

Walking the Road Less Travelled: Lester Embree's Re-discovery of Phenomenology as Reflective Analysis

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Abstract:

In this article I want to argue for the thesis that Lester Embree's conception of 'reflective analysis' is a radical attempt at rediscovering the soul of phenomenology. Finding his roots in the fertile land of phenomenology cultivated by Husserl, Embree identifies two cardinal temptations that ail the movement called phenomenology: academic scholarship and theory building seen as autonomous intellectual activity. He then creatively and critically builds brick by brick the edifice of the phenomenological method or approach called 'reflective analysis.' This I see as a creative and critical response to Heidegger's apparent epitaph for phenomenological philosophy. After discussing the significance of 'reflective analysis' as a rejuvenating practice of doing phenomenology, I also briefly point out the limitations of this approach. I end this article by bringing into limelight the hermeneutic contours of 'reflective analysis' and what it holds for the future of phenomenology.

Many who call themselves "phenomenologists" have forgotten (if they ever knew it) that what is fundamental to the phenomenological approach is something that may simply be called "reflective analysis."

Embree (2011) p. 9

Phenomenology proceeds by "seeing," clarifying, and determining meaning, and by distinguishing meanings. It compares, it distinguishes,

it forms connections, it puts into relation, divides into parts, or distinguishes abstract concepts. But all within pure “seeing.” It does not theorize or carry out mathematical operations; that is to say, it carries through no explanations in the sense of deductive theory. As it explains the basic concepts and propositions which function as principles governing the possibility of “objectivising” science (but finally it also takes its own basic concepts and principles as objects of “reflective” explanation), it ends where “objectivising” science begins. Hence ... [Phenomenology] is a science in a completely different sense, and with completely different problems and methods.

Husserl (1970) p. 46

The age of phenomenological philosophy seems to be over. It is already taken as something past which is only recorded historically along with other schools of philosophy. But in what is most in its own, phenomenology is not a school. It is the possibility of thinking, at times changing and only thus persisting, of corresponding to the claim of what is to be thought. If phenomenology is thus experienced and retained, it can disappear as a designation in favour of the matter of thinking whose manifestness remains a mystery.

Heidegger (1972) p.84

Introduction: The Embrean Vision of Phenomenology

Philosophers Thomas Nenon and Philip Blosser invoke approvingly the American phenomenologist Lester Embree (1938-2017) and his works in cultivating phenomenology as a methodological approach aimed at constituting a vibrant philosophical tradition that could possibly be in a meaningful conversation with other disciplines even beyond the boundaries of academic philosophy (Nenon & Blosser 2010, p.2). And I wish to go beyond this and make the claim that Embree while critically appropriating the Husserlian phenomenological method radically rediscovers the soul of phenomenology as ‘reflective analysis.’ Further in developing the depth grammar of ‘reflective analysis,’ Embree quells the

challenge posed by Heidegger regarding the merit of the Husserlian way and method of doing phenomenology. In one of his letters Heidegger caustically remarked: “Founder of Phenomenology - no one knows what that means anymore.” Further in 1923 Heidegger made a sharp contra-distinction between his and his mentor Husserl’s conception of what phenomenology is now and what it ought to be:

Phenomenology can only be appropriated phenomenologically, i.e., only through demonstration and in not in such a way that one repeats propositions, takes over fundamental principles, or subscribes to academic dogmas. A large measure of critique is required for this, and nothing more dangerous than naïve *trust in evidence* exhibited by followers and fellow travellers. If it is the case that our relation to the things themselves in seeing is the decisive factor, it is equally the case that we are frequently deceived about them and that the possibility of such deception stubbornly persists.

Perhaps called once to be the conscience of philosophy, it has wound up as a pimp for public whoring of the mind, *fornicatio spiritus* (Luther). (Heidegger 1999, p.37).

I want to visualize the notion of ‘reflective analysis’ creatively woven by Embree as a critical, creative and thoughtfully provoking philosophical response to the Heideggerian challenge of “appropriating phenomenology phenomenologically.”

In his edited work *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology* (Embree 1997, p. 2) Embree raises a very fundamental question: what is phenomenology? After pointing out some general characteristics of phenomenology such as contra-system building in speculative thinking and contra naturalism, Embree points out five characteristics shared by phenomenologists of various persuasions. First, “phenomenologists tend to justify cognition (and some also evaluation and action) with reference to ... [evidence], which is awareness of a matter itself as disclosed in the most clear, distinct, and adequate way possible for something of its kind.” Second,

“phenomenologists tend to believe that not only objects in the natural and cultural worlds but also ideal objects, such as numbers and even conscious life itself can be made evident and thus known about.” Third, “phenomenologists tend to hold that inquiry ought to focus upon what might be called ‘encountering’ as it is directed at objects and, correlatively, upon ‘objects as they are encountered.’ Fourth, “phenomenologists tend to recognize the role of description in universal, a priori, or ‘eidetic’ terms as prior to explanation by means of causes, purposes, or grounds.’ Fifth and last, phenomenologists tend to debate whether or not what Husserl calls the transcendental phenomenological [*epoche* is ... useful or even possible]” (Embree 1997, p.1-2).

A cursory look at these characteristics shared by phenomenologists of multifarious intellectual persuasions as claimed by Embree would reveal that the first four very much echo the salient features of the Gottingen lectures delivered by Husserl in 1907 on the very idea of phenomenology (Husserl 1970) and the fifth feature reflects essentially the radical challenge posed by Heidegger regarding the Husserlian ‘phenomenological philosophy’ as he refused to follow his mentor Husserl slavishly (Moran & Mooney 2002, pp. 18-19).

Further Embree delineates different but mostly overlapping tendencies that have given rise to four distinct branches in the theory and practice of phenomenological investigation. First, what has come to be known as *Realistic Phenomenology* emphasizes eidetic method in the search for universal essences. Alexander Pfänder, Herbert Spiegelberg, Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith are some of the leading philosophers who pursue realistic phenomenology (Embree 1997, p.3).

Second, the branch called [Transcendental] *Constitutive Phenomenology* emanates from Husserl’s own work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* which was published in 1913. This branch of Phenomenology focusses on logic and mathematics which are seen as part of the philosophy of natural

science or of physics. And Constitutive Phenomenology mostly depends on transcendental phenomenological *epoche* and reduction. This phenomenological method implies suspension of the accepted, pregiven status of conscious life as perceived in the world so as to secure an ultimate intersubjective grounding for the world. Philosophers like Gaston Berger, Jean Cavailles, Aron Gurwitsch, Eugen Fink, Thomas M. Seebohm, J.N. Mohanty etc have been leading transcendental constitutive phenomenologists (Embree 1997, p. 4).

Third, we have what has come to be known as *Existential Phenomenology* which is mainly ascribed to Heidegger (arguably the most influential phenomenologist after Husserl) whose work *Being and Time* in radical sense inaugurated it by calling our attention to what is called ‘fundamental ontology.’ And Heidegger significantly claims it to be the leading phenomenological motif. The unique point in Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology is the conception of human being as ‘*Da-Sein*’. Philosopher Hannah Arendt went a step further by asking this fundamental question: *what is Existenz philosophy?* In a sense this question does echo significantly in the writings regarding the problems of human existence raised by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers and of course more dominantly in Heidegger (Embree 1997, p.4).

Fourth, we have what is called *Hermeneutic Phenomenology* which takes its origin not so much from the writings of Husserl unlike the aforementioned three branches of phenomenology, but primarily from the writings of Heidegger, especially his most celebrated work (but still incomplete) *Being and Time*. Other philosophers whose works reflect the themes of Hermeneutic Phenomenology are Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Patrick Hellan, Don Ihde, etc (Embree 1997, p.5).

Two Seductive Temptations in Phenomenology and the Very Idea of ‘Reflective Analysis’

Embree in his work *Reflective Analysis: A First Introduction into Phenomenological Investigation* (first published in 2003 and the second

edition appeared in 2011) speaks of two cardinal seductive temptations that can entrap phenomenologists. He identifies the first one as ‘scholarship’ which is to be seen as distinct from ‘investigation.’ Here one should note that Embree is not anti-scholarship. Rather the contention of Embree is that scholarship seen as a species of research is not to be conflated with investigation but rather as a preparatory and very useful auxiliary field for doing phenomenological investigation. But Embree cautions the phenomenologists saying “like physical exercise, that which helps performance is not the same as performance itself” (Embree 2011, p.9). The second lurking seductive temptation is ‘argumentation’. For Embree, arguers rant; whereas phenomenologists ponder and express themselves tentatively. This is not to be misinterpreted and claim that phenomenologists are contra argumentation. Rather phenomenologists do engage in argumentation but see it as a complementary rational exercise to critique mistaken philosophical positions and even this is done not so frequently. For Embree “genuine phenomenologists do not ... produce arguments, rather they produce ‘analyses’” (Embree 2011, p. 10).

An interesting fact that emerges here is this. For Embree phenomenology is essentially a method or better still an approach in which one is to become more skilled in. Moreover two essential factors constitute this conception of phenomenology: firstly, adoption of a suitable attitude which is fundamentally reflective as well as theoretical; and secondly, engaging in observation which might be called ‘analysis’ (Embree 2011, p.17). Here Embree raises a pertinent question: why should anyone want to become a phenomenologist? The tentative answer provided by Embree significantly points to the soul of ‘reflective analysis.’ In his own words: “Simply put, greater skill at the reflective analysis of encounterings and objects-as-encountered help us more effectively and responsibly to know, value, and act” (Embree 2011, p. 28).

Hermeneutic Contours of Reflective Analysis

From the foregoing discussion what emerges is an image, however hazy and cloudy it might be, of Embree's radical revisioning of phenomenology as 'reflective analysis.' But Embree brings in the much-needed clarity to this term by re-interpreting some of the key interrelated conceptions that weave intrinsically the very womb of phenomenology: consciousness, intentionality and investigation. The word 'consciousness' is a polyvalent word and an oft-quoted phenomenological slogan goes like this: "All consciousness is consciousness of..." In phenomenology 'consciousness' is employed not merely in the sense of being aware of something or experiencing something. In a significant sense it also connotes, according to Embree, the fundamental characteristics of believing, valuing and willing. Also 'consciousness' may tend to connote 'contemplation' in a specific sense. Whereas in the phenomenological *weltanschauung* the central issue of 'consciousness' is something that is originally practical. That means it is fundamentally a *doing*, a praxis (Embree 2011, p. 20).

An important concept that is symbiotically linked to 'consciousness' is 'intentionality.' And it refers to the manifold processes that constitute the very fulcrum of subjectivity which is directed at objects. And Embree contends that this complex phenomenon of intentionality is sometimes mistakenly used in a non-phenomenological sense even by phenomenologists: merely referring to its practical nature of purposiveness and thus being oblivious to the generic signification which goes very much beyond the limited purchasing value of purposiveness. This category mistake is akin to the confusion caused by the literal sense in which some phenomenologists translate the Husserlian notion of *Einführung* as empathy, as something exclusively emotional. If we take 'intentionality' as a family resemblance concept, then the following associated ideas would emerge: perceptual inventiveness, recollective inventiveness, affective inventiveness, volitional inventiveness, wakeful inventiveness, focal inventiveness. And in a significant sense the first

person indexical pronoun 'I' in most cases signifies the subject who is able to engage in a stream of intensive processes. And this can be fruitfully termed as encountering and alternatively phenomenology could be said to focus on the act of encountering objects and the objects-as-encountered. (Embree 2011, pp. 21-23).

At this juncture Embree raises a very pertinent question: What is the point of becoming a phenomenologist? In simple terms, he states that it makes one skilled at the reflective analysis of the acts of encountering and the objects-as-encountered. And this gives birth to responsible and effective ways of knowing, valuing and acting. But this requires disciplined effort and only that will generate an appropriate locus from which one can 'phenomenologically' observe, analyse and describe in the paradigm of 'reflective analysis' (Embree 2011, p.28). And Embree does this in his work by investigating phenomenologically the intensive acts of 'observing', 'accounting', 'reflecting', 'willing-valuing-believing', 'experiencing', 'analysing' and finally 'examining.'

Limitations of Reflective Analysis

The above reflections show how Embree re-discovered the soul of phenomenology by advancing the very idea of 'reflective analysis.' In fact Embree would readily conflate both the terms 'phenomenology' and 'reflective analysis' justifiably and use them interchangeably in his writings. But here one could raise a valid question: are there ingrained limitations in this method of phenomenological investigation called 'reflective analysis'? Before I attempt to respond to this query it will be significant, I think, to note two interesting and philosophically engaging conceptual and homological parallels with reflective analysis.

First, as I have argued earlier in this article, Embree's 'reflective analysis' is a cognate term along with Husserl's notions of 'analysis', 'seeing', 'reflective explanation' and 'reflective perception.' In his Gottingen lectures on the very idea of phenomenology, Husserl says:

“Phenomenology proceeds by “seeing”, clarifying, and determining meaning, and by distinguishing meanings. ... The procedure of “seeing” and eidetic abstraction ... is exclusively its own: it is the specifically philosophical method, insofar as this method belongs essentially to the meaning of the critique of cognition...” (Husserl 1970, p.46. Italics in the original).

Further Husserl would characterize this whole process of “seeing” as ‘reflective perception’ and simultaneously warns us about the lurking danger of thinking too much here that would imprison the direction and the flow of phenomenological investigation. For *“Seeing” cognition is that form of reason which sets itself the task of converting understanding into reason* (*Ibid.*, p. 50. Italics in the original). One cannot miss here the striking homological parallel between ‘phenomenological *seeing*’ proposed by Husserl and ‘reflective analysis’ advanced by Embree as a distinct philosophical way of *doing* phenomenology.

Second, the ‘speech-act theory’ advanced by the celebrated British philosopher of language J.L. Austin, I contend, resonate very deeply with Embree’s notion of ‘reflective analysis.’ Austin critiques what is called ‘the descriptive fallacy’ in the philosophy of language and suggests that the use of language is primarily not to describe a state of affairs but to perform an act. That is to say that human linguistic intercourse weaves together the triad of language, life and world and gives birth to ‘speech-act’ as and when it fulfils a set of constitutive rules which Austin calls felicity conditions. Further Austin would distinguish three phases of a linguistic utterance: the locutionary act, the perlocutionary act and the illocutionary act. Initially Austin would apply the speech-act category only to the performative utterance of a declarative sentence whereby one performs a conventional social act. Later Austin makes an in-depth analysis of possible linguistic behaviour of humans and provides a taxonomy of all such possible human linguistic utterances and classifies them and concludes that all linguistic utterances of humans could be speech-acts if and when they fulfil certain conditions which he would

call the necessary ‘felicity conditions’ (Austin 1975, pp.1ff). Elsewhere I have made a novel attempt to characterise Austin’s speech-act theory as ‘linguistic phenomenology’ (Devasia M Antony 2001, pp. 34-47).

Notwithstanding the above indicated philosophically interesting parallels, one can dwell on what one might call the limitations of reflective analysis. Though the phenomenological method ‘reflective analysis’ can be applied both in the realms of philosophy and other non-philosophical disciplines, it is non-applicable to formal disciplines like mathematics, and natural sciences like chemistry. However, it should be noted that ‘reflective analysis’ can be adopted in a posterior fashion to understand what is being done in disciplines like these. Significantly the moot point here is that ‘reflective analysis’ can be carried out very effectively in such disciplines like humanities and social sciences where one has to thematize the socio-cultural world. Here the most important phenomenological question would be the possibility of valuing and volition in constituting a given cultural edifice (Guillen 2024, p.15).

Concluding Remarks

The above reflections on the hermeneutic-praxiological contours and trajectories of ‘reflective analysis’ justifiably portray it as a radical re-discovery of the phenomenological movement by the American phenomenologist-philosopher Lester Embree. Undoubtedly Embree has dared to walk the road less travelled in re-discovering the soul of phenomenology as ‘reflective analysis.’ And this radical conception of phenomenology as ‘reflective analysis’ is very revolutionary when applied as a method of phenomenological inquiry not only within the domain of the discipline of philosophy but also beyond the realm of philosophy. In the edited volume entitled *Advancing Phenomenology: Essays in honor of Lester Embree* (Nenon & Blosser 2010, pp. 271ff) there are nine research articles that dwell on the applicability of phenomenology beyond the realm of philosophy. A close look at the corpus of Embree’s writings undoubtedly shows that his re-discovery of

phenomenology as ‘reflective analysis’ germinates in the fertile soil of the Husserlian *weltanschauung*. Simultaneously it also portrays close umbilical affinity with the oeuvre of Merleau-Ponty, another radical phenomenologist. And to my mind, these words uttered by Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. viii) aptly embody the phenomenology driven life-journey of Embree: “We find in texts only what we put in them ... We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology.”

And I am sure Embree would chuckle to himself on reading this comment of Merleau-Ponty.

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