

Phenomenological Account of Religious Experience

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History of philosophy is built upon rigid discrimination between various human experiences. Human experiences are divided mainly into two major experiences: Perceptual and intellectual. Perceptual experience is defined by empiricism as an *a posteriori* experience of empirical sensations. Meanwhile, rationalism claims that the only acceptable experience is *a priori* experience of intellectual object (natural laws, mathematical equations and logical operations). There is no other experience outside those two philosophical account of experiences. All other experiences must be subsumed either within perceptual or intellectual experience.

This long established philosophical imperialism over experience was finally challenged by new mode of philosophizing called Phenomenology. Differ from both Rationalism and Empiricism, Phenomenology abandons normative claim of experience and adopt a more descriptive account of experience. According to Phenomenology, we must describe experience as experienced by first person, not an object of philosophical contemplation. Phenomenological description of experience also discards two major assumptions found in the epistemological tradition: Naturalism and psychologism. Naturalism is epistemological assumption that there are spatio-temporal objects which transcend the way human experience them. Psychologism, on the other hand, is assumption that objects are merely a by-product of psychic mechanism. Experience, according to Phenomenology, must be released from those two epistemological prejudices and be described in its own terms.

Phenomenological account of experience concerns merely about the internal structure of experience. There are always two poles of human experience that correlate each other. Human experience is divided into *noesis* (mode of experience) and *noema* (experienced object). Imagination (*noesis*) bring forth imagined object (*noema*). Thinking (*noesis*) bring forth thought object (*noema*). Perception (*noesis*) bring forth perceived object (*noema*). We must be very careful in using the phrase “bring forth,” since it is not necessarily meant that subject actively bring object into appearance. Without appearing object, there is no mode of experience. The way object appears to the subject also determines mode of experience. Subject and object is engaged in such a reciprocal relation.

Phenomenology is often used to explain form of experience called religious experience. From phenomenological perspective, religious form of experience has its own structure and dynamic unfound in any other form of experiences. Anthony Steinbock, a phenomenologist, uses the word “verticality” to represent the structure and dynamic of religious experience (Steinbock 12). Verticality expresses a lived directedness—religiously, morally, and bodily—like when we aspire to reach new heights, when we look up to someone, when we value the life of another above our own. This article is written to explore phenomenological account of religious experience further by keeping in mind the principle of reciprocity. It is solely about religious experience as an experience of the absolute explicated negatively as both non-subjective and non-objective experience.

Presentation

Phenomenology concerns mainly not “what” is there in experience but how this “what” appears to us. Phenomenologist contemplates not upon a chair but how that chair appears to her. How something appears to subject is called givenness or mode of givenness. Experience means the way or mode in which something is given to us. A chair, for instance, could be given as perceived chair, remembered chair, imagined chair, disliked chair and so on. Focusing on givenness of experience requires that subject suspends all prejudices concerning the being of things. There are two major prejudices that need to be suspended namely naturalism and psychologism. On one hand, naturalism prejudices that there is independent reality outside human experience. Psychologism, on the other hand, prejudices that reality is merely

mental construction. Those two prejudices, if not suspended, become serious obstacle to phenomenological reflection to givenness of experience.

In normal everyday life, subjects usually impose her own interest to phenomena. We see what we want to see not the perceived itself. Phenomenological reflection is actually a disposition of the “self.” The interest at stake in the so called phenomenological disinterestedness is precisely self-interest namely self’s interest in the world that intrudes and imposes itself on the phenomena. One of the most important objective of phenomenology is to liberate the phenomena and mitigate the intrusion of the self on the phenomenal field. Phenomenology is constituted by rigorous and disciplined exercises aimed at abstaining from the simple assertion of being in favor of witnessing how its meaning is given to us. Phenomenology can be understood as methodological attempt to practice such a disposition for a possible dis-position. By doing so, phenomenology might focus on whatever gives itself in its own manner: An epiphany of the Holy, revelation of the Other, manifestation of cultural objects, disclosure of the earth, and display of elemental beings.

Openness of phenomenology to all kinds of givenness could actually be put under scrutiny. There is mode of givenness that has dominated phenomenological way of seeing called presentation. Presentation is a type of givenness that is peculiar to sensible and intellectual objects. What is peculiar about presentation that it is more or less dependent upon my power to usher things into appearance within a context of significance. It could be said that subject provokes phenomena to give itself to subject as appearance. When I intend an object, an object gives itself. I lean against the tree, I enjoy fresh air or I imagine the contour of a rock. All of my intentions usher how the being of the things appear to me. Intentions are also teleological in character. Walking toward a familiar person points further on to new features in response to my initiating moves. Walking toward him points further on to new themes and horizons. I pursue a richer fulfillment and expect situation delineated by what was initially presented. I recognize the way he walks and expect to see other familiar things that could characterize him as my best friend.

Through presentation, object is understood as my accomplishment , a *Leistung*. However, presentation is not all tied one sidedly to the subjective realm. The objects themselves call us to a encounter. They function as allures and affectively motivate my turning toward them so that they can be ushered into experience in an explicit way. A dress must allure a woman first before

it could be thought as a perfect dress for her best friend's wedding. There is somekind of objective pull that is affectively influence people judgment on how things appear to them. In fact, in order for something to come into being as prominent, it must be affectively significant and exercise an affective pull on the subject. This salience and turning forward can be more or less gradual or sudden. A student gradually focuses his perceptual apparatus to discern an interesting lecture by his professor. Or, he might suddenly pay attention to some interesting propositions loudly spoken by the professor.

Precisely because of this interplay of intentionality, the economy of concealment and apperance governs the way things are presented. Object can resist subject's intention or subject's power to present. My perceptual "I can" can be checked by an "I cannot," a concept may exceed by ability to think, my "I think" can be guarded by an "I cannot think." I can see a front side but not back side of a drawer. I can think "a cat" as animal but not as furniture. Even so, what challenges subject's ability or freedom to thinks is still relative to subject and thus remains within the general economy of presentation. I can try to halt my own cognitive effort when come acroos the "unthinkable," but this would still be to cisrcumscribe the intellectual field by my "I think" or "I can." The dynamic interplay between subject's intentional act and affective pull of the object, intersubjective orientation to the world, passive association of sense, passive association of sense, all this belongs to presentation as mode of givenness of experience and is governed by its laws and dynamics.

Verticality

As form of experience, presentation is predominant within phenomenological accounts of experience. Basically, presentation is regarded as the only mode of givenness. This singularity creates two fundamental problems. First, we would attempt to apply presentation to anything that has the potential of being given. Thus, for example, God would be described as susceptible to the same kind of intention and fulfillment, verification and dissapointment we found in perceptual or intelectual object. Second, there are matters that are in principle not accessible to perception or thought. The matters could possible be given as not being able to be given, experienced as not being able to be experienced. There are matters which could be characterized as limit of phenomenal givenness.

Presentation as phenomenological singularity is challenged by several prominent phenomenologists. They have their own reservation to ontological

equation between “experience” or “presence” with presentation of objects, perceptually or epistemically, or with an accomplishment initiated by the self. Max Scheler, for instance, distinguishes vividly between givenness as revelation (*Offenbarung*) from manifestation (*Offenbarkeit*). Emanuel Levinas insists that the Other is what is not able to be given. He distinguishes givenness as disclosure from givenness as revelation. Jean Luc Marion draws similar distinction between manifestation and revelation in his work *Dieu sans l'être*. Their works, in principle, found a new phenomenological approach to experience which celebrate proliferation of mode of givenness.

Proliferation of phenomenological way of experience matters bring forth a non-presentation mode of givenness called verticality. Verticality is the vector of mystery and reverence. It differs radically from horizontality which is the vector of understandability and conceivability. Verticality could also be distinguished from transcendentalism. The notion “transcendentalism” itself could mean three different beliefs (Taylor, *A Secular* 20). *First*, belief in some agency or power transcending the immanent order. *Second*, belief in some good higher than or beyond human flourishing. *Third*, belief in possible transformation which could take us beyond merely human perfection. Those notions of transcendentalism, however, are loaded with too many religious (formal) presuppositions. Meanwhile, verticality escapes all form of formalization including religious one. Verticality is not mode of givenness of a transcendent God since “God” could still be included within horizontality.

Verticality signifies vectors of experience having structure of their own, independent from the structure of presentation. Those experience of verticality harbor their own kind of evidence and mode of givenness. What is given vertically do not incite cognition but awe and wonder. Modes of givenness are called vertical when it takes us beyond ourselves. Modes of vertical givenness testify the existence of radical presence of “absolutes” within the field of human experience. This “absolute,” however, is not synonymous with “universal.” It is a unique presence that cannot be attributed to singularity or plurality. Absolute experience could be found in three spheres: religious, moral and ecological.

Phenomenologist, Anthony Steinbock, registers five modes of vertical givenness which harbors “absolute” (Steinbock 25). *First* is epiphany. Epiphany is the mode of givenness that qualifies a dimension of experiencing as religious. It is the mode of vertical givenness when we experience “the holy” as something beyond mundane reality. *Second* is revelation. Revelation is

mode of givenness that qualifies a dimension of experiencing as moral. The movement in and through which the person is revealed is interpersonal and pertains to exemplarity. *Third* is manifestation. Manifestation denotes a vertical givenness that pertains to the ways in which products or cultural artifacts evoke the Holy. Cultural objects could both be presented horizontally and manifested vertically. When manifested vertically, they serve as “icon.” An icon does not represent something but points beyond itself, it stems from what is other not from itself. *Fourth* is disclosure. Disclosure pertains to the way Earth as ground is given in spatio-temporal experience as absolute. The Earth as such is never presented in the perception of object but is disclosed as absolute ground. Earth could be disclosed as ground for our bodily orientation toward things and that ultimately gives them meaning. *Fifth* is display. Display pertains to the way elemental beings evoke the Holy. A tree, a grain of sand, a body of water could display the Holy while themselves remaining relative. Holy water used in religious ceremony was still an earthen element but evoked holiness due to the sacredness of the ceremony.

Any forms of verticality is usually distinguished from idolatry. Idolatry could be understood as a way of experience matters that deforms or reverses verticality. Idolatry is a way of imposing our subjectivity on what is being experienced. It has the effect of closing off epiphanic, revelatory, manifest, disclosive and displaying givenness. It is the deepest way to characterize our despiritualizing downspin in all its forms. Idolatry deforms not only our religious experience but also all forms of experience found in daily activities. We see beggar in pavement yet think that he must be somekind of social burden. We see war on television yet concern only how it will effect foreign investment. We see our sick brother in a hospital yet calculate the bills we will have to pay. We hike through unexplored rain forest yet think about the trees merely as standing reserve. We sanctify our religious group and treat others as infidels. Those are exemplars of idolatry as an anti verticality. The logic of idolatry is a reversed verticality. The more we invest ourselves in our selves and things, the less we are able to dispose ourselves to mode of vertical givenness.

Experiencing the Holy

One of the most interesting exemplar of religious experience is mystical experience. Mystical experience is characterized by special intimacies of the presence of the holy which cause existential transformation. This way,

mystical experience cannot be reduced into a matter of consciousness. The language of consciousness too easily restricts matter of experience to epistemic objects, suggesting that transformations pertaining to the individual person are merely changes in awareness or knowledge. It reduces mysticism to psychologism or to altered mental states. Mystical experience is self-giveness of a presence, a Personal presence. Existential transformation felt by mystics after experiencing the holy cannot be translated to ratio-cognitive event. Mystical experience do not merely impact the mind but also spirit, emotion, attitude and somatic. It changes our ways of loving, in terms of tears, ecstasies, pains and so on.

Mystical experience is the givenness of something holy as “It” is lived not cognized. We tend to conceive mystical experience as non-rational experience since we subsume it under horizontal mode of givenness such as presentation. Mystical experience is the self-giveness of the Holy qua Personal presence as this presence is lived. This self-giveness of the Holy is a vertical mode of givenness namely epiphany. Epiphany is personal presence of the Holy and mystical experience is precisely the personal givenness of the Holy as lived in such an intimate manner.

Mystical experience cannot be categorized as trans-mundane experience. The Holy runs through everything and everyone in its everydayness. Mystical way of living is not *bios theoretikos* but *bios praktikos*. Mystical experience could not be reduced into contemplative life since what qualifies mystics are their experiences not their contemplative practices. Mystical elements can be present in ordinary form of experience like the experience of beautiful landscape. Everyone, however, cannot easily be categorized as mystics. Mystical experiences are not within anyone’s reach since they are not correlative to our effort as in case of presentation. They are experienced as “gifts.” Anthony Steinbock wrote: “One can always strive to dispose oneself to the Holy, one can always engage in rigorous spiritual exercises and try to live a “religious” life in this way, but it is not a foregone conclusion that mystical experiences will come about” (Steinbock 26).

Experiencing the Holy surely needs human effort. This human effort, however, is different with that of presentation. This effort may or may not be responded by the holy. The effort required is one of “bracketing” one’s self in order to liberate the vertical dimension in the things themselves and in ourselves. Disposition of the self is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is a lived effort such as those rites practiced by mystics. Those rites could also

be practiced by non-mystics. Vertical experience, however, is not disclosed to anyone. It is a gift that may or may not come about due to some dispositional practices.

Experiencing the Holy in mystical term is indeed a vertical experience. It is a vertical mode of givenness. Heidegger concludes that the Holy confronts all experience with something to which it is unaccustomed and so deprives of its on ground. Vertical experience of the Holy differs with the way we experience our coffee table as place for putting a cup of coffee. One cannot approach the Holy by the mediate and the familiar. If we do that, we just horizontalize our potential vertical experience. Experiencing the Holy deranges or displaces one from ground.

Heidegger, interestingly, claims that the experience of the Holy is poetic in nature. It is an experience of a poet. Heidegger wrote, “Derranging in this way, the holy is the awesome itself. But its awesomeness remains concealed in the mildness of its light embrace. Because this light embrace educates the future poets, they as the initiated ones, knows the holy. Their knowledge is divination. Divine concerns what is coming and what is rising, that is, the dawn” (Heidegger 85—86). The holy expressed by the poet concerns what is coming. This coming, however, could not be named immediately. The poet does not have the power to name the holy immediately. Naming the holy needs something that is higher than what is nearer to the holy, and is nevertheless different from it.

Experiencing the holy could be illustrated as a god throwing lightning flash into the poet’s soul. The flash is not the result of the poet’s creativity or power. It suddenly strikes the poet. The poet could be so struck that he would be tempted to follow only the good fortune and to lose himself in the sole possession of the god. God, however, is not the holy. Poet’s possessed by god would signify the loss of his poetic being. The essential condition of the poet is grounded not in the reception of the god, but in the embrace of the holy. The holy encompasses the poet. When the holy ray strikes him, the poet is not carried away into the blaze but is fully turned toward the holy. The holy blaze shakes the poet and breaks the silence to bring out the words. Poetic words does not represent a given reality but present themselves from darkness through holy blaze.

Experiencing the holy is an experience about what is to come. The appearing of the holy is not continuation of current affairs. It is the coming of the beginning. As coming, the primordially of the beginning is the abiding

before which nothing else can be thought. The “now” names the coming of the holy, which indicates the time in which history decides essentially. One cannot date such time and it is not measurable by historical dates and periods. Historical dates are merely by-product of human calculative thinking. This history, however, is not the event of occurring itself. The event of occurring is only there when there is a primordial decision on the essence of truth. The holy, which is older than time and higher than the gods, is founded in its coming from another beginning and another more primordial history. The holy takes a decision from its beginning in the matter of men and gods: whether they are, how they are and when they are. This way, the holy can only be experienced as gift since it is the holy’s decision beyond the discretion of men and gods. In other words, the holy appears as resistance to experience but it do need human effort to experience it. It is simply a non-effortless gift.

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