

RESEARCH NOTE: THE CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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1. *Introduction*

This research note is penned in honour of Johan Vander Hoeven on his retirement as Editor-in-Chief of *Philosophia Reformata*. It is to acknowledge his helpful contribution to the critical exposition of phenomenology. I first read his work almost 30 years ago and it challenged me to develop a sympathetic Christian critique of this philosophical movement. This note is to offer some reflection upon the Christian interpretation of phenomenology. In particular, it raises questions about how some famous phrases, one by Dilthey, the other by Husserl, have been construed.

Herman Dooyeweerd, the founding editor of this journal, acknowledged Husserl's importance as well as the impact of the various streams of the phenomenological movement. He issued warnings which now, at the beginning of a new century, can easily sound as harsh and dogmatic, even if they were framed by statements which enjoin us to adopt a self-critical attitude to all dogmatism.¹

There is a history to the reformational critique of phenomenology which continues to this day. Vander Hoeven's lectures² have been a part of this history and there have been other important contributions from Th. De Boer on Husserl³, Son Bong-Ho on Husserl⁴, Theodore Plantinga on Dilthey⁵, Louise D. Derksen on Gadamer⁶, Kuk-Won Shin on Gadamer⁷ and various others.

The critique of phenomenology is an important part of reformational philosophical reflection and development around the world. In this note I wish to raise questions about the interpretation of some key statements as they function in this reformational critique⁸.

¹ Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (4 vols), Presbyterian and Reformed 1969. See comments in Foreword (Abbreviated) to the First Edition Vol. I, p.v, or the "dangerous adversary" comment in Vol.II, pp.487-490.

² John Vander Hoeven, *The Rise and Development of the Phenomenological Movement*, Christian Perspectives, Guardian Publishing Company, Hamilton, Ontario, 1965.

³ Th. de Boer, *The Development of Husserl's Thought*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1966.

⁴ Son Bong-Ho, *Science and Person*, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1972.

⁵ Theodore Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1980.

⁶ Louise D. Derksen, *On Universal Hermeneutics*, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Boekhandel, 1983.

⁷ Kuk-won Shin, *A Hermeneutic Utopia: H-G Gadamer's Philosophy of Culture*, The Tea for Two Press, Toronto, 1994.

⁸ This critique now also feeds e-mail "chatgroups" which are a new force in the academic discussion that hitherto has taken place in the halls of academia and at scholarly conferences. These include "Christian World-View Network" at Redeemer College, Ontario maintained by Michelle Botting and David Koyzis (cwn@redeemer.on.ca) and "Neutrality Myth Network" maintained by Colin Llanfear in the UK (cjlanfear@lineone.net).

Let me draw attention to Vander Hoeven's interpretation of two well-known statements, made 35 years ago. The first is discussed here in relation to another English translation that must now be dealt with. It concerns Wilhelm Dilthey's famous comment about "everything fixed becoming wavering". The second statement is Husserl's "the dream has been dreamt".⁹ I have already commented upon rightly interpreting the latter statement elsewhere¹⁰ and my comment here essentially repeats what has been offered there with one added question.

Our purpose must be to clarify how the Christian theoretical development of philosophy relates to variant interpretations of key texts. Our theoretical exposition must be shaped by our reading of texts, on the one hand, and on the other the close and critical reading and exposition of key texts should be spurred on by our self-critical philosophical method. The question at issue is how we engage ourselves in ongoing discussion with the variant interpretations in relation to diverse philosophical elaboration by proponents and adherents, of our own and other philosophies.

2. *Vander Hoeven compared with Rickman on Dilthey*

VanderHoeven quotes Dilthey in the following way:

In the mind of the present period and its philosophy, the last and most characteristic feature arises out of the discord of the sovereignty of scientific thought and the desperation of the mind concerning itself ... Here the emptiness of consciousness asserts itself, whereby all standards have been abolished; everything fixed has become wavering, an unlimited liberty of admission, the play with boundless possibilities let the mind enjoy its sovereignty and at the same time give it the pain of its lack of content.¹¹

The translation of the same passage by H. P. Rickman renders it in these terms:

From this dissonance between the sovereignty of scientific thought and the inability of the spirit to understand itself and its significance in the universe springs the final and most characteristic feature in the spirit of the present age and its philosophy.¹²

⁹ This is given the date "Summer 1935" and runs with a title "Denial of Scientific Philosophy. Necessity of Reflection. The Reflection [Must Be] Historical. How is History Required?" which was "Beilage XXVIII" pp. 508-513 in the German Edition of *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaftslehre und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (edited by Walter Biemel), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1954, 2nd printing 1962, and is found in Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis in the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1970, pp. 389-395 at p. 389.

¹⁰ Bruce C. Wearne, "Review Essay on *Open the Social Sciences: The Gulbenkian Commission Report 1996*" in *The American Sociologist* Fall 1998, pp. 71-78.

¹¹ Vander Hoeven, *op. cit.* p.12.

¹² W. Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, edited, translated and introduced by H. P. Rickman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, p.112. The excerpts which follow in my text follow in the same paragraph.

Rickman's translation continues and these are the matters which Vander Hoeven's abbreviating ellipsis refer to (which no doubt were of pedagogical importance when these lectures were initially delivered and then published):

The grim pride and pessimism of a Byron, Leopardi or Nietzsche presupposes the domination of the scientific spirit over the earth.

Rickman's translation then continues (i.e. after the point at which Vander Hoeven has inserted an ellipsis):

But, at the same time, the emptiness of consciousness asserts itself in them because all yardsticks have gone, everything firm has become shaky; an unrestricted freedom to make assumptions, and playing with unlimited possibilities allow the spirit to enjoy its sovereignty and at the same time inflict the pain of a lack of content.

My quotation of Rickman's translation would continue after the point where Vander Hoeven's stops. The reason for this is explained in the comment I make after it.

This pain of emptiness, this consciousness of the anarchy in all deeper convictions, this uncertainty about the values and goals of life, have called forth the different attempts in poetry and fiction, to answer the questions about the value and goal of our existence.

When seen in the context of the larger quote, Dilthey is apparently discussing something problematic in the then most recent stage in the evolution of the humanistic world-view. The focus is as much upon developments in science as in "the humanities". Vander Hoeven's quote illustrates this pain and in the immediate context of his lecture can be read as a sharp and perceptive illustration of the dilemma of humanistic *philosophy* to develop its own project any further.

But even where they refer to the *same* parts of the relevant excerpt from Dilthey, it seems that Rickman and Vander Hoeven have somewhat different approaches to their respective interpretations. They have different assumptions that feed their respective translations of Dilthey's text. Further clarification would be useful to us and some *Philosophia Reformata* readers may have pertinent contributions to make on this important point of interpretation. Vander Hoeven and Rickman may care to comment.

For instance, Vander Hoeven seems to hang his argument upon "the mind of the present period" juxtaposing this with the "desperation of the mind concerning itself". Objectivity is, as it were, set over against subjectivity.

Rickman's translation, on the other hand, seems to render Dilthey's reference to "spirit" (rather than "mind") as referring to his attempt to identify the failure of a synthesis to unite objectivity with subjectivity. By contrast, Vander Hoeven seems to have implied a subjective desperation about a failed project to establish objectivity. The difference may turn out to be only slight but there are subtle implications and different views of the relationship of objectivity to subjectivity are thereby implied.

If we follow Rickman's interpretation it does not seem to be simply the "sovereignty of scientific thought" which has released the "emptiness", but

something even more basic. Dilthey would then be pointing out that in the context of over- (or inner-) whelming “desperation”, known to us pre-eminently through the work of famous literary “desperados”, that this dissonance bursts forth into fruit in many ways, including the scientific *Weltanschauung* so prominent in modern consciousness. It would then mean that the “inner emptiness” is manifested in these “desperados” because in them science has triumphed and what science tries to explain is then immediately explained away. Rickman’s Dilthey is the exponent of how a desperational world-view has come to prevail in “the present age.”

On the other hand for Vander Hoeven the desperation seems to be of philosophical provenance. Vander Hoeven’s translation and subsequent exposition has, via the ellipsis, downplayed the literary context in which Dilthey’s comment came forth — hence he seems to have been considering philosophy as an analytic and systematic enterprise and, at least at that juncture, giving less attention to phenomenology’s romantic and literary roots (or routes) than Dilthey was.

However a few pages later, Vander Hoeven concludes his discussion with a masterful and even somewhat prophetic announcement about the result of this philosophical dilemma. In the logical arguments that open up as a result, two ways are left to philosophy: “an escape into explicit mythology” or “the seal of stagnation and of powerlessness in the pragmatistic proclamation of the ‘plurality of truth.’”¹³

On the other hand, Rickman’s Dilthey would seem to have *already* anticipated this development. In Vander Hoeven’s quote it is only there, “hidden” as it were, by the ellipsis.

The comments of Johan Vander Hoeven, Theodore Plantinga and others might be helpful here. Can we clarify by developing the reformational appreciation and critique of phenomenology further in a truly Christian self-critical direction? Is there not more that can be said here?

3. *VanderHoeven on Husserl’s “der Traum ist ausgeträumt”*

Of Husserl, Vander Hoeven says “At the end of his career [Husserl] had to admit in disillusion: ‘Philosophy as science, as serious, rigorous, even apodictical science — the dream has been dreamt.’”¹⁴

But is this a statement of disillusion? Given what Husserl is reported to have said close to his end¹⁵, it is possible that this statement does not need the interpretative postulate of the writer’s despair as its presupposition. Such an interpretation would follow the inner dialectic of phenomenology, if not humanistic philosophy *in toto*, and develop a critical perspective that goes something like this:

¹³ Vander Hoeven, p. 16.

¹⁴ Vander Hoeven, p. 18.

¹⁵ See Alfred Schütz, “Husserl and his influence on me” in Don Ihde and Richard M. Zaner (eds), *Interdisciplinary phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1977, pp. 124-129 at pp. 128-129.

When Edmund Husserl penned his Summer 1935 note on the “Denial of Scientific Philosophy”¹⁶ he indicated a theoretic continuity with the Kantian project. In Kant’s 1783 words the critical project he began had been initiated when Hume woke him from “dogmatic slumber”, pointing him in a completely new direction for his enquiries.¹⁷ Over one hundred and forty years later Husserl opined “Philosophy as science, as serious, rigorous, indeed apodictically rigorous science — *the dream is over.*”¹⁸

The ambiguity concerns whether Husserl’s “dream” is post- or neo-Kantian. What are we now to do in our theoretic labours once we, with him, realise that the dream is over? And was this 20th century dream of Husserl a dogmatic slumber? Is the critical project dead, finished, a mere ideal that has dissipated with the passage of time, and do we give up trying to discover a way to be accountable at the base of our thinking for how we go about our scientific labour?

On the other hand, it might mean that the dozing interlude has been broken so that we can now *resume* the Kantian project and in the light of day take criticism and self-criticism to an even higher level by sustained scientific reflection. Have our spirits not been refreshed to renew our efforts to find new ways of becoming wise about the true meaning of Enlightenment? Is not our next task in history to finally establish a way to criticise all previous criticisms? Are we not now able to discover the meaning of our search for the universal truth once and for all?

So which way are we to go in interpreting Husserl? Which path should we follow? With Husserl’s attempt to transcend the crisis of European science, and our discovery of the end of the dream, do we now accept that all hopes are dead (just like Keynes observed about *long-run* tendencies¹⁹)? Or is it time to wake up to the weaknesses of our previous efforts and resume the critical theoretical project?

In these terms the so-called “post-modern” dilemmas facing, say, the social scientific community world-wide, could be understood as being prefigured in Husserl’s utterance. But could not the end of Husserl’s dream simply indicate that this inner dialectic had already been embraced by Kant’s awakening from *dogmatic* slumber?

¹⁶ Edmund Husserl, “Denial of Scientific Philosophy. Necessity of reflection. The Reflection [Must Be] Historical. How is History required?”, Appendix IX of *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental philosophy*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1970, pp. 389-395.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics that will be able to present itself as a science*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1953, p. 9.

¹⁸ Husserl, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

¹⁹ John Maynard Keynes, *A tract on monetary reform*, Macmillan Royal Economic Society, London 1971(1923), p. 65. “*In the long run* we are all dead”. The term “long run” refers to a concept of time in the context of a debate about controlling long-run factors in economic and social organisation.

4. *Conclusion*

This *note* arose out of my reflection upon how I had initially been introduced to the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* by the positive and helpful reformational critique of phenomenology. Vander Hoeven's published lectures brought this philosophy to my attention when the phenomenological spectre had begun to haunt the social sciences. This critical analysis raised important themes in phenomenology's rise and development pertinent to understanding how phenomenological sociology has developed ever since.

Now when some taken for granted interpretations of various thinkers, including Dilthey and Husserl, are re-examined, we enter into a careful empirical re-examination of what they wrote and Vander Hoeven's exposition remains an important one even as some questions about correct interpretation and translation have to be faced.