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What is Reflective Analysis?



1. “Reflective analysis” is another name for phenomenology, a school of thought begun in 1900 by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl wanted to develop a metaphysics or first philosophy that was a strict science and that hence deserved to be an “-ology,” but “reflective analysis” better conveys initially what phenomenology is as an approach that can be taken in many disciplines.

2. In this time when most phenomenology is actually scholarship on texts, there is need not only for understanding of but also improved skill in this approach because it is the way in which phenomenological claims can be assessed as well as phenomenological investigation advance.

3. In the present essay I attempt to show something of what this general approach is. While most writing in or on phenomenology is addressed by professionals to fellow professionals in philosophy, I am addressing professionals in other disciplines as well as college students who are not committed to a discipline and I am not presupposing any knowledge of philosophy. Maybe this introductory sketch can be usefully discussed in classes and numbering the paragraphs will help that. But some of the issues raised may be unfamiliar to professors as well.

4. Little existing technical terminology is used here. Instead, I will introduce a number of technical expressions as I proceed, usually but not always setting them off with so-called “scare quotes.” These technical expressions are usually developed from ordinary words and clarified with examples. Well done reflective analyses include good examples.

5. To begin with, let us suppose that we are in an attitude in which what is depicted in the photo above can be described as the corner of a room with a picture on the wall above an unmade bed. The walls, bed, bedclothes, pillows, and picture are cultural objects that can obviously be described in much more detail. But then, by a familiar change of attitude, we can recognize that the attitude we have just started in is a straightforward or, perhaps better, an “unreflective” attitude, one in which we overlook, as it were, a great deal, including (a) the “manner of givenness” whereby how what is in the illustration above is predominantly seen visually and not touched but still encountered as tangible, (b) that the scene, which is part of a larger situation, is seen through “appearances” such that if we moved closer or backed away, the picture on the wall would look larger or smaller but the picture itself would be believed to remain of the same size, (c) that the picture has some positive aesthetic value and the rumpled bedclothes are

a little ugly, and (d) the unmade bed calls for volitional action to make it up later on.

6. The attitude in which we can observe and describe such previously overlooked “things” (in the signification whereby anything is a thing) can be called “reflective.” And the resort to this second attitude makes it possible to say, as I have done, that the bed, walls, etc. are predominantly seen, that they are seen through visual appearances, that they have various values for us, and we are disposed to act on something in this situation.

7. By a different angle of reflection while looking at the corner of the room depicted, we can recognize “correlations” whereby there is (a) visual perceiving, (b) valuing, and (c) possible willing in relation to what has just been distinguished and, furthermore, there are, for a third angle of reflection, the unreflective and reflective attitudes, among other things such as dispositions, that we can also easily enough recognize. Then again, where visual perceiving is concerned, it is different from the auditory perceiving that would be lived through if a ball was thrown against the wall and bounced on the bed and then the floor, but this is only a possibility like the tactual perceiving that we would have had if we ran our hand down the wall and not something actualized. Furthermore, the “experiencing” that is actualized in this case is one in which the “thing-as-experienced” in it as well as it itself occur in what is best called the “now” (because then the word “present” can be used for a different descriptive purpose below) and they are best characterized as “perceptual.”

8. Perceptual experiencing contrasts, on the one hand, with “recollecting” and, on the other hand, with “expecting” where real things are concerned. (“Real things” are in time while “ideal things,” such as the significations of words, are not, but nothing more needs to be said about

ideal things in the present essay.) In recollectional experiencing, the experiencing observably goes on in the now while what is experienced in it is in the past, and in expectational experiencing, what is expected is normally a possibility in the future, while the expecting if it also observably goes on in the now.

9. Besides the three species of experiencing of real things just distinguished, there were the differences alluded to between positive and negative valuing and also between inactual and actualized perceivings and willings correlative to different aspects of the scene in the corner of our room depicted above. Valuing and willing and, for that matter, believing are species of what is best called “positing.” More generally, experiencings and positings are kinds of components in what are best called “encounterings.” One might be tempted to use “experiencing” in a broad signification to cover all of these components, but using “encountering” this way leaves “experiencing” free to cover perceiving, recollecting, and expecting specifically and to contrast with believing, valuing, and willing as species of positing.

10. Hearers and readers of this essay should be able to find and observe whether the things described thus far are as I have described them. The descriptions are based on what is best called “reflective observation,” which has the three angles also described, and correlatively the encounterings, things-as-encountered, and attitudes of encountering are reflectively-observationally verifiable. A brief classificatory outline can summarize our findings thus far (the things-as-encountered can be added if one wishes):

ENCOUNTERINGS

I. Positings

- A. Willings
- B. Valuings
- C. Believings

II. Experiencings (of realities)

- A. Expectings
- B. Recollectings
- C. Perceivings

11. Three questions might now lead the hearer or reader to look further for herself into what has been sketched thus far:

(1) In recollecting and expecting respectively, can one merely notice only things things-as-previously-encountered and things-as-to-be-encountered or must one also notice the past and future encounterings and attitudes of encountering correlative with them?

(2) It is fairly easy to recognize that valuings are not only positive and negative but also sometimes neutral; e.g., while our picture might be somewhat handsome and the rumpled bedclothes somewhat ugly, the wall in the corner of the room may have neither positive nor negative in value for us. If that is so, are there three analogous “modalities,” as they can be called, to willing and believing?

(3) In traditional thinking, the imagination is considered a mental faculty on a par with sensation, memory, emotion, volition, etc. I believe this is false. Can we not only pretend to see a second picture to the right on the wall in our illustration, but also pretend to remember eating something for lunch yesterday that we do not seriously remember eating, pretend to like somebody we do not like, pretend to do something like waving our arms in the air above our heads that we are not seriously doing? If so, then is there not is a “fictive” version for each species of “serious” positing and

experiencing distinguished above and imagination is not on a par with the other faculties?

12. Thus far, we have seen that reflective analysis can focus on encounterings, things-as-encountered, and attitudes of encountering. Now we can widen the scope of our reflective observing. Still reflectively observing our predominantly visual perceiving of the corner of the room, we may produce a series of slightly different encounterings that vary with respect to what is paid attention to or, better, “focused on” in them. Thus we can focus on the picture, focus on how the two walls form a corner, focus on the slatted headboard, focus on one pillow, focus on the other, focus on the pile of sheets and blankets, and finally focus on the mattress. This is seven focusings. Despite their similarities, the most striking thing about them is that they form a temporal sequence within what seems best called “mental life.” Each of them goes on for a short while and is followed by another that does so as well.

13. Sometimes these perceivings that differ with respect to the focusing within them are called “mental processes,” a fairly neutral expression that can then be suitably modified, but I prefer to call them “encounterings” also because that expression immediately raises the questions of what it is that is encountered and how. The seven focally different encounterings are encounterings of things beyond or, better, “outwardly transcendent of” the stream of mental life in which they successively occur. This is as interesting as it is obvious. Also interesting, however, is how these encounterings encounter one another within or, better, “immanently in” mental life. Where an encountering immanently encounters an encountering in its future, it can be said to be “protentive to” it and where

it immanently encounters an encountering in its past, it can be said to be “retrotentive to” it.

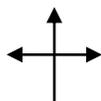
14. “Protentiveness” and “retrotentiveness” are species of a remarkable property that Husserl followed his teacher Franz Brentano in calling “*Intentionalität*,” and I prefer to follow my teacher (and Husserl’s disciple) Dorion Cairns in calling “intentiveness.”¹ Perhaps we first find how encounterings occurring in the now are intentive to things transcendent of mental life, such as the pillows on the bed. There is nothing else like it. But one might be helped to find what is referred to with this word by considering how encounterings in first approximation “meaningfully point” to the things encountered in them.

15. Objection to a mistake may help the hearer or reader of this essay focus on intentiveness. Many thinkers have contended down through the ages that there are so-called “memory images” such that when one recollects a scene from one’s youth, there is actually an image in the now along with the recollecting and this image then represents the past scene. But when we reflect, we do not find such images and we can then wonder why such things are believed in. But what one does find reflectively is the recollecting occurring in the now, the past scene-as-recollected in the past, and that the recollecting is intentive to events in the past. It may sometimes be useful to refer to the intentive encountering as a “noesis” (the adjective is “noetic”) and the thing-as-encountered as a “noema” (the adjective is “noematic”) as Husserl did. Then there is noetic reflecting, noematic reflecting, and straightforward recollecting. Worse than the memory-image theory of

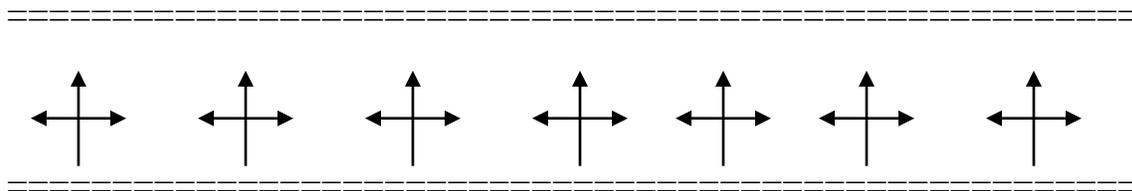
¹ For a reflective analysis by Cairns that goes beyond the present essay and describes intentive syntheses of several sorts, see Dorion Cairns: “The Theory of Intentionality in Husserl,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 32 (1999): 116-124.

recollection is the theory of perception whereby we somehow have representations between the perceiving and the “real” thing perceived, which is a matter of colorless photons. (Perhaps photons exist and are cause but not objects of seeing.)

16. Now let me describe how a diagram might be constructed in which the things just analyzed might be sorted out, but I leave it to the hearers or readers of this essay to construct the diagram. First, one can represent encounterings with short vertical lines with arrow heads pointing up to things transcendent of the stream of mental life and to the left and right to represent retrotentiveness and protentiveness (the attitude could be indicated at the tail of the vertical arrow, but that is not needed now):



17. Second, one can draw two horizontal lines to represent the banks, so to speak, of the stream of mental life and include our seven encounterings in sequence within the stream and intensive to one another as well as to transcendent things such the mess of bedclothes in our picture.



18. And third, our stream can then be considered to flow out of the future on the right through the now and off into the past to the left. (We “naturally” take this temporal flow as part of the spatio-temporality of experienced nature, but this is a belief that can be questioned.)

19. With the approach as well as the concepts now introduced, the hearer or reader of this essay may recognize that it is possible to conduct investigations in the old-fashioned way that William James called introspective in 1890. Actually much else can be developed from here, but a requirement for an introspective or, better, phenomenological psychology can be begun with.

20. In most but not all of the above exposition, the second person (“we” and “our”) has been used. This was not merely a matter of style. The scene of the bed, wall, picture, etc. is originally for us objective or, since that word is overloaded with connotations, we can rather say that it is “public.” In other words, it is seen by or at least visible to more than one person. There is then the fascinating matter of how the persons encountering or able to encounter the scene also experience one another and thus form an intersubjectivity or, less technically speaking, a group that shares in the encountering. Thus, “we” encounter the corner of the room. Until I discover that my friend looking at the corner of my room with me appreciates the bedclothes and the picture differently than I do, I presume she does so in the same way that I do and vice versa. And if I learn that we have reverse preferences they nevertheless are intensive to the same basic things, but with opposite values. My friend is transcendent of my stream of mental life, but even so we have a common or shared mental life within which there is species of experiencing of one another that can be reflectively discerned.

21. But if one recognizes that we originally begin in an attitude in which we share public things, the question can arise of whether there is any alternative to this attitude. The answer is that this “intersubjective attitude” can be “reduced” to an “egological attitude.” Then all other things are considered only in relation to a single person and can be called by contrast

“private.” My friend goes, it may be said, from being a “co-subject” to being an object. We can then ask not only how what is depicted in the picture of the corner of my room appears just to me but also how it appears to just my friend or to just any individual person.

22. I believe such an egological reduction is necessary for psychological investigation and this thus investigations of individual others as well as one’s individual self. Too often it seems that phenomenologists believe that reflective analysis is confined to self-observation in the egological attitude, but this is a mistake. Not only is there individual other-observation as well as individual self-observation, but there can be observation of groups and groups are fundamental in the social and historical sciences rather than the individuals investigated in psychology. Perhaps this comment suffices to suggest that we can start from what is analyzed in Part I above and go on to engage in the philosophy or theory of science. To have objectivity of scientific results, we must return from the egological to the intersubjective attitude.

23. Another brief description may be submitted for the hearer or reader’s examination at this point in the exposition. In the seeing of the pillow on the bed, we can recognize that in our perceiving there is a side facing us and recognize that it is intended to in the “presentive” component of our experiencing and that the side facing away from us is “appresented.” What we perceive is a pillow with not only the mentioned “outsides,” but also “insides.” Without cutting the pillow open to have the inside presented, we can simply turn it over so that one appresented outside becomes presented while the formerly presented side becomes appresented. On this basis and without going into the question of how it is originally established, we can go on to say that another person’s body, including postures, gestures,

products, etc., appresents her mental life, although in this case there is no standpoint for us from which the appresented can become presented as it can always be presented for her.

24. Something should also to be said about the illustration used here. For me in writing this essay it is directly perceived, as is also the encounterings that have been described. But for the hearer or reader of this essay, it is of course a photograph and our descriptions are words and I have been taking advantage of how we are skilled at focusing not on the representations in such cases but on what is represented. When reflectively analyzed, “representational experiencing” can be observed to have a stratified structure such that the infrastratum is intensitive to the representation (the word or depiction) and the superstratum is intensitive to the thing that the representation represents. Thus it can be said overall to be an indirect experiencing even though this structure is overlooked. And this, like the other descriptions offered here, should be confirmed, corrected if needed, and extended by the hearer or reader through her own reflective analysis.

25. Something should now also be said about attitudes beginning from those introduced at the outset of this essay. The unreflective as well as the reflective attitudes can both be called “contemplative” or “observational” because in them we simply look and report what we see. As such they contrast with two other kinds of attitude in which there are also species. The most fundamental kind of attitude is “practical” and as such concerned with what happens, often seeking to influence it but sometimes merely seeking to let something happen. While thinking and experiencing predominate in contemplative attitudes, volition or willing predominates in practical attitudes. A third kind of attitude has valuing predominating in it and might be called the attitude of “enjoyment” or recreation. How these three kinds of

attitude might be specified is another exercise that the hearer or reader might want to employ reflective analysis to perform.

26. Some remarks might be made, finally, about mental lives and the world. What is traditionally called in phenomenology the “natural attitude” seems better called the “worldly attitude” because, while nature is no doubt fundamental, there is more to the world than nature and what is prominent to begin with is how the world is “socio-cultural.” This signifies that the world contains cultural objects such as the bed in the corner of my room, which have values and uses, and also persons and non-human as well as human animals. In the worldly attitude we believe that there is one big system of things related fundamentally in spatial, temporal, and causal relations and this system includes mental lives, which have at least causal relations with other things, our bodies immediately and other things mediatedly.

27. Husserl and his closest followers do not accept that there is no alternative to the worldly attitude and correlatively deny that everything is always only something “in the world.” They hold that while reflecting on mental life we can temporarily suspend belief in or neutralize our believing in the in-the-world status of mental life and, while this alternative “transcendental attitude” is maintained, mental life is non-worldly and can serve the grounding function needed in transcendental first philosophy. Like much else, one can pursue this matter through reflective analysis, but I said at the outset that I would assume no knowledge of philosophy. I hope that colleagues in other disciplines will see different employments of the approach here called “reflective analysis.”

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