ON SOME HUMAN USES OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Is it at all legitimate to subject phenomenology to questions of such a pragmatic, if not utilitarian, nature as that of its human uses? Isn’t it below the dignity of a true science and particularly of a philosophy which started out with the ambition of being a rigorous science to submit to this kind of a cross examination? In fact, Edmund Husserl in his historic manifesto article on “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” solemnly disclaimed all pretensions that it could bring aid and comfort to modern man in his dire need for a philosophy of life (Weltanschauung).

But even so, it must not be overlooked that Husserl himself, during the later parts of his career, could not escape the challenge to his enterprise and to his very existence that came from the political and moral crises of the twentieth century and particularly from Nazi totalitarianism. He answered it by the plea that philosophy and specifically his own transcendental phenomenology had a mission in the service of mankind and that this mission was the defense of a phenomenologically reconstituted reason against the rampant irrationalism of the time.

I shall not attempt to defend phenomenology on such lofty grounds; nor shall I try to give here the kind of merely theoretical justification which might show the usefulness of the phenomenological approach in the framework of the total intellectual enterprise or in the treatment of specific philosophical problems. Thus I shall forego the justification on such grounds as the claim that phenomenology, being itself free from all unexamined presuppositions, can supply firm foundations for all other scientific and philosophical knowledge. This is more or less an internal affair of philosophy and philosophy of science. It is by no means an easy assignment. And personally I have considerable doubts that phenomenology, especially in its present shape, is in the position to carry it out.

My concern here is more restricted. But it is all the more basic in
terms of its practical significance. I would like to tackle the question of whether phenomenology can make any direct contributions to human existence. It is all very well to show that phenomenology is a necessary or even a sufficient presupposition to knowledge. But even if it is, what would be the concrete use of such knowledge? What I would like to show within the limits of this paper is that practicing the phenomenological approach can effect one's concrete living, not only one's thinking about life. To my knowledge such an attempt has not yet been undertaken explicitly. I shall call this the question of the human uses of phenomenology. In positing it I do not want to set human uses against other non-human, or possibly even inhuman, uses. I merely want to focus on the question of what difference to man's living in his total world it could make if at least once in a while he would adopt the phenomenological stance. I am under no illusion that one can do this all the time. I certainly would not claim that I can. I am not even sure that this would be a good thing. Nevertheless, what I would like to show is that adopting this attitude explicitly, if only intermittently and partially, can change one's whole style of living.

Let me confess that until some ten years ago I too have never bothered much about any non-technical uses of phenomenology. At that time Douglas V. Steere, a genuine friend of phenomenology, in the presence of some non-philosophers, dropped the fateful question: "What can the ordinary man expect from your phenomenological enterprise?" This finally hit my conscience. How to justify the phenomenological way of life, if there is such a thing, before oneself as well as before one's tolerant and possibly even tax-supporting fellow-beings? I am not thinking so much of the all too familiar, if not vulgar questions: "What is the use of all your talk? Where does it get you? Does it pay?" I am concerned about Socratic self-examination and existential justification, which even the philosopher cannot shirk.

How can I rise to this challenge? Certainly the answer presupposes some acquaintance with, if not complete knowledge of, what phenomenology is all about. I am fully aware that in the present context I have no right to assume this. All I can do is to supply a first taste of the article or, for some, a few reminders of previous tastes, although I cannot guarantee that what I can offer will taste exactly the same. For here I have to face an even more serious hurdle: Is it possible at all to present a unified conception of phenomenology? There are those who believe that a closer inspection reveals not only one phenomenology but as many of them as there are phenomenologists. Personally I am not