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Phenomenology of Religion: Content and Consequence

It can be very difficult to be religious and a good philosopher at the same time. Philosophy is a demanding discipline. It demands critical thinking and rational justification. Religious life demands (among other things) a surrender to faith, unquestioning belief. The two are not easily reconcilable. However, when it comes to much of philosophy, religious philosophers can get away without worrying about their religious or spiritual lives. They accept that one can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God and consequently relegate their faith to its own separate sphere. That attitude works for the most part, but when it comes to Ethics, spiritually-motivated philosophers find themselves in a peculiar situation.

In the philosophical sphere, rational justification is required in ethical decision making. In the religious sphere, ethical decisions are based upon the mandate of God. A philosopher looking at religious ethics will often (though not necessarily always) come to the conclusion that such ethics have no rational basis, and unless that philosopher abandons the idea that rationality is the only way to solve problems, he will not be able to justify a purely religious ethic. There is also the nasty question of deciding what it is that God wants. The critical philosopher, then, may find himself disgusted with organized religion. He or she may also abandon religion as a viable source of any justification and resort to a sort of agnostic spirituality. This may work well for a philosopher operating alone, but outside of the Academy people do often make ethical decisions with scripture as if it were the only necessary justification for those decisions. We need to communicate

with them. We also need a philosophical description of religion. With such a description, we may be able to make sense of religious ethics, and though the rivalry between philosophy and religion may never be put to an end, it will have a more substantial form, and the questions and problems will be clearer.

The description with which I will concern myself is a phenomenological description of religious experience. This description will not base itself in the dogmatic axioms of a particular religion. Rather, it will be a phenomenology of religious experience as a whole. It will seek unifying principles from various religions. The religious experience, as it turns out, is based upon a conception of the holy, sometimes called God (I will use the two interchangeably). It is my opinion that a phenomenology of religious experience can in no way prove the existence of the holy, but God as an idea is perhaps the most important part of that phenomenology. The idea of the holy, will be made clearer by such a study. Once a phenomenology of the holy is possible, it also becomes possible to imagine ethical obligations towards the holy. In fact, if one were to accept a phenomenology of religious experience as accurate, I think that all ethical obligations would actually come from one's relationship with the holy. Such an ethics would be independent (but not necessarily divergent) from ethics based upon belief in sacred scripture. That ethics may be in no way helpful to those who aren't religiously or spiritually motivated. Nor would it likely be helpful to those without philosophical tendencies. Those who would benefit from an ethics based upon a phenomenological description of religious experience are people like me. We are torn between love of a system which puts all its faith in reason (thereby avoiding some nasty questions about intellectual conflicts of interest) and our sympathy for a system that holds something as

higher than human beings, who tend to disappoint one. An ethics like this could help the philosopher avoid giving up recourse to reason in ethics while at the same time incorporating spiritual life and philosophical life. In effect, one could change the “leap of faith” in religion from believing that a book is the will of God to simply believing that there is an all-powerful God. The first step is to talk about the purpose and methods of phenomenology in rational discourse. If we are interested in phenomenology as a way to describe religious experience, we should know first how it describes things.

Phenomenology is the search for the underlying structures of everyday lived experience. In the words of Calvin Schrag, “The peculiar and distinctive task of existential phenomenology is that of penetrating to the structures of world experience, striving for a conceptual clarification of the world through interpretive categories that are always reflexive upon the data they seek to elucidate.” (Schrag, 256) It seeks to clear away misconceptions and uncover fundamental relationships. There is a sort of hermeneutic circle in the study. The way we view the world in a certain day and age will have effects on our philosophical description so that phenomenological ideas reflect the time in which they were made. Schrag says something along these lines in his description of phenomenological ethics:

“Again, the implications of this structural element of historicity for any concrete ethical program are profound. If the moral self is always positioned within a personal and communal history, then the ethical norms that are derived (quite independently now of how they are derived) will be subject to an inevitable historical conditionedness. Every ethical value will express in one way or another the attitudinal and ideational complexes of the age. Ethical formulations cannot remain immune to historical change and becoming. Even the conceptual categories and tables of virtue in which we cast our moral experience are conditioned by the presuppositions of the times.” (259)

That is, a phenomenological description is not one that is subject to the same kind of proof required of arguments in the field of logic. So, if phenomenology is meant to

uncover underlying structures what does the phenomenology of religious experience mean?

Firstly, a phenomenology of religious experience is not meant to prove the existence of God. However, it is prudent to note here that the description I will use, that of Rudolf Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, does indeed intend to say that its description of the holy is one of a definite reality. Otto thinks that the feelings that occur during religious experience are the direct cause of a real thing. In the introduction to Otto's book, John Harvey writes ". . . it is Otto's purpose to emphasize that this [the holy] is an objective reality, not merely a subjective feeling in the mind; and he uses the word *feeling* in this connexion not as equivalent to emotion but as a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving nor of ordinary conceiving." (Otto, xvi) That is, when we have a religious experience, we are experiencing something outside of ourselves. For Otto, there is an extra-human cause. Though Otto thinks the holy is an objective reality, I think his description is nonetheless extremely useful in describing religious experience, which brings me to my next point, what his study can do for us.

A phenomenology of religious experience also doesn't necessarily tell us whether or not to be religious, though it may aid us in the decision to do so or not. Reflection upon religious experience "has as its goal the clarification of those possibilities that confront us so that we can choose responsibly what kind of lives to live, especially since we must choose without the epistemic guarantees we would like." (Westphal, 354) That is, phenomenology of religious experience can tell us what we're getting into. It helps us understand what religion is:

" . . . the phenomenology of religion brackets or temporarily sets aside such questions as to whether we are obliged or permitted or forbidden by the standards of truth and rationality to hold various religious beliefs. Instead, its point of departure is the fact that

religion is an observable phenomenon of human life, and its task is to help us better understand what religion is by giving descriptive analyses of that aspect of human experience. In this regard it strongly resembles the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art, the task of which are neither to praise nor to bury science or art, but to give us deeper insight into the structures and functions of these widespread human activities. In all three cases, the observability of the phenomena is no guarantee of agreement when it comes to descriptive analysis.” (353)

In this sense the phenomenology of religion is especially useful to the spiritually oriented philosopher, who may wish to see the far-reaching consequences of religious choices on the rest of her mindset.

Once again we need to ask the question about universality in phenomenology. According to Otto, his description is universal. He thinks he has found the heart of religious experience. When speaking of his description, he says, “There is no religion in which it [the holy] does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name.” (Otto, 6) Otto may be relying on his idea that the holy is an objective reality here, in which case he is making a circular argument, but he still provides other evidence. Otto continually talks about the place of parallel ideas in the highest strata of religions across the ages, from the most ancient religious practices to the current practices. According to him, they all indeed include his conception of the holy as the most fundamental religious precept. While Otto’s description of religious experience may not be universal and for all of time, there is good reason to believe that it adequately describes religious experience up to this point. Even if Otto relies on the existence of a Christian God, his idea of the holy can be transplanted to a more philosophically tenable plane by presentation as pure phenomenology. After all, if we are to judge a phenomenology on how well we think it describes our experience of the world, then Otto’s description should be judged in just that way. If those of us who are religious

relate strongly to it, then it should be considered accurate. Now I may move on to Otto's ideas about the holy and how we experience it.

Otto is fundamentally concerned with moments of religious consciousness. For him, the "holy", also known as the "numinous" is not something most of us maintain constant contact with. We experience the holy in brief, overpowering moments, which Otto asks us to think of in order to properly judge his work: "The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little qualified by other forms of consciousness." (8) Interestingly enough, at the same point Otto says that readers with no religious experience need read no further. (I hope that if any of you have never had a religious experience, you will continue to read this paper regardless.) For Otto, religious experiences contain elements that no other experiences contain, and he wishes to try and enumerate those elements the best he can, keeping in mind that no strict definition will suffice. That it lacks a strict definition is not a serious problem. I ask readers who think it is to remind themselves of Levinas' "existence without existents, whose definition is very much intuitive. In any case, Otto often suggests definitions by analogy because for him, the numinous is experienced uniquely: "I shall speak, then, of a unique 'numinous' category of value and of a definitely 'numinous' state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined." (7) That is, in to fully understand Otto's phenomenology, one must have had a religious experience. Though it may bother us to think that we can't understand Otto without having experienced religiously, the idea is not entirely repulsive. After all, a

phenomenology of religious experience is concerned with what happens when we experience religion. It makes sense that we would need experience of the numinous in order to understand it.

The numinous is a complex idea. And as Otto often tries to explain things in terms of “ideograms”, or groups of ideas, so he does with the numinous. First and foremost, the numinous is irrational. It evokes what Otto calls “creature feeling” or “creature consciousness”, which best defined as a feeling of dependence. This dependence is no ordinary dependence. As Otto puts it, the creature feeling “is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.” (10) It is important to Otto that creature feeling deals with two things: the perceiver and the perceived. It is not merely the subject’s feeling of dependence or inadequacy, but also what is perceived as a real and existing power separate from that subject. As I have said before, Otto takes it for granted that the numinous actually causes the perception. That is, the definitions that he provides are meant to be definitions of something real and outside of the human mind. The creature feeling “has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self.” (10) However, I still think that Otto’s description is useful to those who will not admit proof of the existence of the holy. It is clear to me that those who have religious experience undergo this creature feeling, which perceives a far greater power than any found in regular experience. The object of the creature feeling, be it real or no, is perceived by the religious experiencer. That object is the numinous. It has multiple distinct features, which one elucidates with the ideogram of the “Mysterium Tremendum.”

The “Tremendum” aspect of the numinous has three fundamental features: awefulness, overpoweringness, and urgency. Though these three can not be separated in an exceptionally clean fashion (according to Otto), they can be dealt with on their own to some extent. Awefulness is first. The numinous inspires awe. To experience it is to experience dread. This dread combined with fear creates “a terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil. It has something spectral in it.” (14) The spectral quality is the most important. It makes it so that fear of the holy is a very distinct type of fear. It is not the same as fear of a playground bully or the fear one experiences just before impact in a car crash. It has the characteristic of uncanniness. The experience of the Aweful has a Judeo-Christian manifestation to which Otto draws attention. It is the wrath of the God of the Old Testament. “. . . it is patent from many passages of the Old Testament that this ‘wrath’ has no concern whatever with moral qualities. . . . It is, as has been well said, ‘like a hidden force of nature’, like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near. It is ‘incalculable’ and ‘arbitrary’.” (18) This is not to suggest that awefulness puts us in a constant state of fear for our existence. The amoral power of the numinous can be unleashed upon others just as it can be unleashed upon us. It can also manifest itself with subtlety. Curiously, Otto says, “The awe or ‘dread’ *may* indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man’s hair bristle and his limbs quake. But it may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across his mood.” (16) That is, the awefulness presents itself as pure uninhibited power, but does not always arouse intense

dread. Awefulness is amoral, awe-inspiring, and otherworldly. The next part of the ideogram of the numinous is “overpoweringness”.

Overpoweringness is that part of the numinous which deals directly with the dependence aspect of creature feeling. This dependence is not dependence in the way that needing food and water to survive is dependence. Nor is it dependence in the sense of being created by a community or one’s physiology. The dependence that overpoweringness evokes is a feeling of worthlessness or meaninglessness in the face of something greater:

“It is especially in relation to this element of majesty of absolute overpoweringness that the creature-consciousness, of which we have already spoken, comes upon the scene, as a sort of shadow or subjective reflection of it. Thus, in contrast to ‘the overpowering’ of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one’s own submergence, of being but ‘dust and ashes’ and nothingness. And this forms the numinous raw material for the feeling of religious humility.” (20)

Overpoweringness evokes humility. It makes us feel submerged, like nothing.

Overpoweringness is a reaction to the might of the numinous.

The third and final aspect of Tremendum is urgency. This urgency “everywhere clothes itself in symbolical expressions-vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, impetus.” (23) Otto seems to be saying that the numinous is ubiquitous in this respect. Its power translates to life. Its energy, for some mystics, is much like the wrath described previously: “. . . in the ‘voluntaristic’ mysticism, the mysticism of love, where it is very forcibly seen in that ‘consuming fire’ of love whose burning strength the mystic can hardly bear . . . the scorching and consuming wrath of God; it us the same ‘energy’, only differently directed.”(24) So much for Tremendum. Now I will move on to “Mysterium”.

The Mysterium aspect of the numinous is that which is “The Wholly Other.” The numinous is unintelligible. It is completely foreign. Otto writes, “. . . that which is ‘mysterious’ is-to give it perhaps the most striking expression-the ‘wholly other’ . . . that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.” (26) The mysterious can not be comprehended by the human mind. It is different from everything we understand:

The truly ‘mysterious’ object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’, whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.” (28)

The mysterious also has curious positive and negative characteristics. It is both positive and negative at the same time. The most concrete analogy that can be made is to a ghost. Ghosts are not part of our existence, yet we perceive them. Otto says, “because it [the holy] is a thing that ‘doesn’t really exist at all’, the ‘wholly other’, something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind.” (29) We can barely conceive of the mysterious. It is impossible to directly describe, and for that reason it captivates us. The mysterious is precisely what the Buddhist monks search for in meditation: “. . . in fact the ‘void’ of the eastern, like the ‘nothing’ of the western, mystic is a numinous ideogram of the ‘wholly other’.” (30) The final aspect of the numinous is the “fascinating”.

We have already spoken of the numinous as something that appears to us momentarily. It is otherworldly, awe-inspiring, immensely powerful, energetic, and unintelligible. Finally, it is fascinating. According to Otto, “The daemonic-divine object

may appear to the mind as an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow his own.” (31) Here it is that Otto says human beings seek to appropriate some sort of application of the numinous to their daily lives. Though the numinous remains irrational, “The ideas and concepts which are the parallels or ‘schemata’ on the rational side of this non-rational element of ‘fascination’ are love, mercy, pity, comfort; these are all ‘natural’ elements of the common psychical life, only they are here thought as absolute and in completeness.” (31) This is about as far as I will go with Otto’s phenomenology for the time being. I now wish to start dealing with some of the ethical results of that phenomenology.

If we accept that Otto is right, and that his description of religious experience is accurate, then we can start towards an ethics based upon that experience. For Otto, sin and atonement were crucial to this next step: “. . . for Otto, this complex ‘object’ of experience is not just a matter of power, but also of value. Before the numinous I experience not only the limits of my power but also the limits of my worth. The notions of sin and defilement that emerge go beyond the notions of guilt and remorse derived from morality, just as holiness is not reducible to goodness; however, the value categories of religion are intimately related to those of morality.” (355) I am not interested in sin and atonement, but rather with the consequences of some of Otto’s findings. First of all I feel I need to back up for a moment and talk about what phenomenological ethics do. Even if it is clear to the readers, it hasn’t always been so for me.

What would ethics look like in a universe where human beings have a relationship like the one we have just described? What is the purpose of that ethics? Well, phenomenological ethics is interested in “description [of ethics] rather than proscription, keeping in mind, however, that an interdependent relation between the two is always implied.” (Schrag 256) The phenomenologist wants to tell us about what moral experience is more than what is correct morally. His goal is a “formal axiology rather than ethical persuasion.” (257) As phenomenologists, “we need to “bracket” the concrete act of valuing and seek to describe the conditions that make moral experience possible. The attention in a formal phenomenological axiology is directed to the question of the *possibility* of moral experience.”(257) Then phenomenological ethics is interested in talking about the possibilities of moral experience. What is possible in Otto’s universe?

First of all, it seems rather difficult to think that anyone who accepted Otto’s conception of the holy could ever make claims about the wishes of God in a concrete way. If God is unknowable and unintelligible, then human beings cannot likely aspire to know God’s wishes in any way approaching the concrete. However, ethical action in some relation to the holy would seem appropriate. That is, the holy has been posited as that which makes us realize we are personally without worth. Our existence is punctuated by moments of realization that involve dread, awe, and fascination in relation to something that is wholly greater than we are. Our ethical action would then seem to have something to do with that relationship: “. . . this shows that above and beyond our rational being lies hidden the ultimate and highest part of our nature, which can find no satisfaction in the mere allaying of the needs of our sensuous, psychological, or intellectual impulses and cravings.” (36) As ethical beings, those who experience the numinous

would seek to serve something that is above themselves. There is, however a serious obstacle to those who experience the numinous. The numinous is unknowable

The conflict between the mysterious and tremendous aspects of the numinous is rather serious. The philosopher who wishes to understand religious ethics as a coherent entity has a hard time finding an impetus for that ethics. It could be that a practical ethics based upon the phenomenology of religion is impossible, but I do not think that is necessarily so. After all, those who experience religion do not do it alone. The numinous presents itself as overpowering the entire universe. That is, the numinous so overpowering that all things are small before it, and the differences between human beings and their fellow existents is minute in relation. I would like to develop this idea more, but must regrettably stop here now.

My purpose in writing this essay was to clarify a few questions about religion's place in philosophy. My approach was phenomenological, and I thought it necessary to clarify the relationship of that approach to the subject matter. It served my purposes to borrow a description that was phenomenological in vocabulary but lacking in one respect, its belief in the *proof* of God. Regardless, I think that Otto's description of the holy is certainly worth taking into account when considering religion in a philosophical manner. Its description strikes me as very accurate in regards to my personal experience, one who has attempted to find the holy in multiple religions. In any case, this essay has served to answer my questions about what phenomenology is and how it relates to religion and ethics. I believe I have also presented us with a very useful problem: that of ethical decision for a spiritual or religious person. It would please me to explore this problem more in depth. I am convinced that it is important to bridge the gap between the

Mysterium and the Tremendum. That is, it is now necessary to find a basis for ethical action under the idea that God is unknowable and yet all powerful.

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