

METAPHYSICAL GROUND FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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The Call for a New Method in the Humanities

In all our thinking and acting, says Thomas Langan, there are presuppositions, so if we want to understand how people live in the world, we must find a method to bring out those presuppositions.¹ Understanding, says Mary-Rose Barral, depends upon the presuppositions one has at the beginning of the investigation.² The opposing interpretations of the human being, the person, the self, which arise from conflicting presuppositions regarding the nature of the human being require a new look. To go beyond this opposition calls for a return into the ground for doing research in the humanities, one which will do justice to the nature of the human being understood in its expression, in its metaphysical nature. The call for a new method is also a call to re-look at how the meaning of the human being as subject, as person, is constituted. What it means to be a person is revealed by the human subject. Meaning presupposes the subject, a who that exists. Any interpretation of the human being implies a metaphysics and a phenomenological approach which allows access to description of who one is and what it means and how that meaning came to be mine, would be integral.

Presuppositions

With the foregoing call for a new method in the humanities the following presuppositions are set forth:

- 1) The person is an existing being whose meaning is constituted through personal experience, choice and action.
- 2) The reflexive function of consciousness precedes temporally and is the primordial ground for the reflective function of consciousness. This means that intentionality and the reflective function of consciousness rest upon the reflexive function of consciousness.
- 3) Meanings are imbued with value and reveal subjectivity *into* objectivity.
- 4) Transcendence, both vertical, toward the cosmos and horizontal, toward others, is essential for understanding how the meaning of self is constituted through choice and action. The integral aspects of vertical/horizontal transcendence is on four fronts, it is quadrilateral.

- 5) Intuition, as the reflexive function of consciousness, by an effort of attention, transcends the subjective/objective dimensions of personal self and meaning.
- 6) The non-transferability of being, the irreducibility of experience and the primacy of the intransitive over the transitive of the human being reveals that a philosophy of being and a philosophy of consciousness mutually affirm one another.

Amplification of Presuppositions

1) The description of self-in-action, not only as a being but being as subject, as person, is a metaphysical description. Beginning with the subject brings to the forefront the significance of personal meaning and its inextricable relation to choice and action. This presumes dynamic movements. If one is revealed as one's own self through one's own experience then the dynamic aspects disclosed in choice are revealed as an integral unity of direction in self-meaning and its constitution. Choices which constitute personal meaning are mine. In turn this reveals the valuing activity of a person as choices arise from living in a social context. Personal, social and universal values are imbued in experience and meaning.

One both constitutes and reveals oneself as who and what one is through choice and action. This re-returns to and is founded upon the meaning of human subjectivity in the metaphysical. One outcome of beginning with the metaphysical ground of human subjectivity is that it is viewed as transphenomenal rather than extra-phenomenal. Describing the integral aspects of experience opens a way to understand one's own self as one constitutes oneself and simultaneously reveals oneself to others. The human being is not a static being nor understood once and for all but is continuously moving and acting toward further understanding.

This describes the condition for the possibility of an immediate given in experience. With phenomenological description, the dynamic aspects in the emergence of personal meaning through choice and action presupposes a metaphysical assumption, one which reveals how self-meaning constitution through action is in being. As Pierre Thévenaz says:

It will no longer be a question of the philosopher looking elsewhere, of fleeing towards the beyond, towards that which is outside and above, but of returning towards the interior and towards what is this-side.³

2) Henri Bergson⁴ calls for the primordality of the intuitive, what Thévenaz⁵ calls the reflexive function of consciousness. The primordial function of consciousness is the reflexive rather than the reflective. The

reflexive is immediate, an intensification of consciousness. The reflective is mediate, a recuperating consciousness. The reflexive is a centripetal movement, a constituting power more original than intentionality. The reflective is a centrifugal movement. The reflexive describes how, in experience, meaning moves toward the person in that person's turning toward it. The reflective in a complementary movement, describes how, in experience, meaning moves toward the person in that person's re-turning toward it. John Wolters displays the direction and inclination of transcending:

Personal experience is the ground of choice and action. Personal experience is that which sees that things firstly attained by our senses of seeing, hearing, touching, etc. really are, have an own being, and my personal being is revealed as a subject that is open for utter and other being, as a subject that is transcending the own limits of my sensible nature unto a metaphysical being. Metaphysical is what goes *meta*, further than the physical, sensitive world and own physical existence. If I transcend thus the physical unto the *being* of physical beings and also of my own physical existence, I am conscious of it, but this consciousness is secondary, it follows the direct intuition on what is, in the being of sense-form things. If I apprehend more and more the being of things my consciousness of doing also is enlarged, but the principal is that I know more and more beings, that is the proper value of man as an intellectual being. I have not to contribute my own consciousness, my sensitive faculties are given by sensitive experience and still more my intellectual faculties of intelligence free choice and action by my human experience of the being of things, I have to develop both, principally my intellectual experience of things, of plants, of animals, of fellowmen. Rather the last can develop my intellectual growing by teaching, etc. This will also help me to make good choices and perform good actions.⁶

These distinctions, not separations, between the two functions of consciousness, describe a movement whereby self-meaning is found at the same time as its self-constitution and describes the human being in its beingness. It displays how a person, who turning toward meaning presented in the world, chooses an action and in so choosing, discovers and conserves the meaning of the world. The meaning of the world presents itself to the person, in its availability for the self who is turning toward its possibility in receptivity. Amplification of consciousness is a dilating reflexion. In reflection, the person recuperates experience and verifies meaning. It is a re-living of an already-existing understanding of self and world.

Reversing the order, the primordality of the functions of consciousness can be found both in Eastern and Western thought. Self-witnessing is the reflexive function of consciousness and re-witnessing is the reflective function of consciousness. Self-witnessing is assuring and re-witnessing is reassuring. For the Chinese *hsin*, meaning both heart and mind, is integral. Heart is the reflexive, mind is the reflective. Neither exists without the other and although not the same are inextricably one. Barral says this clearly, “phenomenology should lead to the very heart of being through an authentic grasp of the originally given in perception as ontological ground.”⁷ William James once said:

Since the heart can thus wall out the ultimate irrationality which the head ascertains...its procedure into a systematized method would be a philosophic achievement of first-rate importance.⁸

3) Considering the human being from the metaphysical view provides access to higher, deeper and wider dimensions of experience and meaning. It is possible to discover the integral meaning of self through the inescapable presence and meaning of others. In this movement, personal meaning is both constituted and revealed as intersubjectivity, the beingness of others. Universal values then are primordial to the meaning of the human being, as subject, as person.

The unavoidable presence of objective values are recognized as constitutive. In experience, meanings are imbued with value and reveal subjectivity *into* objectivity. Values by choice reveal the unique human potential for experiences of transcendence. In both the subjective/objective dimensions, human valuing is foundational to personal meaning-in-action. For Thévenaz:

The phenomenological method thus permits pushing on simultaneously and with one movement towards the roots of subjectivity and the foundation of the objective world.⁹

4) The experience of transcendence toward the cosmos is vertical while the experience of transcendence beyond one’s own being toward the beingness of others is horizontal. Not only does the constitution of a personal self develop and gain clarity through one’s relations with others but through personal meaning. This is described in one’s relation to the beyond.

Transcendence simultaneously reveals who and what one is. The integral aspects of vertical/horizontal transcendence is on four fronts, it is quadrilateral. This quadrilateral movement is the disclosure of a foundation for ethics and morality. It re-turns the meaning of choice-in-action to the ground of shared human values, to the meaning of being a human being, a subject, a person.

Intersubjectivity is the fundamental ground for subjectivity and is most evident in moments where a personal self is revealed to itself in self-meaning constitution. A method which does not include reference to the quadrilateral movement of vertical/horizontal transcendence devalues and truncates the vitality and spontaneity of human experience. Transcendence, understood as a dynamic movement of human experience, constitutes self-meaning in the metaphysical.

5) The irreducible nature of experience is not only what one reveals oneself to be but what experience means in one's understanding of self-in-relation to the objective world, an integral understanding of the who and what of one's own being. This establishes a bridge across the subjective/objective dimensions of experience. Thereby, two opposites are transcended by the immediate presence of self-in-relation-to-self and self-in-relation-to-the-world. The self-meaning constitution available in experience arises and coalesces transcending opposites. Although distinctions can be presented it is impossible to separate or isolate either function of consciousness. The complementary functions of consciousness, the reflexive/reflective, reveal an immediate and conceptual way in which the human being thinks and is in its beingness.

The primacy of what Thévenaz has described as the centripetal movement of the reflexive consciousness is fundamental to achieve any adequate understanding of the nature of the human being. When considering method, says Langan:

...the existential approach is paradoxically an important protection if we wish to achieve *objectivity*. A degree of secure self-knowledge is a condition for our being able to let the other be himself. This is both a psychological and an epistemological matter.¹⁰

6) To understand that which is primordial, as something which is irreducible one must, in some way, gain access to its integral nature of being. For Barral, this means that:

...consciousness does not operate separately in one or the other dimension; rather, it works harmoniously: various consciously felt movements and intentions are joined to form a melody.¹¹

The integral nature of personal experience as subjectivity is revealed as that which constitutes being in its beingness. The experience of one's own personal subjectivity is metaphysical subjectivity and experience with others is metaphysical intersubjectivity.

If the enduring qualities of experience with the values which guide the

self-meaning constitution of immediate experience are considered, it can be seen that the transitive and temporary influence gives way to meaning which remains through time. The temporality of experience, the immediate, established by the reflexive function of consciousness, intuitively puts a person, who, in touch with values, what, one stands for. Intuition, says Bergson, “can place itself within the mobile reality, and adopt its ceaselessly changing direction.”¹² The irreducible nature of experience demands that what a person experiences is given to that person as meaning and is integral to being. For Bergson:

Thought ordinarily pictures to itself the new as a new arrangement of pre-existing elements; nothing is ever lost for it, nothing is ever created. Intuition...perceives in it an uninterrupted continuity of unforeseeable novelty; it sees, it knows that the mind draws from itself more than it has.¹³

The irreducibility of one’s own being is experienced prior to the reflective. This indicates that one’s own being and experience are non-transferable. The primacy of the reflexive to the reflective reveals the immediate and uniqueness of experience. This is re-affirmed by the irreducibility and primacy of the intransitive to the transitive. It provides direct access to self-meaning constitution, through choice-in-action.

This view of the human being reveals a person as intuitively turning toward meaning in openness. Bergson’s work on intuition describes how it is possible, through an effort of attention, to display a reversal in the commonly accepted direction or flow of thought. Immediate experience can be brought into the presence of itself. With the primacy of the reflexive function of consciousness, says Bergson, “in this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality.”¹⁴ In this way there is an immediate experience of self as reality itself. This is immediate as one can be present to the moment of action through which the personal meaning of self is being constituted.

Reflective Synthesis

This approach utilizes metaphysics as ground and phenomenological description to open qualitative dimensions of human experience for investigation. Although phenomenological description provides access to questions regarding the meaning of human experience, it falls short of achieving any comprehensive understanding of how values, which are primordial to personal choice and action, are imbued in experience. Values are objective and provide unity of direction to action, they can be brought forth only by an appeal to metaphysics. As Langan says:

Phenomenology has so emphasized consciousness as process

that it underplays the intentional transcendence towards the persisting-in-themselves things which get revealed within the horizons of consciousness and guide us in its deployment.¹⁵

In the ontological, amidst the flow of being, things persist. The structure is the process of consciousness. It vanishes in its own end. The structure depends upon the assuring consciousness which is the function of self-witnessing. It persists within one's temporality. Intentionality is located within the horizons of the reflexive, self-witnessing. This is staying-with the integral meaning of experience as it is lived. It goes beyond any reduction of experience to structural conceptions of the person.

The nature of the human being, in this approach, is described as a person who, through experience, is one of choice and action. Choices constitute personal meaning and value which arise from living in a social context. Self-witnessing is a centripetal movement, a constituting power more original than intentionality. The reflective is a centrifugal movement. Meanings are imbued with value and reveal subjectivity *into* objectivity. Transcendence, as a dynamic movement of human experience, constitutes self-meaning of choice-in-action to the ground of shared values. This is a quadrilateral movement of experience. Intuition transcends the subjective/objective dimensions of experience. This is transcending opposites. Consciousness does not work separately in one or the other dimension but in harmony. The irreducibility of one's own being is experienced prior to the reflective. The primacy of the intransitive to the transitive of the human being provides direct access to self-meaning constitution. This indicates that a philosophy of being and a philosophy of consciousness mutually affirm one another.

This approach displays the sustaining, expanding, uniting unity of direction in an unbroken flow as dynamic movements. Beginning with presuppositions, amplification of presuppositions and then a reflective synthesis is a continuous movement. For qualitative research one would begin with experiential expressions, amplification of themes and then a reflective synthesis in a continuous movement.

Notes

- 1) Written communication from Thomas Langan, Ontario, Canada, 5 February 1987.
- 2) Mary-Rose Barral, *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of The Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 215.
- 3) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans.

- James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 141.
- 4) Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1911), pp. 238-245.
 - 5) Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-132.
 - 6) Written communication from John Wolters at the International Society for Metaphysics, Madrid, Spain, 6 September 1987.
 - 7) Barral, *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of The Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
 - 8) William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1931), p. 74. Although the primacy of the reflexive is emphasized in this approach it is in relation to the reflective. The reflexive/reflective (centripetal/centrifugal) dynamism is beyond what has been called merely intuitionism.
 - 9) Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
 - 10) Thomas Langan, "Searching in History for the Sense of It All", *The Review of Metaphysics*, XXXII, no. 1 (September 1978), p. 42.
 - 11) Mary-Rose Barral, "The Immersion in Transcendence of Man from Nature", *Analecta Husserliana*, XIV, ed. A-T Tymieniecka (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983), p. 264.
 - 12) Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T.E. Hulme (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p. 69.
 - 13) Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 39.
 - 14) Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
 - 15) Written communication from Thomas Langan, Ontario, Canada, 2 March 1987.