

KA*719: Transformative Phenomenology

Module 2, Posting 2

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During the on-line Forum for Module 2, I was intrigued by Ann Alexander's hypothesis that there is a relationship between "emotional intelligence" and phenomenological inquiry. Since that time, I have had a chance to ponder this possibility. I offer here a few thoughts in this direction.

From what I understand, the phenomenological reduction – the *epoche* – is an effort to arrive at pure perceptual experience before it becomes filtered (i.e. distorted) by conceptual prejudice. This conceptual prejudice, we could say, is a structure of accumulated mental deliberation – prior habits of thought, opinions, rationalizations, internalized theories and concepts, etc. – that acts as a screen to any specific new perceptual experience. For example, "scientific realism" – the belief that there is an external world of discrete objects whose essential properties can be measured empirically – is one such conceptual prejudice. While a convenient structure of consciousness, in effect assuring that there is consistency of perception over time, the conceptual prejudice actually inhibits the freshness, and in fact authenticity, of each new perceptual experience.

For the purpose of this argument, let's assume that the mental activity that generates conceptual prejudice, in all its forms, is a function of the posterior neo-cortex of the brain, the frontal lobe that accommodates deliberate rational reasoning. If this is true, then the *epoche* could be considered as an effort to suspend for a moment the contribution of this part of the brain. Taking this a step further, suspending the contribution of the neo-cortex conceivably could permit greater influence from the older, basal regions of the brain – what is often referred to as the limbic system, *the seat of emotions*. If all this is true so far, then the phenomenological reduction is seeking perceptual input from more primordial regions of the brain, and Ann's hypothesis would seem to have some merit: there *is* a relationship between emotional intelligence and phenomenological inquiry.

Mark Johnson, in his most recent book, concurs explicitly:

I contend that [the] mainstream, and still dominant, [philosophical] tradition has only the most meager resources for dealing with the deepest sources of human meaning. Consequently, much contemporary philosophy focuses exclusively on abstract conceptual and propositional structure, leaving us with a very superficial and eviscerated view of mind, thought, and language. These philosophers have developed elaborate conceptual schemes for identifying the so-called cognitive, structural, and formal aspects of experience, thought, and language, but they lack adequate philosophical resources to plumb the depths of the qualitative feeling dimensions of

experience and meaning. Although some phenomenological traditions do address these affective dimensions, phenomenology has been marginalized within mainstream Anglo-American philosophy and has consequently not had the salutary influence on our conceptions of human understanding that it deserves (2007, p. x).

Switching localities, there is another way of looking at neurophysiology in relation to the phenomenological reduction. As is generally known, the left hemisphere of the brain is configured so as to accommodate linear, causal, rational thinking, as exemplified by the use of language; whereas the right hemisphere of the brain is more intuitive, wholistic, relying on pattern-recognition type of understanding.

There are places in the book *Understanding Phenomenology* (Hammond, et al., 1994) where the authors seem to suggest that phenomenological inquiry is an act of pattern recognition. Especially when discussing the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), a body-based form of knowing is adduced – *pre-conscious* and *pre-language*:

In Part One of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, ‘The Body,’ [Merleau-Ponty] argues not only that this is not an ‘object’ (as defined by objective thought, and as both empiricists and intellectualists assume), but that instead it should be understood as a ‘subject’: more specifically, as the subject of action (‘in-the-world’). But its subjectivity is not the kind envisaged by intellectualists or idealists. In particular, although like the intellectualist’s subject it possesses both knowledge and intentionality, it does so in an essentially practical and ‘pre-conscious’ form (p. 151).

How interesting to think of phenomenological inquiry as an attempt to return to a pre-language, pre-conscious, *body*-based understanding of the world. The body doesn’t decompose phenomena “into supposedly discrete, independently identifiable (and determinately describable) elements, to each of which a physiological cause is described” (p. 138) – no, this is the analytical work of the rationalizing intellect, the languaging left brain. With body-based understanding, we are more likely to compose perception as inter-relationship: “For what is perceived is a ‘whole’ which is not thus decomposable into discrete parts [...] these parts are not fully separable from one another. The specific character of each is influenced at least to some extent by its relations with the others in constituting this particular whole” (p. 143). We could say this work is more aligned with the processing of the right brain.

Though whole-brain inter-communication and interaction is ideal, there has been a tendency recently to over-rely on the linear processing of the rationalizing left brain – as well as the abstract symbolizing of the neo-cortex – and this over-reliance has tended to skew our civilization in a certain direction. Phenomenological inquiry, therefore, with its preference for descriptions of the life-world that come from pre-analytic modes of perception – indeed, from primal emotive sources – may very well be a perspective that could lend some balance.

References:

Hammond, M., Howarth, J. & R. Keat (1994) *Understanding phenomenology*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell

Johnson, M. (2007) *The meaning of the body: Aesthetics of human understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Merleau-Ponty, M., trans. by C. Smith (1962) *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge