Required Text" is a literal statement!

In closing this introductory posting, I would like to mention that as Wagner moved into the chapters introducing sociological phenomenology, the markings on the pages grew more infrequent. This is not necessarily to confess that I was only half-reading these pages (!); it's simply a record that consciousness was piqued more in the earlier presentations of phenomenological psychology and transcendental phenomenology – and consciousness, we are

told, is invariably a subjective experience. I take this piquing, then, as a subjective direction marker. I will return to an overall assessment of Shutz's thinking in a follow-up essay.