TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF COURAGEOUS WILLING

What is the phenomenologist’s vocation in the world of life? If we think of the world in terms of its present challenges, then we can answer, to begin with, that our vocation is to cultivate courageous living in response to these challenges. This is a universal human task. The phenomenologist, specifically, can draw on the resources of phenomenology to articulate courageous living in helpful ways.

In facing the problems of the world – environmental, biological, social, economic, political, and cultural – the mind staggers. The uncertainties are great and the disappointments deep; we sometimes confront apparent defeat; the sheer difficulty of the tasks is daunting; immensities loom; and there is much that is inexplicable. Such problems call for well-focused resources of mind, body, soul, and spirit, mobilized in decisions of an integrated personality, cooperating in teamwork with others. At a time when scientific understanding, philosophic wisdom, and spiritual inspiration need to be creatively joined, nothing is easier than to abandon hope. Phenomenology can help to keep hope strong by developing accounts of willing that show new paths for growth in courageous living.

In what follows I narrow the topic (for the most part) from courageous living to courageous willing. I take it that willing has a major impact on living, including on how we experience things. To be sure, willing does not arise in a cognitive vacuum. In the classical case, willing rests upon deliberation, which rests in turn upon evaluation, which rests upon interpretation, which rests upon perception. In other words, one’s grasp of fact is basic to one’s interpretation of a situation, which in turn founds one’s grasp of the values implicit in the situation, the values that willing strives to actualize. A fatalistic or pessimistic outlook subverts courageous willing. In what follows I make sorties into the phenomenology of some relevant spiritual experiences, but much of what I propose could be affirmed by Bertrand Russell, when he proclaimed a vision of humanity’s potential glory in science, art, and ethics, despite what he took to be the fact that the prospect for human greatness is a cosmic accident destined to eternal annihilation.1

The coming sections first rehearse some contributions of William James to a phenomenology of courageous willing, then describe a typology of

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challenges and correlated responses, and last indicate how the spiritual domain of life referred to in the second section responds to the contemporary need for a measure.

1. COURAGEOUS WILLING

William James is a prime resource for a phenomenology of courageous willing. His philosophy of the “strenuous” life celebrates vigorous responses to problems. Like Paul Ricoeur and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, James shows a healthy respect for reality and its constraints, while allowing a spiritual perspective to repeatedly come through to invigorate hope.

Courageous living, at its maximum, is heroic living, and James gives a characterization of the hero in his essay “Will”:

The huge world that girdles us about puts all sorts of questions to us, and tests us in all sorts of ways. Some of the tests we meet by actions that are easy, and some of the questions we answer in articulately formulated words. But the deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and tightening of our heart-strings as we say, “Yes, I will even have it so!” When a dreadful object is presented, or when life as a whole turns up its dark abysses to our view, then the worthless ones among us lose their hold on the situation altogether, and either escape from its difficulties by averting their attention, or if they cannot do that, collapse into yielding masses of plaintiveness and fear. The effort required for facing and consenting to such objects is beyond their power to make. But the heroic mind does differently. To it, too, the objects are sinister and dreadful, unwelcome, incompatible with wished-for things. But it can face them if necessary, without for that losing its hold upon the rest of life. The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can stand this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low. He can still find a zest in it, not by “ostrich-like forgetfulness,” but by pure inward willingness to face it with these deterrent objects there. And hereby he makes himself one of the masters and the lords of life. He must be counted with henceforth; he forms a part of human destiny.²

Given a description of the hero, the question arises how we attain or approach that level of living.

To some extent, we are stimulated to high-energy living by various factors. In “The Energies of Men,” James lists eight kinds of stimuli that operate either in crisis situations or in a sustained way: excitements, ideas, efforts, duty, crowd-pressure, the example of others, contagion, and “conversions, whether they be political, scientific, philosophic, or religious”.³ James expands on the example of others in the same paragraph just quoted: