

The Origins of Wittgenstein's Phenomenology

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While it is certainly true that the manuscripts comprising Wittgenstein's "middle" phase have enjoyed more attention since the publication of the *Nachlaß*, neither his conception of phenomenology, nor its origins have captured the interest of many within Wittgensteinian studies. The reason(s) for this situation are not fully clear and probably involve several, more or less, related factors, which I will not go into now. However, where little interest existed early on amongst Wittgenstein's interpreters, several thinkers associated with the phenomenological tradition were eager to take up the challenge of investigating these issues. This paper represents a brief overview of the possible origins of Wittgenstein's sudden and unexpected use of the term "phenomenology."¹

While certainly not the first person to take note of Wittgenstein's use of the term "phenomenology" and "phenomenological grammar," Herbert Spiegelberg's initial article "*The Puzzle of Wittgenstein's Phänomenologie (1929-?)*" generated a great deal of attention, and marks the first serious attempt to take Wittgenstein's proclaimed phenomenology seriously. The "puzzle" began with the publication of the *Philosophical Remarks* in the original German. With this work, as Spiegelberg relates, came the "unexpectedly rich confirmation" to various allusions about a phenomenological theory and language that Wittgenstein had briefly entertained in 1929. Unfortunately, due to the lack of access to the unpublished manuscripts belonging to this period, Spiegelberg was not in a position to solve this riddle. However, his initial research and speculative efforts have significantly influenced later research regarding this topic, including my own efforts.

What Wittgenstein meant by the term "phenomenology" is certainly linked to the question of its origin. Although his use of the term is not entirely dependent upon its originary source, clearly, such information would be of great assistance in understanding what he wanted to associate himself with as well as distance himself from.

The most obvious question is whether or not Wittgenstein acquired the term from Edmund Husserl, either directly through his writings or indirectly via discussions, articles, and the like. Complicating the matter further, no comprehensive record of Wittgenstein's personal library exists. Aside from the authors Wittgenstein himself mentions, we have only second hand reports from friends and colleagues regarding books Wittgenstein had obviously been reading.

Even though we do not have any direct evidence of Wittgenstein having read Husserl, there are several anecdotes that prevent us from completely closing off this possibility or simply dismissing it out of hand. The first reference stems from notes taken during Wittgenstein's visits to the Vienna Circle between 1929 and 1930 by Waismann, which can be found in *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*.

During the course of their conversation on December 25th, 1929 the topic of *Phänomenologie* unexpectedly makes an appearance under the title *Physics and Phenomenology*. Paralleling comments in the *Philosophical Remarks*, here, Wittgenstein distinguishes his project – the logical investigation of phenomena in order to determine the structure of what is possible – from that of physics – which is only interested in establishing regularities. Toward the end of their discussion, in a section entitled *Anti-Husserl* – a title attributed to Waismann – Moritz Schlick poses the question to Wittgenstein: "What could one reply to a philosopher, who thinks the statements of phenomenology are synthetic *a priori* judgments?" (Wittgenstein 1980). Although Wittgenstein's response is rather condemning, as Spiegelberg points out, it is unclear whether or not Wittgenstein is rejecting this position with actual knowledge of Husserl or simply the position presented by Schlick. If the latter, we can hardly attribute an accurate and unbiased portrayal of Husserl's work by Schlick considering their on-going debate at that time.

Although not a member himself, Wittgenstein was certainly well acquainted with several of the Vienna Circles most influential patrons. The obvious question is: might one of members have been responsible for bringing Wittgenstein into contact with phenomenology? Felix Kaufmann would seem to be an obvious candidate, except there is no evidence that the two had anything to do with one another. And while Wittgenstein's relationship to Waismann was much closer, given that his disdain for Husserl was comparable to that of Schlick, Waismann would also seem to be an unlikely candidate.

If we are to hypothesize that Wittgenstein's sudden use of the term phenomenology is traceable to the Vienna Circle, then the most likely person to have influenced him would have been Rudolf Carnap. In his work, *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928), Carnap's conception of phenomenology reflects a certain influence of Husserl. This influence is almost certainly attributable to the contact he had with Husserl as Carnap was working on the first draft of his book. He had been staying in nearby Buchenbach between 1922 and 1925, and had attended several of Husserl's seminars in Freiburg from the summer semester of 1924 till the summer semester of 1925 (Spiegelberg 1981). While it cannot be said that Carnap was convinced of Husserl's position, his text nevertheless contains several non-critical references to the *Logical Investigations* as well as *Ideas I & II*, not to mention the adoption of Husserl's *epoché*. There are, however, two good reasons for doubting Carnap as a source for Wittgenstein's sudden use of the term phenomenology: First, their accounts of phenomenology are not very similar (although, as Spiegelberg points out, they are closer to each other's position than either is to Husserl's). This alone does not rule Carnap out, but in conjunction with Carnap's own admission that his relationship to Wittgenstein was quite strained during this time, the possibility of influence dwindles.

Another incident, which seems to lend circumstantial support for Wittgenstein's acquaintance with Husserl's work, involves a chance meeting between Wittgenstein and J. N. Findlay in 1939. Findlay mentioned to Wittgenstein

¹This paper is a modified version of a section from my book *Wittgenstein on Phenomenology and Experience: An Investigation of Wittgenstein's 'Middle Period'*. Also, the quoted passages from Wittgenstein are my translation from the German original.

that he was working on a translation of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, to which Wittgenstein "expressed some astonishment that he (Findlay) was still interested in this old text" (Spiegelberg 1981). While this by no means represents definitive proof, this anecdote keeps the possibility of Wittgenstein's first-hand knowledge of Husserl's phenomenology open.

Frege represents another potential source of contact between Wittgenstein and Husserl. Given that the Frege and Husserl corresponded with one another and were working on related problems, it is not unreasonable to think that Husserl's work or perhaps his ideas might have been mentioned. While I have, as of yet, not found any direct evidence for this connection in the correspondence between Wittgenstein and Frege, it nevertheless remains a promising avenue for further investigation.

Another figure who we should not leave unconsidered is Heidegger. Over the course of several years, Wittgenstein makes at least two references to his work. The first stems from a discussion with Waismann and Schlick, where Wittgenstein appears to make an unsolicited remark regarding *Being and Time* and the concept of *Angst*:

I have a pretty good idea of what Heidegger meant by Being and angst. Man has the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think, for example, of the wonder that something exists. This wonder cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is no answer (Wittgenstein 1980)

In the passage, Wittgenstein continues to develop the connections between his notions of "wonder" [*Erstaunen*] and "the ethical" with those of Heidegger and Kierkegaard. This admission on the part of Wittgenstein that certain aspects of his early thought, i.e. the mystical experience of the world and the ethical, are moving in the same direction certainly indicates at least a partial familiarity with Heidegger's work.

Wittgenstein's second encounter with Heidegger is not as obvious as the first. During an early explication of language-games and the grammar of word usage, Wittgenstein is concerned with preventing "the philosopher" from "straying down hopelessly wrong paths." He then provides an example of just such a dangerous and misleading path present in language:

If we want to deal with a sentence like 'the Nothing nothings' or the question 'what was earlier, the Nothing or the negation?' to be fair we must ask ourselves: what was the author thinking regarding this sentence? From where did he take this sentence? ... He who speaks about the opposite of Being and the Nothing as well as the Nothing as having priority over the negation, he thinks of – I believe – an island of Being surrounded by the endless sea of the Nothing (Wittgenstein 1998).

Although not named as such, the passage (and the accompanying pages) clearly points to Heidegger's lecture *What is Metaphysics*, in which the relationship of *Dasein* to "the Nothing" is treated. While Wittgenstein's attitude towards language such as "the Nothing nothings" is, indeed, critical, the passages do certainly suggest the provocative idea that Wittgenstein had first hand knowledge of Heidegger's work, even if the latter passage betrays a lack of understanding regarding Heidegger's point concerning "the Nothing" as a positive aspect of Being – and not as a mere negation of beings. When taken together, the two passages do seem to make Heidegger a promising candidate.

However, the purpose of this section is not merely to establish points of contact, but rather to investigate the origin of Wittgenstein's use of the term phenomenology. Or more precisely, was Wittgenstein's initial use of the term and corresponding project of a phenomenological language directly influenced by other phenomenologists? Keeping this distinction in mind, and given the time frame of these two references, the possibility that Wittgenstein was *influenced* by Heidegger begins to dwindle.

The first passage stems from the end of December 1929, and although that does not exclude the possibility that Wittgenstein had read *Being and Time* prior to his return to Cambridge, thus prior to his introduction of the term phenomenology, the comment alone is inconclusive. The second passage stems from the beginning of January 1932. Given that the lecture *What is Metaphysics?* was not even held until July 24th, 1929, and published later that same year, it cannot have been the impetus for Wittgenstein's phenomenology. Thus, while the possibility remains open whether or not Heidegger had any direct influence on Wittgenstein, the search for the source of his phenomenological project in all likelihood lies elsewhere.

As intriguing and provocative as these possibilities might seem, there are certainly other potential sources for Wittgenstein's use of phenomenological language, which may have little or no real connection to Husserl or Heidegger. Although now most prominently associated with the term phenomenology, Husserl by no means invented the term. Many individuals, prior to and even after the turn of the century, laid claim to the term phenomenology, among them: Hegel, Goethe, Mach, and Mauthner. And although Wittgenstein had read the work of the latter three thinkers (especially Mauthner), we do not find any real matches regarding Wittgenstein's "new" form of philosophizing.

Lastly, I would mention a theory that is neither glamorous, nor really even a theory, but more of an educated guess. On the one hand, the "theory" implies the least "causal" interaction, but, on the other, by ridding ourselves of the need for a "smoking gun" agent of change, we are probably closer to the truth of the matter. The theory contends that the term "phenomenology" was a part of the Viennese cultural landscape; that the term was simply floating freely within this uniquely charged and fertile atmosphere. Having been born and raised in Vienna to one of the wealthiest families in Europe, Wittgenstein was certainly in a position to absorb the vibrant cultural atmosphere existing at this time.

Continuing with the theme of a more general influence, it is even possible that his sister Margarete had a hand in the introduction of the term. She was the one who introduced the adolescent Ludwig to Schopenhauer's *The World and Will as Representation*, and thus to philosophy. Within the family, she was considered the most academically and culturally astute, and with her wealth she was able fully to immerse herself in the culture of that time. Margarete certainly had the opportunity to have discussed such topics with him, and even provide access to a great deal of philosophical literature. Perhaps, after his return to Cambridge (from Vienna), in order to distinguish his present phenomena-logical investigations from his earlier work, he simply adopted a familiar term without any concrete source in mind.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the section, the question regarding the origin of the term "phenomenology" in Wittgenstein's work will probably never be definitively answered. None of his known writings or notes mentions

anyone specifically, and portions of his *Nachlaß* from around this time, which might have shed some light on the issue, were later destroyed per Wittgenstein's instructions. That having been said, I would like to elaborate further my contribution to this speculative endeavor.

When one considers the kind of thinker Wittgenstein was, I would contend that the notion of any *specific* influence quickly evaporates. As Spiegelberg writes, "influence' [is] a very complicated affair... [and in Wittgenstein's case] could hardly ever amount to anything more than a stimulant and a trigger for his own thinking" (Spiegelberg 1981) With the notable exceptions of Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell and possibly Mauthner, talk of traceable influence in Wittgenstein's writings would be, at best, an uphill fight.

Here, the problem of origin is analogous. Wittgenstein's thought is so tightly wound around or within itself that to speak of an origin for his use of "phenomenology," more likely than not, only misleadingly complicates the issue. By this, I am not proposing that Wittgenstein's thought developed sealed up in some hermetic chamber; for obviously, he had been "influenced" by different thinkers and writers, even by his own admission. On several occasions, he even characterizes his own thought derogatorily as "reproductive" rather than creative or original (Wittgenstein 1977). However, the point is not whether Wittgenstein has been influenced by others, but rather how do these influences manifest themselves in his work, or concerning the question of origin, to what extent can something be regarded as being the source?

A characteristic of Wittgenstein's work is the degree to which he has internalized the various voices presented. This is most apparent in his later works, but is actually present at every stage of his development. What this means is that Wittgenstein rarely engages in a discussion with another thinker; rather he has either so thoroughly taken over a particular viewpoint or abstracted the main tenets of a position (and continued their development) that notions of authorship begin to blur. The various positions

encountered in his texts and notes are usually his own. In other words, he has personalized them to such a degree that it is not Descartes' dualism against which Wittgenstein is arguing, but Wittgenstein himself representing this dualism – Wittgenstein contra Wittgenstein. An example of this aspect of his thought can be seen in his later critique of philosophy in the *Investigations*. While the critique is directed towards the philosophic tradition, in going about his task, Wittgenstein actually criticizes his own earlier views (mostly those contained in the *Tractatus*). Here, the faults and weakness of philosophy, he believes to be embodied in his earlier thought. Thus, by critiquing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein understands himself to be affecting a critique of philosophy as a whole.

In closing, I would point out that even if he acquired the term "phenomenology" in a more open and non-specific way, similar to what I have suggested above, it would be incorrect to conclude or simply insinuate that the term held no special significance for him. Quite to the contrary, had he been neutral with respect to calling his project "phenomenology," it would never have survived the open and continuous hostility by certain members of the Vienna Circle, nor Moore's repeated criticism of the term during Wittgenstein's lectures.

Literature

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