

A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology and Existentialism

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Phenomenology and existentialism are two of the most influential movements in twentieth-century philosophy. During the heyday of existentialism in the middle decades of the twentieth century, there were heated disputes about whether the movements belonged together or were even compatible with one another. Herbert Spiegelberg, for example, argued that, while phenomenology and existentialism are independent movements, they are compatible in principle and, indeed, that they have “at least enough affinity for fruitful cooperation” (1960: 70). Asher Moore, by contrast, saw the relationship between existentialism and phenomenology as an “unholy alliance,” and argued that phenomenology was “unfit . . . for existential inquiry” because it necessarily had to overlook individual existence in its search for universal structures (1967: 408, 409).

Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre were the two figures crucial to this debate – crucial in the sense that each could, with right, be claimed by both phenomenology and existentialism. In fact, they disagreed on the subject of the relationship between existentialism and phenomenology. Heidegger always thought of his work as true to the genuine spirit of phenomenology (although he stopped referring to his work as “phenomenological” in order to distance himself from Husserlian phenomenology). He was dismissive, however, of existentialism, contending that it was a continuation of the errors of modernism (Heidegger 2000: 225). Heidegger concluded in 1966, perhaps unrealistically, that “it is hardly necessary anymore today to expressly observe that my thought deals neither with existentialism nor with existence-philosophy” (Heidegger 1986: 649–50). Despite his rejection of twentieth-century existentialism, Heidegger’s work carried on the existential tradition of thought as it had been developed by the nineteenth-century progenitors of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and also was tremendously influential on the later development of existentialism. Heidegger’s standing in the existential tradition is secured by his exploration of the existential structure of *Dasein* or human being, his historicized account of essences, his critique of the banality of conformist everyday life, and his reflections on guilt, anxiety, death, and authenticity.

Sartre, on the other hand, embraced the label of existentialism, arguing that it was “the least scandalous, the most austere of doctrines” (1947: 15). Existentialism, he

claimed, was “a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity” (1947: 12). At the same time, Sartre saw his existentialism as fundamentally grounded in a phenomenological approach. He gave *Being and Nothingness* the subtitle “A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology.” And in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, he wrote of phenomenology that “for centuries we have not felt in philosophy so realistic a current. The phenomenologists have plunged man back into the world; they have given full measure to man’s agonies and sufferings, and also to his rebellions” (1962: 105).

Before saying any more about existentialism’s and phenomenology’s compatibility with and relevance to one another, we should briefly introduce the two movements.

Phenomenology

The term “phenomenology” has been in common use in philosophy since Hegel’s monumental work, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807). During the nineteenth century, the word denoted a descriptive as opposed to a hypothetical-theoretical or analytic approach to a problem.

Phenomenology began as a discernible movement with Edmund Husserl’s (1859–1938) demand that philosophy take as its primary task the description of the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness. This description was meant to be carried out on the basis of what the “things themselves” demanded, without assuming or adopting the theoretical frameworks, assumptions, or vocabularies developed in the study of other domains (such as nature).

Husserl apparently began using the term in the 1890s in his lectures “Phänomenologie: ein Abschnitt in Brentanos Metaphysik (Klärung von Grundbegriffen)” (see Heidegger 1993: 13 n. 6). Franz Brentano (1838–1917) had a decisive influence on Husserl’s development of phenomenology owing to Brentano’s own descriptive approach to the study of psychic phenomena, and also through his arguments regarding the structure of consciousness. Also of influence was Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1833–1911) argument against naturalistic accounts of the psychic domain, and his attempt to develop a more descriptive approach to the human sciences.

In Husserl’s hands, “phenomenology” came to have a more precise, methodological sense (see Chapter 2). For Husserl, phenomenology is a study of the structures of consciousness (see Chapter 6), which proceeds by “bracketing” the objects outside of consciousness itself, so that one can proceed to reflect on and systematically describe the contents of the conscious mind in terms of their essential structures (see Chapters 8 and 9). This was a method, Husserl believed, which could ground our knowledge of the world in our lived experience, without in the process reducing the content of that knowledge to the contingent and subjective features of that experience (see Chapter 7).

On the basis of this method, Husserl believed, philosophy could be established as a rigorous science that could “clarify all species and forms of cognition” (Husserl 1964: 4), because it could discover the structures common to all mental acts. Following

Brentano, Husserl saw intentionality, object-directedness, as the mark of the mental (see Chapter 5). Intentional acts, Husserl argued, have a meaningful structure through which the mind can be directed toward objects under aspects. Another essential structural feature of the mental, Husserl argued to great influence, was temporality (see Chapter 10).

Early followers of Husserl extended his work into a variety of domains – Max Scheler (1874–1928), for instance, into an examination of the essence of emotions and intuition; Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) into art and aesthetics; Edith Stein (1891–1942) into the nature of empathy; Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) into psychology. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Husserl’s most brilliant student and influential critic, along with Jaspers, moved phenomenology in a new direction.

Heidegger rejected Husserl’s focus on consciousness and, consequently, much of his basic phenomenological method. For Heidegger, the purpose of phenomenological description was not to discover the structures of consciousness, but to make manifest the structure of our everyday being-in-the-world. Because Heidegger’s interest was worldly relations rather than mental contents, he rejected both the usefulness of the phenomenological method as practiced by Husserl and the need for mental meanings to account for many if not most forms of intentional directedness. Indeed, Heidegger argued that the intentionality on which Husserl focused – the intentionality of discrete mental judgments and acts – is grounded in something more basic, the intentionality of a general background grasp of the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) extended Heidegger’s account of being-in-the-world to a study of our bodily experience of the world in perception (see Chapter 3). Sartre as a phenomenologist shared Heidegger’s focus on existential, worldly relationships, but sought to account for those relationships in a Husserlian fashion by focusing on consciousness.

Heidegger and Husserl both had a formative influence on many of the most prominent philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century. These include Heidegger’s students Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who developed Heidegger’s philosophical hermeneutics, and Hannah Arendt (1906–75), whose work on politics and public ethics developed many of Heidegger’s insights into our being with one another in a shared public world. Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), Michel Foucault (1926–84), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), and Jürgen Habermas (1929–) have all been influenced by and, to some degree, defined their work by opposition to, the phenomenologies of Heidegger and Husserl.

Existentialism

Existentialism was self-consciously adopted as a label for a movement only in the twentieth century. But existentialist writers see themselves as carrying on a tradition that was first anticipated by Blaise Pascal’s (1623–62) rejection of Cartesian rationalism, which tried to define human being in terms of our rational capacities. Pascal saw human being as an essential paradox, a contradiction between mind and body. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), usually acknowledged as the founder of modern existentialism, shared Pascal’s sense for the inherent contradiction built into the human

condition. Kierkegaard reacted to Hegel's systematic and, purportedly, total account of human being and history in terms of rationality, arguing for the essential absurdity of human existence, and the need for a fundamentally irrational, but faithful and passionate commitment to a Christian form of life. Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Dostoevsky (1821–81) likewise criticized the philosophical tradition's emphasis on rationality as undermining the passionate attachment to the world necessary to support a worthwhile life. Together, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche form the historical background to twentieth-century existentialism (see Chapter 11).

In the twentieth century, the existential approach to religion pioneered by Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky was developed by a surprising range of theologians and religious thinkers (see Chapter 13). These include, among others, Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948), Paul Tillich (1886–1965), Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Miguel de Unamuno (1865–1936), Lev Shestov (1865–1938), Karl Barth (1886–1968), and Martin Buber (1878–1965).

In the public imagination, however, twentieth-century existentialism was most well known in its atheist form as popularized by French thinkers like Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), and Albert Camus (1913–60) (see Chapter 14). This branch of existentialism was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God," his rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and his consequent critique of traditional metaphysics and ethics.

Like the phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, existentialism as a movement starts its analysis with the existing individual – the individual engaged in a particular world with a characteristic form of life. Thus, an emphasis on the body (see Chapter 17) and on the affective rather than rational side of human being (see Chapter 16) are characteristic of existentialism. For existentialist thinkers, the focus is on uncovering what is unique to that individual, rather than treating her as a manifestation of a general type. Existentialists thus tend to be anti-essentialists, to deny that there are essential features or properties that determine the being of a thing. Many go further and insist that the world is not just lacking in essence, but absurd, and thus incapable of being made sense of (see Chapter 19). Indeed, existentialists like Sartre and Camus argue, human being itself is rendered meaningless and absurd by the inevitability of death (see Chapter 20).

With their focus on the individual and a denial of any meaningful sense of what constitutes an essential or absolute goal for human existence, existentialists emphasize human freedom and responsibility (see Chapter 18), and hold that the only goal consistent with that freedom and responsibility is to live authentically (see Chapter 15). Finally, existentialists tend to share an opposition to rationalism and empiricism alike, and often define themselves by their opposition to the main currents of modern philosophy.

Because existentialist analysis takes as its starting point an involved stance within an individual's experience of the world, some of the most powerful works in existentialist thought have taken the form of novels, plays, or pseudonymous tracts. These forms are effective ways for an existentialist author to explore a way of being in the world from the inside, as it were. As a consequence, existentialism has been, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least as influential in the literary arts as it has been in philosophy. Dostoevsky was, of course, primarily a writer of fiction,

but many of Sartre's, Beauvoir's, and Camus's most influential writings were also works of fiction. Camus received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957; Sartre was awarded (and refused) the prize in 1964. Literary figures influenced by existentialism, or recognized as existentialists in their own right, include novelists,¹ playwrights,² and poets.³

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Let us return, then, to the issue of the compatibility of existentialism and phenomenology. To a large extent, the arguments over the issue have been rendered moot. With the benefit of few more years of historical distance, it no longer seems pressing to decide to what extent existentialism can be phenomenological, or whether phenomenology leads one inevitably to existentialist views on the self and the world. What is clear is that there is no merely accidental relationship between the two traditions. Indeed, the ultimate compatibility of the movements is resolved in practice. Both movements are now routinely drawn upon in addressing current concerns in the philosophy of mind and action (Chapters 21–25), cognitive science (Chapter 26) and psychology (Chapter 27), the philosophy of science and technology (Chapters 29 and 31), ethics broadly construed (Chapters 30, 34, and 35), politics (Chapter 36), history (Chapter 37), art (Chapter 38), and mathematics (Chapter 39).

The phenomenological and existential traditions have now largely merged into a common canon of works and ways of doing philosophy. If we had to try to summarize what these two traditions have in common, we could perhaps do no better than identify the following four approaches that they both share:

1 A concern with providing a description of human existence and the human world that reveals it as it is, without the distortion of any scientific presuppositions. This leads to:

2 A heightened awareness of the non-rational dimensions of human existence, including habits, non-conscious practices, moods, and passions.

3 A focus on the degree to which the world is cut to the measure of our intellect, and a willingness to consider the possibility that our concepts and categories fail to capture the world as it presents itself to us in experience.

4 A belief that what it is to be human cannot be reduced to any set of features about us (whether biological, sociological, anthropological, or logical). To be human is to transcend facticity.

Existentialism develops these concerns in a particular direction, coming to hold the following:

5 Everyday life is at best banal and at worst absurd and meaningless.

6 Anxiety in the face of death can disclose to us the banality or absurdity of life; hence, there is a constant motivation to flee from anxiety back into conformism and a reaffirmation of everyday life.

7 The most pressing philosophical task is to help us cope with anxiety and despair in such a way that we can affirm *this* life in all its absurdity.

8 The ideal human life will be authentic, that is, accept responsibility for the exercise of freedom.

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The Organization of the Book

This book is divided into three main parts: Part I is devoted to phenomenology and Part II is devoted to existentialism. Each of these parts contains longer chapters devoted to the main movements of the respective traditions, and a number of shorter chapters highlighting some of the central concepts of the movement. In Part III we abandon the attempt to treat phenomenology and existentialism as movements in isolation from one another. Indeed, we abandon the effort to treat them as *historical* movements at all. Instead, we present chapters devoted to taking up contemporary problems, issues, and fields of philosophy from an existential and/or phenomenological perspective. Some of these chapters are more influenced by one movement or the other. As a whole, however, we believe that they demonstrate the continued vitality of phenomenology and existentialism.

Notes

- 1 These include Ivan Turgenev (1818–83), Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), André Malraux (1901–76), Walker Percy (1916–90), John Updike (1932–), Norman Mailer (1923–), and John Barth (1930–).
- 2 These include Samuel Beckett (1906–89), Eugène Ionesco (1912–94), and Arthur Miller (1915–2005).
- 3 Such as Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926).

References and Further Reading

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