Introduction to Phenomenology

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Perception of a Cube as a Paradigm of Conscious Experience

We will use a simple example to illustrate the kind of descriptive analysis of consciousness that phenomenology offers us. This example will give us an idea of the type of philosophical explanation that phenomenology provides. It will serve as a model for the more complicated analyses that we will undertake later.

SIDES, ASPECTS, AND PROFILES

Consider the way in which we perceive a material object, such as a cube. I see the cube from one angle, from one perspective. I cannot see the cube from all sides at once. It is essential to the experience of a cube that the perception be partial, with only one part of the object being directly given at any moment. However, it is not the case that I only experience the sides that are visible from my present viewpoint. As I see those sides, I also intend, I cointend, the sides that are hidden. I see more than what strikes the eye. The presently visible sides are surrounded by a halo of potentially visible but actually absent sides. These other sides are given, but given precisely as absent. They too are part of what I experience.

Let us formulate this structure in regard to its objective and its subjective dimensions. Objectively, what is given to me when I see a cube is a blend made up of sides that are present and sides that are absent but cointended. The thing being seen involves a mixture of the present and the absent. Subjectively, my perception, my viewing, is a blend made up of filled and empty intentions. My activity of perceiving, therefore, is also a mixture; parts of it intend what is present, and other parts intend what is absent, the "other sides" of the cube.

Of course, "everyone knows" that perception involves such blends, but not everyone knows their philosophical impact or their

philosophical range. All experience involves a blend of presence and absence, and in some cases drawing our attention to this mixture can be philosophically illuminating. When we listen to a sentence being uttered by a speaker, for example, our listening involves a presence of one part of the sentence, flanked by the absence of the parts that have already been pronounced and those that are to come. The sentence itself, as a whole, stands out against the silence, the noise, and the other sentences that precede, follow, or accompany it. The blend of presence and absence in our experience of a sentence is different from that involved in the perception of a cube, but in both cases there is a blend of presence and absence, of filled and empty intendings. Other kinds of objects would have still other kinds of blends, but all of them would be mixtures of presence and absence.

Let us return to the experience of the cube. At a given moment, only certain sides of the cube are presented to me, and the others are absent. But I know that I can either walk around the cube or turn the cube around and the absent sides will come into view, while the present sides go out of view. My perception is dynamic, not static; even if I just look at one side of the cube, the saccadic motion of my eyes introduces a kind of searching mobility that I am not even aware of. As I turn the cube or walk around it, the potentially perceived becomes the actually perceived, and the actually perceived slips into absence; it becomes that which has been seen, that which is again only potentially seen. On the subjective side, the empty intentions become filled and the filled become empty.

Furthermore, other modalities of perception also come into play. I can not only see the cube but also touch it, I can tap it to see what sort of noise it makes, I can taste it (for infants, the mouth is the primary tactile organ), and I can even smell it to see what it is made of. These are all potential presentations that come along with any presentation I have of the cube, potentials that can be activated and brought into direct presence. All of them surround the cube even when it is simply given to my view. It is interesting to note, however, that only vision and touch present the object as a cube; hearing, taste, and smell present the material the cube is made of, not its character of being shaped as a cube.

Let us spell out the visual experience of the cube a bit more precisely. We can distinguish three layers in what is presented to us.

(1) First, there are the *sides* of the cube, six of them. Each side can itself be given under different perspectives. If I hold a side directly before me, it is presented as a square, but if I tilt the cube away from me slightly, the side becomes given at an angle; it looks more like a trapezoid. The farther corners seem closer to one another than do the nearer ones. If I tilt the cube still farther, the side becomes almost like a line, and then, finally, if I tilt it just a bit more, the side vanishes from view. In other words, a side can be given in different ways, just as the cube can be given in different sides. (2) Let us call each of the ways in which the side is given an *aspect.* A side has the aspect of a square when it faces us directly, but it has the aspect of a trapezoid when it is turned at an angle to us. As a cube appears to us in many sides, so each side can appear to us in many aspects, and these aspects, transitively, are also aspects of the cube. But we can go one step farther. (3) I can view a particular aspect at a given moment; I can close my eyes for a minute, then open them again. If I have not moved, I will have the same aspect given to me again. The aspect itself can be given to me as an identity through a manifold of temporally different appearances. Let us call each of these momentary views a *profile* of the aspect; it is, transitively, also a profile of the side and a profile of the cube. A profile is a temporally individuated presentation of an object. The English word "profile" is the translation of the German *Abschattung,* which can signify "profile" or "sketch." Ultimately, therefore, the cube is given to me in a manifold of profiles.

Let us change our example from the perception of a cube to the perception of a building. I look at the front side of the building. I look at that side from a point of view a little to the left of center: at that moment, I see one particular aspect of the front of the building. Suppose I say to you, "This view of the building is very attractive; come and look at it from here." As I move away from the spot and you move into it, you see the same aspect that I just saw, but you will be experiencing profiles that are different from the ones I experienced, because the profiles are the momentary presentations, not the look or the view or the aspect that can be seen by many viewers. An aspect, a side, and of course the building itself are all intersubjective, but a profile is private and subjective. The profile may even depend on my disposition at the time and on the condition of my sensory organs; if I am ill or dizzy, the profile may be wobbly or

grayish instead of being steady or blue. The relative and subjective character of profiles does not mean that the aspects or the sides or the things given through them are relative and subjective in the same way.

IDENTITY OF THE OBJECT ITSELF

Perception, therefore, involves layers of synthesis, layers of manifolds of presentation, both actual and potential. Now, however, an important new dimension must be brought into play. When I see the different sides of the cube, when I experience various aspects from various angles and through various profiles, it is essential to my experience that I perceive all these manifolds as belonging to one and the same cube. The sides, aspects, and profiles are presented to me, but in them all, one and the same cube is being presented. The layers of difference that I experience are played off against an identity that is given continuously in and through them.

It would be wrong, however, to say that the cube is just the sum of all its profiles. The identity of the cube belongs to a dimension different from that of the sides, aspects, and profiles. The identity is other to the appearances it offers. The identity never shows up as a side, an aspect, or a profile, but still it is presented to us, precisely as the identity in all of them. We can intend the cube in its sameness, not just in its sides, aspects, and profiles. As I move around the cube, or turn it around in my hand, the continuous flow of profiles is unified by being "of" the single cube. When we say that "the cube" is presented to us, we mean that its identity is given.

At this point, we see a deeper dimension of the intentionality of consciousness than those we examined in Chapter 1. Consciousness is "of" something in the sense that it intends the identity of objects, not just the flow of appearances that are presented to it. The issue of the identity of the object will become important when we examine the transition from perception to intellection, when a perceived object becomes part of a state of affairs or a fact, but it is important even as a constituent of perception. When we perceive an object, we do not just have a flow of profiles, a series of impressions; in and through them all, we have one and the same object given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and is given. All the profiles and all the aspects, all the appearances, are appreciated as being of

one and the same thing. Identity belongs to what is given in experience, and the recognition of identity belongs to the intentional structure of experience. Let us also note in passing that this identity itself can be intended in absence as well as in presence, and we can be mistaken about it.

This analysis of sides, aspects, and profiles helps confirm the realism of phenomenology over against the Cartesian and Lockean philosophies of knowledge. According to the latter, all we are immediately aware of are impressions that strike our sensibility; we are enclosed in the circle of our ideas. But once we admit that there are such things as profiles distinguished from aspects, and aspects distinguished from sides, we find that it is quite impossible to account for such structures in terms of simple impressions and ideas within the mind. If everything were simply internal to us, all we would have given to us would be profiles: flashes of color and bits of sound, out of which objects would have to be constructed. We could never distinguish among a profile and an aspect and a side. In contrast, the distinctions between sides, aspects, and profiles make it more obviously clear that the surfaces and looks of things are "out there" for us to perceive; they are not just fabricated out of the impressions that strike our sensibility. The side or aspect that can be seen as the same at different times by the same person, or by several different persons, could not be merely an impression privately affecting each subjectivity. Furthermore, "behind" and "in" the sides, aspects, and profiles, there is also the oneness of the object itself, the identity that is given to us. The identity is public and available to all; it is not just something that we project into the appearances.

We have used the perception of a material object, a cube, as an initial paradigm for the phenomenological analysis of intentionality. Other kinds of objects involve other complex forms of presentation. Before moving on to the analysis of such objects and their corresponding intentionalities, let us consider some formal structures that play an important role in phenomenology.