FINDING TEXT AFTER PHENOMENOLOGICAL BRACKETING: INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES AS THE *EIDOS* OF TEXTUAL PRESENCE

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Abstract

One of the aims of philosophy is to comprehend the reality and communicate the same to an enlightened audience. Phenomenology has been a recent development in philosophy. Edmund Husserl speaks of an *epoché* (cessation) to refer to the suspension of judgment regarding the true nature of reality. Reader-Response theories have an inseparable relation with phenomenology. The paper is an attempt to posit the idea of Stanley Fish's Interpretive Communities in the context of comprehending reality after phenomenological bracketing. The presence of interpretive communities helps people find a common reading experience.

Key Words: Reader-Response, Phenomenological bracketing, Interpretive mmunities, *epoché*

History of philosophy describes a search for the true knowledge from what is perceived. Plato's theory of knowledge involves a distinction between a subject or "knower" and an object or thing-known. For him, knowledge is always knowledge of something. "Whilst the forms are invisible to the eye, our souls have participated in the eternal world of forms prior to being incarnate in a physical body, and retain a memory of them"("Plato's theory"). This presence of memory is sufficient, to enable our limited perceptions.

Rationalists like Descartes tried to understand the world by careful use of reason. Descartes opens the First *Meditation* asserting the need "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations ... [For this] I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable .... So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt" (Cottingham 12).Even his doubting

self gives him a proof for his existence: ***Dubito, ergo Cogito, ergo Sum*** (I doubt, therefore I think, and therefore I am).

Empiricists like Locke, Berkeley and Hume based all knowledge as acquired through perception and experience. According to Locke the mind at birth is a tabula rasa, a "white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience"(Locke 53). Physical objects exist independently of perception, but their appearance is very different from reality.

While Locke had trust in the existence of primary qualities like solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest and number, his successor, Bishop George Berkeley denied them as well. Berkeley becomes an advocate of immaterialism and proclaims that the *esse (*existence) of the unthinking things is p*ercipi (*perception*).* It is not possible for them to "have any existence out of the minds or thinking things, which perceive them" (Armstrong 62).

According to Hume's empirical criterion of meaning, a term is intelligible only if there is an idea with which it is associated. Hence, to have knowledge of external objects, we require an idea of that object. As all ideas are copies of (or derived from) preceding impressions, we require an impression of that external object. Hume notes that there can never be an impression of continued and distinct existence.

Immanuel Kant was said to have been woken up by Hume from his 'dogmatic slumber' to formulate a 'Copernican revolution' in the field of philosophy when he synthesized rationalism and empiricism intelligently. For him phenomena are the perception of the 'noumena' through the categories of the mind. One could reach synthetic a priori judgments which provide new information that is necessarily true.

Phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience. Franz Brentano had characterised intentionality as ´directedness upon an object´. He says:

> Every mental phenomenon is characterized by ... the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object ... reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself.... In presentation, something is

presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on....This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. [They] are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves. (Brentano 68)

For Brentano all consciousness can be put into three categories of intentionality: representation, judgement and love or hate. Intentionality is the act of interpreting-and-perceiving, the act of relating to, always being consciousness of some meaning.

Husserl describes consciousness as intentional insofar as it refers to, or is directed at, an object. Intentionality is a property of directedness toward an object. Consciousness may have intentional and non-intentional phases, but intentionality is the property that gives consciousness its objective meaning.

The *cogito* ("I think") is the principle of the pure ego. The pure ego performs acts of consciousness (*cogitations*) that may be immanently or transcendently directed. Immanently directed acts of consciousness refer to objects that are within the same ego or that belong to the same stream of consciousness. Transcendently directed acts of consciousness refer to objects that are outside the ego or that belong to a different stream of consciousness. The objects of consciousness (*cogitata*) are the things that are perceived and consciously experienced.

The difference between immanent and transcendent perception reflects the difference between being as experience and being as thing. Things as they exist in themselves cannot be perceived immanently, and they can only be perceived transcendently. The difference between immanent and transcendent perception also reflects the difference in the way in which things are given and presented to consciousness. This givenness may be adequate or inadequate in terms of its clearness and distinctness, and in terms of its intuitability.

Immanently perceived objects have an absolute being insofar as their existence is logically necessary. The existence of transcendently perceived objects is not logically necessary, insofar as their existence is not proved by the being of consciousness itself.

Every actual *cogito* has an intentional object. The *cogito* itself may become a *cogitatum* if the principle that "I think" becomes an object of consciousness. Thus, in the *cogito*, the act of thinking may become an intentional object. However, in contrast to the Cartesian principle that "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*),

the phenomenologically reduced *cogito* is a suspension of judgment about whether "I am" ("I exist"). The phenomenologically reduced *cogito* is a suspension of judgment about the question of whether thinking implies existence. Thus, phenomenology examines the *cogito* as a pure intuition, and as an act of pure consciousness.

Husserl describes noesis and noema as two phases of intentionality. Noesis is the process of cogitation, while the noema (or cogitata) are that which is cogitated. N*oesis* and *noema* correspond respectively to experience and essence.

Phenomenological reduction is a process of defining the pure essence of a psychological phenomenon. This is accomplished by a method of "bracketing" empirical data away from consideration. In bracketing our experiences we suspend belief in the actual existence of intended objects — be they physical objects, persons, minds, propositions, or meanings. Husserl uses the term *epoché* (Greek, for "a cessation") to refer to this suspension of judgment regarding the true nature of reality. Through an intuition of how appearances of things might be varied we can then come to discover 'eidetically' their 'invariant general structures', that is, the essences (*wessen*) of things. This approach leaves pure consciousness, pure phenomena, and the pure ego as the residue of phenomenological reduction. Husserl says in *Logical Investigations,* "The essences directly grasped in essential intuition, and the connections based solely upon the essences, are brought to expression descriptively in concepts of essence and lawful statements of essence. Every such statement is an 'a priori' one in the best sense of the term·" (qtd. in Farber 198)

There are three steps in the transcendental-phenomenological reduction. First, one reflects on consciousness: whatever act is under consideration, one ceases to be concerned with its object (whether this object be an individual, an essence, a state of affairs, or some other kind of entity) and turns one's attention instead to the act in which the object is intended and to the ego as subject of this act. Second, one disregards the naturalistic aspects of consciousness through transcendental reduction of the ego and its acts: this reduction isolates the "pure" data of consciousness from their presumed naturalistic environment. Third, the data that remain over after transcendental reduction are then studied eidetically by applying to them the method of eidetic variation. Thus phenomenology is an "eidetic science" of transcendental consciousness, a study of those transcendental features of the ego and its acts that are universal and necessary. The end product of phenomenological reduction is the *"eidos" (*essence or, '*ideal species'),* of the phenomenon.

Although Husserl refers to universals, species and essences here, undoubtedly the ideality of meaning should be understood more generally as referring to that

which remains unitary or identical. The claim is that whatever object we experience; we always perceive it *both* from a particular perspective or vantage point (actual) and as unitary (ideal), and whatever is ideal, can never be turned into something real. Husserl thus sees ideality in the more general sense as 'unity in plurality'(Husserl 196).

For Sartre consciousness is consciousness "of something". It is non-substantial and is total emptiness. Sartre considers its existence in "its essence, and that everything exists for *consciousness* is itself in itself" (Marsh 85).

The exponents of Reader-response bracket the traditional concept of a work as a structure of meanings. They consider the meanings as the creation of individual readers. Though the responses of the actual reader is different from what is expected in the "implied reader", we could reach towards a common reading, as the readers share "interpretive strategies", "identity themes", "expectations" and "similarities of concern" even before reading a particular text.

There are different approaches within this school of critical theory. However, some look at the work from the individual reader's point of view, while others focus on how groups or communities view the text. Gadamer argues that "a literary work does not pop into the world as a finished and neatly parcelled bundle of meaning; rather meaning depends on the historical situation of the interpreter," (Selden 62)

Norman N Holland says, "a reader responds to a literary work by assimilating... to his search for successful solutions within his identity theme to the multiple demands ... on his ego" (*Five Readers* 218). There are similarities among readers. Holland argues, "When you and I apply ideas we share to the same text, then very likely we will come to the same conclusion about that text. In those respects we read alike" ("Old Criticism" 5).

David Bleich thinks that the readers of the "same text will agree that their sense motor experience of the test is the same" (220).

In the essay "Literature in the Reader", Fish defines his "informed reader" as having the following qualities: "The informed reader is someone who (1) is a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up; (2) is in full possession of 'the semantic knowledge that a mature . . . listener brings to his task of comprehension,' . . . ; and (3) has literary competence" (48).

This is in contrast with what William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley has said in *The Verbal Icon*: "The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*) . . . It begins by trying to derive the standards

of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome . . . is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear (qtd. in Fish 23).

Fish answers this by saying that the "objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. . . . A line of print is so obviously there . . . that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it" (43). To Fish, the poem can't disappear because it was never actually there in the first place except as a reflection of the interpretive strategy used to approach it.

Fish denies the text's independence as a repository of meaning. The text does not contain meaning: despite being written upon, it is a tabula rasa, a blank slate onto which the reader, in reading, actually writes the text. Fish focuses on two major questions that his critics levelled against him. The first question that concerns him addresses the reasons behind why the same reader will interpret "different texts" (167) in different ways, and the second question that he addresses explores the reasons why different readers will interpret the same text in a similar way.

According to Fish, in both of these situations, the answers stem from the methods that the readers use in interpreting the texts, rather than from the formal elements of the texts themselves. First, the employment of a different "set of interpretive strategies" upon the same literary text would produce "another text" (168). Thus different interpreters will see different intentions because they are a creation of the reader and not the author. Second, the employment of the "same set of strategies" (169) used on Lycidas and a different text(For example, George Eliot's Adam Bede)would produce similar results. Third, another reader who employs "interpretive strategies similar to mine [on the same poem] will perform the same (or at least a similar) succession of interpretive acts" (169), for which reason we would be "tempted to say that we agree about the poem (thereby assuming that the poem exists independently of the acts either of us performs) [whereas] what we would really agree about is the way to write it" (169). Fourth, another reader of Lycidas who "puts into execution a different set of interpretive strategies will perform a different set of interpretive acts [with the result that one] could complain to the other that we could not possibly be reading the same poem . . . and he would be right: for each of us would be reading the poem [the person] had made"(169). Fish concludes from this that the "notions of the 'same' or 'different' texts are fictions [for] it will not be because the formal structures of the two poems (to term them such is also an interpretive decision)call forth different interpretive strategies but because my predisposition to execute different interpretative strategies will

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produce different formal structures"(237).

Fish seeks to know why different readers should ever agree and why should "regular...differences in the career of a single reader ever occur" (171). This is because of the presence of

> interpretive communities ... who share interpretive strategies not for reading(in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions....[These] strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around....[If] it is an article of faith in a particular community that there are a variety of text, its members will boast a repertoire of strategies for making them,...[while if another community] believes in the existence of only one text, then the single strategy its members employ will be forever writing it(171).

In speaking, "what utterers do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies" (173). He asks: if "everyone is continually executing interpretive strategies and in that act constituting texts, intentions, speakers, and authors, how can any one of us know whether one of us know whether or not he is a member of the same interpretive community?"(173).Given that any evidence proposed to "support the claim would itself be an interpretation [the only] 'proof 'of members is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community" (173).

In response to a criticism launched by M. H. Abrams, Fish explains some of his understanding of the conventional nature of language:

> If what follows is communication or understanding, it will not be because he and I share a language, ... but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any words we utter will be heard as necessarily referring (303).

Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.

To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation

of competing interpretations. For each reader approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual but as part of a community of readers. "Indeed," Fish writes, "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings"(14).

When the method of Husserl's phenomenology and that of interpretive communities are analysed, one could find that there is a similar strive towards a common essence. It is the universality and similarity of perception that makes human life possible. The collective name 'human being' or even 'being' is given to a particular group that shows the similarity of the same sorts. It is our belief that what we perceive is similar to that of others. Absolute similarity is not possible as A. J. Ayer says, "[The other] tells me that he is in pain, but may it not be that what he understands by pain is something quite different from anything that I should call by that name"(205). But our continuation of life in this world is seen possible through the belief in a similarity of perception.

In the same way people, especially of a particular society, living together share the same milieu. Sartre states, "people of the same period and community, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mind" (*What is Literature?* 51)

The phenomenological reduction is a search for universal essence from particular experience after bracketing the external world. Reader response theories also bracket the intention of the author. The exponents of reader response exhorts that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author"(*Image* 148).

For Stanley fish, it is the readers who 'write' the 'text'. In the sense there are innumerable 'texts' as reading. (Even the 'texts' created by readings of a particular reader at different times are varied insofar as their interpretive strategies differ.) The sharing of interpretive strategies by the readers by a community of readers leads to a universal reading.

Whereas in phenomenological reduction we reach a universal essence from a particular instance, in reader response, as conceived by Stanley Fish, we obtain the universal reading from several readings. There are, of course, "texts" after bracketing the author. However, in order to have a common reading, we have to open the bracket and accept the possibility of sharing certain cultural assumptions and strategies.

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