

Criticism of Phenomenology
from the View-point of
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Indian philosophy is a vast array of philosophical concepts expressed in the particular Indian style. In fact, shorn of all local peculiarities, all philosophical thoughts and concepts belong to the common-world of philosophy. The same fundamental philosophical thought may take on two different notes depending on two different local-cultural and philosophical traditions. For example, the contemporary philosophical genre, known as existentialism, that originated in France, may be traced in the ancient Buddhism. Professor Radhakrishnan expressed this opinion in the Proceedings of the Indian Philosophical Congress, 1930 (1). Thus, not only existentialism but almost all the Western philosophical thoughts had parallel germination in the Indian soil. No wonder, therefore, that Husserl's phenomenology may have certain daggerretyped parallels in the Indian philosophical schools.

As phenomenology mainly hinges on epistemological problems, it is only natural that phenomenological speculations are to be found mainly in the Nyaya-Vaisheshika school. And the concept of pure consciousness is also to be greeted warmly by its counterpart in Sāṅkhya and Vedānta.

Professor J.N. Mohanty in two of his papers entitled 'Phenomenology in Indian Philosophy' (2) and 'Husserl's phenomenology and Indian Idealism' (3) made a brief sketch of the

germinal phenomenological thoughts in the different Indian philosophical systems or schools. According to him, there is a strong similarity between the common features of Nyaya 'categories' and Husserl's intentional gegenstände of cognitive acts. Nyaya defines 'category' or Padartha as meaning-classification (Pada = term; and Artha = meaning). Therefore, padartha is synonymous with the intentional meaning-constitution of the transcendental subjectivity, in as much as padartha implicates 'knowability'. Again, in Nyaya, 'Lakshana' is not a logical definition. Nyaya logicians place 'Lakshya' or Category before Lakshana. Thus the philosophers of the Nyaya-Vaisesika school placed more importance on knowability than on the known (object). Professor Mohanty summarizes the phenomenological features of the Nyaya-Vaisesika school thus : "The Nyaya-Vaisesika recognizes that these objective categories [substance, attribute, action, universality, particularity, inference, negation, etc.] are all meaning-products. The categories are called 'padarthas', — a Sanskrit term, whose etymological meaning is 'meaning of words'. The intimate connexion between expression and meaning has been recognised by Husserl to the extent of identifying expression with logical meaning. For the Indian logician, the common feature of all these objectivities is that they are all 'knowables'; to be 'knowable' is to be an object of consciousness. And the object-word is, both according to Nyaya-Vaisesika and the modern phenomenology of Husserl, an 'intentional' 'meaning-

product'. This may be a small step, but it may be said to possess such importance as Husserl ascribes to Brentano's findings regarding the concept of intentionality. Such ideas are foregrounds of phenomenology" (4).

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The fundamental tenet of pure consciousness in phenomenology is also to be found in Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Vedānta. Professor Mohanty said about the phenomenological thought in Sāṅkhya : "Indeed, it is interesting to see how in the Sāṅkhya, an evolutionary ontology has been made subordinate to the phenomenological motive, conceived as a purely naturalistic evolutionary ontology, the terminology of the Sāṅkhya becomes unmeaning. The two ultimate principles in the Sāṅkhya ontology are the Prakṛiti (= the unmanifest Matrix of all evolutes), and Puruṣa (= the conscious subject). Neither is Prakṛiti material nor is Puruṣa psychological. Psychological subjectivity (with its three functions of mind, ego and intelligence) is an evolute from Prakṛiti; but Puruṣa, the ultimate conscious principle is the pure consciousness, ——— transcendental subjectivity. The successive evolutes are described in a language borrowed from conscious functions, and their ontological interpretation has proved difficult. Confusion between individual psychology and cosmic evolution has been a common charge. We believe that in the present context and in this context alone,

the motive of the Sāṅkhya is intelligible. The motive is phenomenological and hence the consequent subordination of ontology to phenomenology" (5). Sāṅkhya should not be interpreted as a realistic philosophy; it is decidedly idealistic, in so far as Purusa is the transcendental subjectivity, and in so far as the evolution occurs in reference to this transcendental subjectivity. It is, as if, the linch-pin round which the evolutionary cycle moves. "Like Husserl, the Sāṅkhya includes psychological subjectivity along with Ego (ahankara), Intelligence (Buddhi), and Manas (manas) within the natural world. The ultimate point of reference, that which makes all experience and knowledge possible is Pure Consciousness as such, uncoiled by contact with the object-world" (6).

Like phenomenology, Yoga also speaks of the purity of consciousness or of pure consciousness: "The object of Yoga is to divest mind of all its impurities, so that the stream of consciousness is clear as crystal capable of reflecting the whole reality" (7).

But nowhere in the Indian philosophical currents the phenomenological trend is to be discerned so much as in Vedānta. Professor Mohanty wrote: "The Vedānta's 'Brahman' is rather the transcendental subjectivity of Kant or Husserl than the all-inclusive absolute of Hegel or Bradley. It is Pure Consciousness,

rather than an all-inclusive existence. It is to be realized in inner reflection rather than in a synthesis of naturalistic cognitions. Original Vedānta is phenomenological; latter Vedānta is metaphysical" (8). Mohanty continued in the same paper : "... the Vedāntic literature abounds in phenomenology of perception, of dream, of sleep and of the illusory experiences" (9). In the Philosophical Quarterly of India, 1954, also, Mohanty wrote : "But, nowhere is the emphasis on the supremacy of Pure Consciousness as greater than in the Vedānta of Shankara" (10). In this paper he showed the similarity between Husserl's phenomenological concept of Pure Consciousness and the Vedāntic concept of Pure Consciousness. He particularly stressed the identity between the answers of the two to the vital question: "How does the Pure Consciousness constitute the objective psychological subjectivity? Mohanty answered the question thus : "Husserl and Vedānta have very similar answers. Vedānta traces psychological subjectivity to the prior and false identification of the body with the self (dehatmadyasa). Let us now listen to Husserl : 'Only through the empirical relation to the body does consciousness become real in human and animal sense and only thereby does it win a place in Nature's space and time — the time which is physically measured. Consciousness and body constitute, Husserl tells us, a 'natural unity' " (11).

Professor Debabrata Sinha also found a very striking point of similarity between Vedānta and Phenomenology. He wrote: "... We should not lose sight of certain fundamental Husserlian insights into the nature of consciousness which almost appears to ring a Vedantic note. With a rather ontological overtone Husserl focuses on the fundamental theme of consciousness as the foundational stratum of our experience. He speaks of 'the immortality of transcendental I' and of 'the impossibility that transcendental I were born' " (12). Swami Vivekānanda also struck a Vedantic phenomenological note in his Thoughts on the Gita : "The moment you can calm it [the mind], that [very] moment you will know the truth. What is it that is whirling the mind? Imagination, creative activity. Stop creation [resort to epoche] and you know the truth. All power of creation must stop, and then you know the truth at once" (13).

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Traces of phenomenological thinking can be found also in the Buddhist schools of the Māhyanikas and the Sunyavadins and also in the Yogācāra or Vijnānavada school. The Māhyanika School deny the existence of the categories. "The Lankāvatāra [of this school] tells us that Intellect gives us discrimination (vikalpa) and Quality (dvaita), not Reality. The entire phenomenal practices of the world depend on the four categories of the intellect. Entangled in these categories, people do not try to realize Reality through mystic vision. Consciousness (jāna) has got two

aspects: the first is called intellect (taṅka) which proceeds with the subject-object duality; the second is spiritual experience (prajña) which enables us to realize the Formless and Unqualified Absolute" (14). This Formless and Unqualified Absolute is called Dhutatahata (Suchness). D.T. Suzuki wrote : "Dhutatahata (suchness), thus absolutely viewed, does not fall under the category of being and non-being; and minds which are kept within the narrow circle of contrasts, must be said to be incapable of grasping it as it truly is" (15). It would, perhaps, not be unjust to assume that the Mādhyamika school, here, refers to the bracketing of Husserl in understanding reality. D. Radhakrishnan also spoke of the "Mādhyamika theory of the phenomenality of the world" (16)

The Yogācāra school also rejects the categories as untrue : "All the properties we know, length, size, taste, etc. are subjective. There are no objects independent of us, and when we speak of such we use words only. Outer objects are non-existent. The apparent phenomena around us are produced by mental operations within. They appear and disappear like swiftly vanishing clouds. The so-called outward things, stars and planets, are really mental experiences arising in an established order which may perhaps be counted upon. We read into external nature what exists only in our own minds" (17). According to the Yogācāra school, "consciousness exists quite independently (of the existence or otherwise of external objects)" (18).

The concept of Abhutaparikalpa of the Viśvānavaḍīna comes very near to the philosophy of phenomenology. "The Laṅkāvatāra declares that all dharmas, except consciousness are unreal. Consciousness-only is the established truth preached by the Buddha. All the three worlds (rūpa, rūpa and arūpa, i.e. of Matter, Form and No-form) are the result of discrimination (vikalpa) or thought-relations. No external object exists in reality. All that is, is consciousness" (19). The Abhutaparikalpa "is the dynamic stream of Constructive Consciousness which manifests itself, through its own power of beginningless and transcendental ignorance, as the phenomenal world of subject-object duality" (20). The external world is the construction of mind-consciousness with the help of mana, manita and vikalpa. In his The History of Buddhist Thought Edward J. Thomas said that these "lead to attributing reality or self-existence to unrealities, an entirely wrong, and wrongly imagined (parikalpita) construction of experience" (20a). Here phenomenology is peeping through.

Even in the Jainas school we lay trace out strands of phenomenological thoughts. This is so because almost all the schools of Indian philosophy believe in śabdika pratirakṣa or direct perception of objects : "The Jainas also believe in the stage of Kevala, because according to them, in that stage all avasthas are destroyed and the self becomes pure, and it is called Jina, Arhata or Paraśātma" (21).

Lastly, the Buddhists believe in yogi-pratyaksa which is the "direct apprehension of reality; there is no construction; it is just as the mere sensation or the knowledge of the momentary particular. But this perception is entirely mental, not conscious" (22). All this comes very near to the phenomenology of Husserl and to phenomenology in general.

It is true that accurate parallel phenomenological concepts are not to be found in the Indian philosophical schools. Nevertheless, as we have just now seen, traces of phenomenological thoughts may be found in the Indian schools of philosophy.

However, we can criticize phenomenology from two angles ————
(i) we can criticize the phenomenological traces in the Indian philosophical systems from the view-point of the Indian philosophical schools, which will certainly establish the lacunae of phenomenology, at least indirectly, and (ii) we can criticize phenomenology being armed with the Indian philosophical wisdom.

S. Radhakrishnan criticized the phenomenological aspects of the school of Yogachara very trenchantly. He wrote : "While then, metaphysically, all is due to the one reality which is thought, the Yogacharas sometimes reduce the matter opposed to the empirical individual to a mere sensation or collection of sensations. The world is not merely the contents of this or that

consciousness. Solidity, distance, hardness and resistance are not mere ideas of the finite mind. By maintaining that they are, the Yogacara's view becomes crudely subjectivist² (23). Although phenomenology is not concerned with the object, as it wants to understand the phenomenon only, yet phenomenology is no different from the Yogacara school in so far as it believes that we cannot go beyond the phenomena. We are limited within the bounds of consciousness only. Therefore, like the Yogācāra school, phenomenology too is subjectivistic. Husserl tried utmost to overcome this barrier but in vain.

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The Yogācāra school like phenomenology, believes that all cognitions are empty, and that it is the meaning-giving quality which bestows meanings upon them. But S. Radhakrishnan criticized this view thus : "If all cognitions are empty of content, then consciousness that are of things is also empty" (24). How can such an empty consciousness have the meaning-giving quality? Moreover, how is it possible that the meaning given to objects by consciousness happens to be real? The meaning given is not a 'word-work' in the Freudian sense. S. Radhakrishnan criticized the Yogācāra school's comparison of waking state to dream state thus : "The comparison of waking to dream is due to a confusion. Dream experience is subjective and private, while the waking is not so. Objects of waking knowledge endure, while dream objects

last during dreams. Sartre argues that there is a real difference between dreaming and waking. We may dream of travelling great distances, and if the two, dreaming and waking, were identical, then we should get up at the place to which we have travelled [“in our dream”], not as we actually do at the same place where we were when began to dream” (25).

This argument was further elaborated by S. Radhakrishnan. He argued, following Sartre : “If from the start there were no objects, he [Sartre] asks, how could perception take on the form of objects? It is because objects exist that consciousness is able to take on their form. Otherwise consciousness would be as when on any form it pleased” (26). S. Radhakrishnan went on : “If it is said that our consciousness of things as external is illusory, that we see objects as if they were external, whereas in reality they are not, Sartre asks, if really they were nothing external, how can we have even an illusion of externality?” (27).

Phenomenology distinguishes between phenomenon and reality, though, in fact, the phenomenologists keep mum about the latter's existence or non-existence. Likewise, Jāyārjuna of the Nāhyāyika school distinguished between appearance and reality. Husserl criticised Jāyārjuna on this score. He said : “It must be admitted that that which does not exist never exists, and that which exists is absolutely real, and therefore there can be no assumption of

the two kinds of truth" (28). Following Kumāresila's argument, one can say that phenomenology wrongly assumes the existence of two kinds of objects — phenomenal and real. Of course it should be made clear here that though phenomenology does not explicitly state the existence of the real world, nevertheless, in assuming the existence of a phenomenon they at least implicitly presuppose the existence of a real world.

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Professor Sharma criticized Vijñānāvāda as subjectivism "which denies the reality of the external objects and takes them as the projections of the momentary Vijñānas" (29). Phenomenology, also, in spite of Husserl's utmost effort to the contrary, like Vijñānāvāda, is subjective. True, phenomenology is silent about existence of the external world. Now, if we cannot go beyond the phenomenon, if we cannot break through the limiting aura of phenomenality, we are doomed to be subjectivistic. Husserl's Pure Consciousness also cannot be awarded any ontological status, because the Pure Consciousness should not be anything else than a phenomenon.

H.H. Pt. Vidhushekhara Dhattacharya criticized the Pure Consciousness of the Vijñānavādins. According to him Alayavijñāna is only relatively permanent. Vasubandhu also said that the Alaya is nothing permanent. It is "only a phenomenal manifestation of Pure Consciousness and is like a stream (pratanoughavat)" (30).

Husserl's Pure Consciousness also cannot be something permanent. How can it be? Because consciousness depends on the objective world which is ever changing. Consciousness, independent of the objective world, is merely a fiction.

Professor Mohanty rightly pointed out the phenomenological overtone in Vaiśeṣika philosophy. By padārtha, the Vaiśeṣika school understands "the intentional meaning-constitution of the transcendental subjectivity". Professor Sharma criticized this stand of the Vaiśeṣika school thus: "The Vaiśeṣika gives us seven categories and treats them as ultimate objective existents, the independent real. But we are told that quality and action cannot exist without a substance and therefore depend on it. [...]. The only fundamental category, therefore, is that of substance. This substance too cannot be known in the absence of qualities and relations and reduces itself to a mere '~~know-not-what~~' a mere nothing" (italics supplied) (31). By extending this criticism of Professor Sharma to the sphere of phenomenology, we can say that phenomenology also reduces the object to a mere '~~know-not-what~~'.

*The Purusa of Sāṅkhya, as Professor Mohanty said, bears resemblance to the pure consciousness of phenomenology. S. Radhakrishnan criticized this line of argument of the Sāṅkhya

school thus : "subject and object are aspects of a higher unity, distinctions within a whole. If we are at the empirical level, even then we shall have to say that all consciousness is consciousness of an object and all reality is the object of consciousness. It is only in distinguishing ourselves from and relating ourselves to an objective world that we know the self at all".

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Husserl's phenomenology can be criticized from the viewpoint of Vedānta also. The epoché of bracketting of reality is only a theoretical attitude to Husserl, while to Vedānta it is of immense practical benefit. Professor Sebabrata Saha wrote : " [...] while with Husserl the epoché or bracketting of reality is still a theoretic attitude, to facilitate the mind in turning back within itself and inspecting it from within, in Vedānta the exercise of turning from the flux of phenomena and events is recognized to be a serious phase in the spiritual life of man" (33). We can, therefore, say that Husserl could not understand the wider meaning of epoché'.

R E F E R E N C E S

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