Phenomenology:
Basing Knowledge on Appearance

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The present document contains **excerpts** from this book, namely: The Abstract; the Contents; and Sample text (Chapter 1).

Avi Sion (Ph.D. Philosophy) is a researcher and writer in logic, philosophy, and spirituality. He has, since 1990, published original writings on the theory and practice of inductive and deductive logic, phenomenology, epistemology, aetiology, psychology, meditation, ethics, and much more. Over a period of some 28 years, he has published 27 books. He resides in Geneva, Switzerland.

It is very difficult to briefly summarize Avi Sion's philosophy, because it is so wide-ranging. He has labeled it '**Logical Philosophy**', because it is firmly grounded in formal logic, inductive as well as deductive. This original philosophy is dedicated to demonstrating the efficacy of human reason by detailing its actual means; and to show that the epistemological and ethical skepticism which has been increasingly fashionable and destructive since the Enlightenment was (contrary to appearances) quite illogical – the product of ignorant, incompetent and dishonest thinking.

Abstract

Phenomenology is the study of appearance as such. It is a branch of both Ontology and Epistemology, since appearing is being known.

By an ‘appearance’ is meant any existent which impinges on consciousness, anything cognized, irrespective of any judgment as to whether it be ‘real’ or ‘illusory.’ The evaluation of a particular appearance as a reality or an illusion is a complex process, involving inductive and deductive logical principles and activities. Opinion has to earn the status of strict knowledge.

Knowledge develops from appearances, which may be: (a) objects of perception, i.e. concrete phenomena in the physical or mental domains; (b) objects of intuition, i.e. one’s subjective self, cognitions, volitions and valuations (non-phenomenal concretes); and/or (c) objects of conception, i.e. simple or complex abstracts of preceding appearances. Abstraction relies on apprehensions of sameness and difference between appearances (including received or projected appearances, and projected negations of appearances). Coherence in knowledge (perceptual, intuitive and conceptual) is maintained by apprehensions of compatibility or incompatibility.

Words facilitate our construction of conceptual knowledge, thanks to their intentionality. The abstract concepts most words intend are common characters or behaviors of particulars (concrete material, mental or subjective experiences). Granting everything in the world is reducible to waves, ‘universals’ would be equalities or proportionalities in the measures of the features, motions and interrelations of particular waves. Such a theory of universals would elucidate sensation and memory.

In attempting to retrace the development of conceptual knowledge from experience, we may refer to certain major organizing principles. It is also important to keep track of the order of things in such development, interrelating specific concepts and specific experiences. By proposing a precise sequence of events, we avoid certain logical fallacies and are challenged to try and answer certain crucial questions in more detail.

Many more topics are discussed in the present collection of essays, including selfhood, adduction and other logical issues, the status of mathematical concepts and theology.

Contents

Sample text (chapter 1)

What, Why and How

1. Phenomenology

Phenomenology may be defined as the study of appearances as such. By an ‘appearance’ is meant any existent which impinges on consciousness, anything cognized, irrespective of any judgment as to whether it be ‘real’ or ‘illusory.’ The evaluation of a particular appearance (an existent within the field of consciousness) as an illusion (existing *only in* consciousness) or a reality (existing *not merely in* consciousness, but also before it, after it, without it or beyond its range) is a complex process, involving inductive and deductive logical principles and activities. Opinion has to earn the status of strict knowledge. To begin with, appearance must be taken neutrally, at face value, as the common ground of reality and illusion (i.e. one of a triad).

> An appearance *is* whatever it *seems to be*. At this level of consideration, the verbs ‘to seem’ and ‘to be’ are one and the same. It is only at the next level, where an assessment of status is involved, that they have to be separated.

Since appearing is being known, phenomenology can be regarded as a branch of both Ontology (the study of being as such; or more restrictively, of real being) and Epistemology (the study of knowledge as such; or more restrictively, of true knowledge). Phenomenology differs from ontology in being less presumptive as to the nature or status of the object dealt with, and it is for this reason a study essential to epistemology. The basic insight or premise of phenomenology is that knowledge develops from neutral appearance. The common-sense view of knowledge would seem to be that knowledge develops from data considered *at the outset* as ‘sensory,’ but as we shall see this view involves logical difficulties. The phenomenological approach is an attempt to overcome these difficulties; and propose a more coherent order of development.

As I have shown in my work *Future Logic*, no item of apparent knowledge, not even a percept, is ever immediately and definitively ‘true’ all by itself. An item may initially *seem* to be true, or contain some truth; but it is only in relation to all other items, which likewise *seem* to be true, that the judgment as to whether it is *really* or entirely true can be made. Even the various criteria and tests involved in such terminal judgments are themselves to start with merely seemingly true. The science of phenomenology is built on the same basic insight.

In this volume, we shall understand the term ‘appearance’ very broadly as including: a) objects of perception, i.e. concrete phenomena in the physical or mental domains; (b) objects of intuition, i.e. one’s subjective self, cognitions, volitions and valuations (non-phenomenal concretes); and/or (c) objects of conception, i.e. simple or complex abstracts of preceding appearances. Abstraction relies on apprehensions of sameness and difference between appearances (including received or projected appearances, and projected negations of appearances). Abstracts are firstly simply

summaries of information, and at a later stage more complex hypothetical entities. Coherence in knowledge (perceptual, intuitive and conceptual) is maintained by apprehensions of compatibility or incompatibility.

With regard to terminology, the reader is advised to keep in mind that in philosophy, and in this particular philosophical treatise, we use words somewhat differently or more specifically than in common parlance. Contrary to the impression given by the term 'phenomenology,' it should be understood as a study not merely of 'phenomena,' but of all appearances, including intuited particulars and abstract data[1]. The word 'appearance' is often confused with 'illusion,' but here includes 'reality.' It is about equivalent in scope to the term 'object' (content of consciousness) or 'thing' in logic (anything existing or thought of). Note well that here 'experiences' refers not only to the phenomena of physical perception, but includes mental percepts, and even intuited data. In common parlance, the term can be more restrictive (limited to sensory inputs) or even coextensive with 'appearances' (e.g. 'my life experiences' includes my abstract thoughts). And so forth – all terms will be made clear in due course. *See* ***Illustrations*** *at the end of the book.*

Phenomenology is a science based primarily on attentive detailed observation of one's own experience and discursive behavior, and only secondarily on careful logical analysis and ordering of such observations. Thus, practice of *meditation* is a prerequisite to development of this philosophical discipline, and our success in the latter depends on our skills in the former. Although philosophical awareness and thinking are ultimately obstacles to meditation (which rises above intellectual pursuits), the former can in the interim still draw significant lessons from the latter. Labeling phenomena as "phenomena", or making distinctions between them, or distinguishing them from intuitive experiences or from abstractions – such acts are all non-meditative; but they may well occur and be remembered in the course of meditation. (See **Appendix 1**.)

2. Knowledge is Based on Appearance

Our primary consideration ought to be just what is apparent to our awareness at each and every moment. Nothing can be granted offhand except this first given. ***Appearance is immediately granted – because there is nothing else to discuss or refer to, because discourse arises solely in reaction and in relation to it.*** Thereafter, we may stage by stage show how knowledge in general, including our alleged knowledge of those stages, develops.

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1 There is no point in coining a new term, even though the term phenomenon is in the present volume used in its primary sense of material or mental concrete particular, in contradistinction to intuited objects or abstracts. But note that in practice the term is often used more loosely with reference to complex appearances like 'a social phenomenon' – which include not only concretes, but also intuitive experiences and even abstracts.

The core thesis of phenomenology, thus, is that *knowledge is based on appearance*. This is in stark contrast to other approaches to epistemology, which propose that knowledge is based on 'external reality' or on 'subjective truth' or some such premature thesis. Moreover, phenomenology regards as essential that *the sequence in which knowledge arises and develops out of appearance* be clarified. A notion or suggestion may be appropriate if intelligently placed in the 'order of things,' but very misleading if misplaced.

- Consider, for instance, **Naïve Realism** (or Materialism or Objectivism)[2]. This philosophy proposes that we have a body with sense-organs, that when these come in contact with external objects sensations are produced, which in turn produce primary ideas (images) in the mind, which are what we experience and build more complex ideas (abstract concepts) from. At first glance, this thesis may appear obvious and worthy of universal belief. But upon reflection, we see that it leads to serious logical problems. If, as it suggests, ideas 'represent' external reality, how do we know that they indeed 'correspond' to it? **If, as this theory implies, all we know are ideas (sense-data and their combinations), *how can we even get to know that there is an external reality at all, let alone a body with sense organs in which our minds reside?*** Thus, surprisingly enough, this approach to knowledge is internally inconsistent.

- In reaction to this conundrum, some philosophers have opted for the opposite extreme, a **Mentalism** (or Idealism or Subjectivism)[3]. They have, in fact, accepted the core tenet of Naïve Realism that what we perceive and build knowledge on are mental substances called ideas, while simply dropping its thesis that these ideas originate in physical sensations in response to stimuli from external objects. The trouble with this thesis is that it involves a stolen concept, since it would be hard put to define mentality after having done away with that of materiality. Moreover, it does not really *explain* the mass of data at hand – it merely explains it *away* as illusory happenstance. It does not elucidate why there would appear to be an enormous universe of matter 15 billion years old, composed of innumerable galaxies, stars, atoms, quarks, including on a small planet called Earth apparent human beings, with apparent bodies, with apparent sense organs. Mentalism just ignores all this, or discards it as sheer fantasy; it does not make it comprehensible. It is therefore incomplete.

Having grasped the problem inherent in the former theory, we might be tempted to opt for the latter, however imperfect, were it not for the possibility of another approach, that of

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2 Historically, at least in its modern version in the West, we owe this philosophy to John Locke (English, 1632-1704). The difficulties inherent in it were noticed implicitly by his predecessor René Descartes (French, 1596-1650), and later by the likes of David Hume (Scottish, 1711-76) and Immanuel Kant (German, 1724-1804). Notwithstanding, Naïve Realism has remained a basic belief, and a source of considerable confusion, for many people, including philosophers and scientists.

3 For example, the Yogachara school of Buddhist philosophy.

Phenomenology, which presents neither the flaw of internal inconsistency nor that of incompleteness. Phenomenology brings together the best in both those theories, while weeding out their faulty elements.

- Phenomenology starts like Mentalism with the *given content of consciousness*, but identifies that content neutrally as 'appearance,' instead of taking up the prejudice that it is something mental (idea). For it must be realized that the concept of mind was built in contrast to that of matter; it has no meaning by itself, and would not have arisen were it not for the concept of matter. Phenomenology therefore posits a concept of appearance, which leaves the question of mind or matter open to begin with, a question to be answered in a larger context.

- Phenomenology ends like Naïve Realism with a belief in matter as well as mind, but it does not get to that thesis in the same manner. The error of Naïve Realism is not essentially its notion of a physical body having sensations that generate ideas, but the fact that it takes this notion for *immediately granted*, treating it effectively as a mere observation. Phenomenology avoids this error by **understanding the notion in question as a *hypothetical model*, through which we manage to *organize* appearances into an orderly and consistent whole called knowledge**.

Our premise is that the starting point of epistemology is never a blank mind in a social vacuum, but the belief framework of ordinary persons in a given historical and geographical cultural context. Researchers in epistemology are *themselves* such ordinary persons in a given societal climate, with their particular viewpoints, though hopefully outstanding intellectual capacities. Any theory such researchers propose must ultimately convincingly explain the genesis of the ordinary frameworks. Whether the latter are thus wholly justified, or demonstrated to be aberrant to some extent, they can neither be ignored nor entirely rejected without logical absurdity.

It is worth making a comment here, parenthetically, about the cultural context. A man like me, born in the 20th Century and educated in the West, normally takes the Realist viewpoint for granted, and assumes that everyone else in the world naturally does too. People with an opposite perspective seem at first unnatural (philosophical nitpickers or weirdo mystics), if not nonexistent. But it must be kept in mind that in other regions of the world and in other periods of history, there have been humans who sincerely held very different worldviews (consider animism or shamanism, for instances). One should remain open minded.

3. To Be Or Not To Be

One notable radical difference with ordinary thinking in our place and time is the Buddhist notion that we have no self. The Buddhist outlook stems from the position of Indian philosophy that all that we can cognize are *dharmas*, that is (in a primary sense) concrete phenomena of perception, and eventually (in an enlarged sense) the abstract derivatives thereof. The 'reality' of dharmas was considered 'illusory,' since they were impermanent, without abiding characters; and all the

more so, derivative notions about dharmas. The Hindu branch of Indian philosophy opted for the thesis that beyond such elusive existents there is a (more 'real' and 'permanent') spiritual existence (with individual selves or souls, and a universal Self or God). Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, forked off, denying any such additional existents (on the surface, at least, because they later admit a ground of being, which is known only on the highest level of consciousness). Moreover, some Buddhist schools effectively consider some dharmas as material, whereas others consider all as mental.

Some modern Western thinkers would agree with the no-self position, from a more mechanistic perspective, regarding man as a machine (an organic computer or robot) devoid of soul. René Descartes (17th Century) was the first in the history of Western philosophy to raise the issue of selfhood (or raise it so explicitly and clearly). He inferred (*ergo*) existence of self (*sum*) from existence of cognition (*cogito*). More precise would be to say that we (at least partly) infer Subject and consciousness from the appearance of Object. Something appears – *to what (whom)?* a Subject! *how?* through consciousness! Some philosophers would consider such reasoning as compulsive, influenced by mere grammatical habit. But in my view, these characterizations are neither just habitual nor deductive certainties; they are inductive *hypotheses*[4] needed to settle certain logical issues.

The term 'Subject,' by the way, is used as here relative to 'Object,' in the relation called 'consciousness'[5]. In the relation of 'volition,' the same entity is called 'Agent,' versus the 'will' (the act of will or that which is willed). The term 'soul' refers to the common ground of Subject and Agent (as well as affective and other roles). The term 'self' stresses the personality of soul, as distinct from other entities, which lack consciousness, volition and affection. The term 'spirit' stresses the distinct substance of soul, compared to material or mental entities (without at the outset excluding that all three may ultimately be of uniform stuff).

In my view, the issue of self is relatively secondary in importance, in the (re)construction of knowledge from scratch that Descartes was pursuing here. He quite correctly saw that even apparently sensed objects may be dreamed. But he (so far as I know) missed the primary conclusion that 'whether these appearances are reality or illusion, it is at least sure that they are.' *That* ought to have been his main building block. In that case, the second inference becomes 'something appears to be (thus, exists), therefore I and my consciousness of that appearance also exist,' the reverse! But I am perhaps being picky. His '[I][6] think therefore I am' can also in

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4 Hypotheses, incidentally, made by the Subject through consciousness.

5 I use capitals for the 'Subject,' and occasionally the 'Object,' of consciousness, to avoid confusion with the subject or object of a proposition, and other ambiguities.

6 I put the 'I' implied in 'cogito' in brackets, so as to stress the verb 'think' as primarily implied. The 'I' is grammatically required at the beginning of that sentence, but logically is intended as given in the 'sum' clause, only after an inference indicated by the 'ergo' conjunction. This remark justifies my reformulation of Descartes statement as "think (thoughts appear), therefore am (they appear to someone, call that me)".

fairness be read as '***things appear therefore I am here seeing them***.' Note also that the 'therefore' implies someone inferring; thus not only experience but also reason are implicit in the insight and statement.

In the present volume, we shall radically diverge from the Buddhist or Western Mechanist theses. It is indeed logical to suppose that if all we can cognize are the concrete physical and imaginary phenomena we perceive, i.e. *visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or gustatory* manifestations of being, and the abstract ideas we form in relation to those phenomena, then there is no self. For no one can claim to see or hear or touch or smell or taste the self – it has admittedly no *perceptible* qualities. However, the way out of this dilemma is to abandon the underlying dogma (about dharmas), and admit that we have another sort of cognitive relation with the self and its exclusive properties (consciousness, will and valuation) – a direct self-experience that might be called 'intuition.'

This thesis need only be taken as a hypothesis to start with. But it soon, as we shall see, becomes evident that such self-experience is needed and extremely useful in solving a variety of epistemological as well as ontological problems. For examples, how are present memories (of past sensations) distinguished from present sensations? Or how are word intentions known to be intended? Thus, it is not through some arbitrary superstition that self and its functions are established, but through the utility and gradual confirmation of the hypothesis of intuition. Theories of knowledge that ignore or exclude intuition merely seem to manage to stand without it, because they do not explicitly confront certain issues, leaving them tacit and unresolved.

4. The Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology, then, is a theory of knowledge that (i) lays emphasis on a neutral, noncommittal consideration of the building blocks of knowledge as 'appearances' – meaning all contents of consciousness, without prejudice as to their source or nature – and (ii) seeks out *organizing concepts and principles* that would successfully order this knowledge if proposed in an *appropriate sequence*. We may well propose elements of Realism or Mentalism, provided we do so in a critical manner.

The *basic building blocks* of knowledge include concrete experiences, meaning perceived material and mental phenomena and intuitions relating to self, and the conceived, abstract derivatives of the preceding. How to we proceed from experiences to conceptual knowledge? Among the *prime processes* involved are apprehensions of sameness or difference (comparison and contrast) and of compatibility or incompatibility (confrontation, face-off). These processes make use of a certain amount of imagination, which however does not detract from their impartiality, as we shall try to show. The intent here is to sketch *a phenomenological approach* to such fundamentals of epistemology. That is, we need to depict hypotheses as to how the abstract derives from the phenomenal and intuitive, without any prior assumptions as to the nature of the phenomenal, intuitive or abstract, in a manner that considers appearances *ad hoc*.

Attempts to do this under a Naïve Realist presumption have little credibility in that they assume as given that the observer (me, you) has a 'physical' body, sense organs and a brain, whereas (upon reflection, more critically) these entities and their material substance can only in fact be justified *after* a long analysis and synthesis of all data. The alternative, phenomenological approach avoids this logical difficulty (circularity), by starting without assumptions concerning the nature of phenomena or their status (whether they are real or illusory), and proceeding in an ordered manner from the experiential level to the conceptual level, with reference to convincing cognitive processes. If we thereby arrive at a conclusion justifying the basic assumptions of the naïve view, so well and good; but we do not base our understanding on that view. It is an effect, not a cause of knowledge.

What matters for us here in phenomenology, to begin with, is *what* is cognized, irrespective of *how* it came to be cognized. Because the 'how' is ultimately just another 'what.' For instance, the common thesis that the visual phenomena appearing before me here and now are the end products of a process of some kind involving physical eyes, constitute in this context an *attempt at explanation*. Taken as a given *ab initio*, it constitutes Naïve Realism. But to say this does not exclude the truth of the thesis as a *final* conclusion.

Note that we say 'naïve,' not so as to intimidate eventual dissenters into following suit, but because there is an unquestioning acceptance, an unawareness of the issues involved, to correct. In our example, the main issue is (simply put) that, just as each act of seeing something requires validation, so the vision of the eyes themselves is itself open to doubt. It is not because our perceptions are occasionally wrong that they need evaluation, but because a lot of what we regard as perceptual is more precisely (at least in part) conceptual.

Phenomenology is the *intelligent* organization of appearances into knowledge. By 'knowledge' is meant loosely, to start with, our opinions and impressions. If these are well organized, they gain the status of knowledge in a strict sense, or 'true' knowledge. If they remain scattered and confused, they are classed as mere opinions and impressions, or 'false' knowledge. Among the basic methodological principles of phenomenology, we may cite the following:

(a) Attention to all appearances in all their details. Awareness that they change and accumulate.

(b) Constructing a theoretical model that takes all appearances into consideration, and does not simply ignore them nor (worse still) contradict them.

(c) The order of things in knowledge proposed by that model must be coherent, as an inappropriate sequence of events can hide or lead to contradictions.

(d) Such an epistemological model is necessarily flexible, open to revision, depending on its adaptation to the current mass of data and insights.

(e) It is not an axiom, but is acknowledged to be an ongoing hypothetical construct, to be 'proved' inductively by virtue of its adherence to the aforesaid reasonable principles (which may of course be viewed as themselves part of the construct).

Many historical philosophical errors have been caused by a failure to consider the order of things in the arising and development of knowledge. This is equally true in matters of detail, as in grand issues.

For example, the Zeno paradoxes cannot be conceived as proofs that motion is impossible, but only as evidence that our (or Zeno's) initial *concepts* of motion are problematic; for motion is *experientially* manifest before and irrespective of any conceptual deliberation concerning it and all discussion concerning motion arises only in reaction to such experience of it as an attempt to rationally interpret and explicate it.

One of the main purposes of the present essay shall, therefore, be to identify the temporal and logical order of the main items in knowledge, so as to preempt such errors.

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