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Ran Lahav (Israel-USA) and José Barrientos-Rastrojo (ETOR, Spain)

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Workshop by Dean Pickard (USA)

Phenomenological Seeing and Hermeneutical Awareness

Powerful experiential exercises can be used to concretely demonstrate that each of us is completely unaware of things that are immediately present to us. This is so because our habits of mind do not permit such seeing. To suddenly experience something like this is to be able to experience in a very concrete way the fact that we are always operating within horizons that are conditioned by our habits of perception and by our emotional, cultural, linguistic milieu. I will mention one exercise for perception and one for emotion that can cause a "breakthrough" experience.

The exercise in perception is to notice for the first time just the periphery of one's visual field, its actual shape and that it is always there, quite easy to see, if we draw our attention to it in four easy steps.

1. Keep your focus on a spot in front of you (the exercise will not work without this).
2. Without moving your eyes, notice everything in your left visual field, then the right, then above, then below.
3. Next, see all four directions *at the same time*. This will be a first for most people (though it is familiar to martial artists, among others).
4. Finally, notice the shape of this total perceptual field *itself*, rather than anything *in* this field.

Then, as you come back to normal, see how easy it now is to notice this visual field that is always present, that you never noticed before. You can't just *look* at it, but you can *see* it nonetheless.

This is analogically similar to the difference between certain kinds of knowledge, which have objects, as opposed to wisdom, which does not. Wisdom is not seeing this or that. It is not a perspective. Rather, it is an attitude that arises from such shifts in perspective, a kind of seeing things in an over all relation that allows us to not be so trapped in the particular.

A similar exercise can be done with emotional orientation in our experience that reveals an omnipresence of our vulnerability, whatever fluctuations in surface emotional states there may be that constantly attract our attention and color our views of things. Behind any particular desire or feeling there is an underlying yearning, vulnerability, temporality, a distention of the soul, as Augustine calls it, being pulled, moved, or motivated. (It is what Plato has Diotima reveal to us in the *Symposium* as the true nature of Eros and the fundamental feature of human experience.) The world always feels some way or other to us. It is colored with joy, sadness, ennui, desire or any other felt sense of things. But this is only variation of the basic omnipresent character of conscious awareness, namely the world always presents itself to us in feeling or mood, as Heidegger says. This omnipresent felt sense is the concrete manifestation of our vulnerability, our capacity to be affected at all, our openness to meaningfulness. It always has a cultural, linguistic, and personal felt horizon. The actual exercise is to select very powerful experiences from memory and relive them, experiences of intense joy, sadness, fear, anger, etc.. We then turn our attention to feel and see what is common to all of them. This is not easy at first, since these appear to be such radically different feelings and experiences. But just as we were able to stop looking at objects in our perceptual experiment in order to see something that is omnipresent but cannot be observed directly, we can begin to detect something that is omnipresent in our felt sense of being in the world. We can then move to a further recognition, the omnipresence of not just vulnerability

or being pulled, but of meaning and interpretation without getting caught up in this or that meaning, thus setting aside theoretical issues of truth. We can later also discuss the centrally important confusions about truth and why relativism/subjectivism, on the one hand, and objectivism/absolutism, on the other, are simply untenable ways to even try to approach the issue of meaningfulness. Clearly, some interpretations are vastly superior to others. But this has little to do with questions of epistemology and much to do with philosophical hermeneutics.

A third exercise is an extension of the last one. It is to remember and vividly relive those moments in our lives that are most disruptive of the ordinary, most disorienting but that give us an entirely new orientation and capacity for new meaningfulness. Examples that can be tapped into are powerful moments of deep wonder as a child, or the experience of falling deeply in love, the experience of becoming a parent, or the experience of some life altering realization, etc.. This rupture of the ordinary is an opportunity for self-overcoming, renewal, rebirth, connection with something sacred in us, something powerful that arises out of our deep vulnerability. Experiences of horror, anguish, and grief are also experiences of this deep rupture to our meaningfulness. When we experience these it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a point of reference and stability from which to notice the basic character of such experiences, that is, our deep vulnerability, that things mean anything at all and that things matter deeply. Such experiences could not occur without this deep vulnerability. To relive these experiences puts us closer in touch with the ever present possibility for reworlding and transformation. Even experiences of horror, the sense of impending loss of our world or the experience of anguish when all is lost and "nothing matters" if we survive these moments, upon reflection we can see that as terrible as such experiences are they reveal our deep vulnerability in that our meaningful world can be overturned. But at some point we emerge from such primordial experiences, if we are torn open by them enough and reworld, with a sense of wonder and awe at how we are reborn. Such death is the only death we ever experience, the death of a meaningful world. I must survive to have such an experience. What we usually call death, the experience of the absence of another, is itself an experience of one who is still vulnerable, and hence alive. Death is not something we ourselves can experience. If we experience it, then it is not what we normally mean by death. The only death we experience is the death of our meaning.

Exercise 4

1. Sit relaxed and follow your breathing eyes closed. Let yourself become still and focused.
2. Begin to notice what occurs in your awareness and then add the labels
 - a) **Sensation:** (color, cool, warm, heavy, light, sleepy, itchy, tension, pain, tingling, pulling, buzzing, humming, stretching, nervous, etc.)
 - b) **Emotional feeling** (bored, sad, joyous, excited, anxious, angry, pleased, curious, nervous, etc.)
 - c) **thought** (thought/memory and feeling sensation/emotion; thought judgment and feeling sensation/emotion; Thought image and feeling; Thought imagination; Thought narrative, thought dialogue, etc) We will spend several minutes on this
3. Kant tells us that space is our "outer" sense and time is our "inner" sense. This is the way our sensory awareness is experienced, as "out there" and "in here." Let's explore this now just as it is experienced without any habits of thought about how the world is, rather, just the distinction in experience between this inner and outer sense that precedes our assumptions and habits of thinking about the world this way or that. Notice how your sensory awareness has a "location" to it, a "there" that in our habits of meaning we call spatial location. All sensation has this spatial quality or characteristic of location, but so do all images or imaginings have this spatial quality, as well. Let us become aware just for a

moment of this sense of "out there," that things are there in my awareness of sensation, even my own body with the various different qualities of sensation and feeling are here or there, in my stomach, in my throat, on my skin here or there. I feel proximity to things around me. This itch is here, not there. That sound is there not here. We normally just take this for granted as being located in space as if space is "out there." Let us remember that space is a concept, not an experience. We never *experience* anything called "space" any more than we experience anything called "time." Rather, we experience spatially and temporally. Staying for a moment with this feeling of spatial location, see if you can set this habit (of bringing your experiences under the concept of space as "out there") aside momentarily and just become aware of the *sense* of "there" *itself*, the *sense* of now, *itself*. Now notice the focusing on each of the features of awareness *itself* more than what it is you are focusing on. This is the beginning of the ability to experience experience itself, rather than this or that feeling or object that normally captures and fills our awareness.

4. Now distinguish any feature of your awareness from your awareness itself. Let anything arise to awareness without examining it or labeling. Rather begin to notice the distinguishable features of your awareness (sensations, emotions, thoughts as we did before) but now notice what is common to them. Hint: they are all present to you, are "there" "now." Now begin to let go of noticing the distinctiveness of what comes to awareness and be aware once again of your awareness itself. What phenomenological feature(s) does it have?

See if you can become aware of all your sensations at once without focusing on any one of them. At first your mind will dart from one to another trying to be aware of each one. But one technique to bring them simultaneously into awareness is to focus out in front of you into the blackness without really focusing on it, just keep your orientation there until you begin to have an awareness of all the sensations going on without focusing on any one of them and not darting from one to another. Even if you only have a split second awareness of this, you have an awareness of "thereness" without any particular "there." Next, if you can just come to this same awareness for a split second over and over but now let go of the overall awareness of thereness (space) and notice the "newness" of this "thereness". The experience is of awareness itself rather than an awareness of anything. It has no location in space. It is what Kant called "inner sense" as opposed to outer. In outer sense, I seem to have a location in relation to whatever I am sensing. Thoughts seem to be inner and sensation seems to be outer and emotion seems to be both inner and outer, mostly inner. Emotions rarely occur without thoughts. See if you can now distinguish all these in your experience, your phenomenological noticing.

Augustine tells us that this inner sense is most intimately experienced as a "yearning," a kind of openness or receptiveness to something not yet. It is our sense of impending future, a "now" a purpose or hope guided by positive or negative expectation to which our response is feeling. The final part of this exercise is to come to an awareness of this "yearning" or vulnerability, this being pulled that is ALWAYS there, ALWAYS present in all the different qualities of experience we call feeling or emotion and that feeling or emotion always has a here and now to it. If you do these exercises well, you will be able to develop this bare awareness more easily and not be driven by your emotions to behave in habitual patterns, to see the process of awareness with all its variations as the here and now of vulnerability or yearning or being pulled. You can observe this being pulled rather than let it impel you to acts that you would not wish to pursue if you were able to be more reflective about it. Being able to see into the core of any experience, the being pulled of the here and now, give you some control and choice. It allows for better judgment about what matters.

The term in Sanskrit for bringing inner and outer sense to rest, bringing memory to rest, bringing emotion to rest is called *samadhi*. Samadhi is cultivated awareness of complete equanimity and stillness. In this condition space and time are suspended yet there is awareness of this profound stillness. It is an awareness in which the distinction of self and not self is suspended but can return in an instant. This is non philosophical contemplation. It gives us a

vacation from the self and its habits, cravings, aversions, and insecurities. In Zen it is called bare awareness where there is no perspective. Practice of this bare awareness allows us to suspend our usual perspectives and interpretations thus making them somewhat estranged when we come back to them. We are momentarily freed from them as habits and can examine them and shift to other perspectives much more easily. From this arises *prajna* or insight which is not seeing from this or that perspective but a condition of freedom in which an attitude may arise that is non particular and non judgmental, just noticing, without judging.

Transformative Insight (see below at end) also uses a different but companion practice of reading or thinking-saying a powerful insight and rather than reasoning one's way or arguing pro or con, take the insight seriously as life transforming.

What would it be to understand and shift one's horizons and orientation such that an insight becomes not intellectually "true" but becomes an undeniable lived felt awareness, an attitude? Even if we only have it for a split second, it has found its way to our spiritual core and becomes a possible way of being in the world for us. This is not an intellectual shift but a gestalt shift in understanding where all the elements of our knowledge and awareness take on a different horizon of meaningfulness, a different whole and therefore a different felt sense of being here.)

Exercise 5: Attitude: Attitude is a much higher level feature of being in the world than mere perception or emotion or belief. How and why is attitude different from these and what difference does this make?

a) Think of a time when you had the most shocking realization that you were mistaken about something, that you got the facts wrong and judged someone unfairly. What is the experience of that shift like? Now consider that there may be such undiscovered errors in your life. You are fallible. The response to a powerful recognition of this is humility. But if you have integrity, you will develop skill in making judgments. You will have the confidence to live powerfully by your judgments because they are more skillfully arrived at. At the same time you are humbly aware of your finitude and fallibility so you are ready at any moment to subject your judgments to careful scrutiny and modify or abandon them. You take a general approach of suspending judgment when possible, in many cases where it is not required or the matter is of great importance.

b) Think of a time when you were completely convinced of your rightness about something and were very judgmental toward someone, but you did have the facts right. But you subsequently had some good fortune or change in your life or a really good vacation or you fell in love and you were able to see and experience those same facts with a very different **attitude**. This led to a rather different perspective, a different valuing and interpretation of the same facts, even though the facts did not change in a descriptive sense, though the meaning of those "same" facts may be radically different now. That change is one of attitude. The mere facts of our lives are not what is central but what those facts are made to mean. So to distinguish what happens from what we make it mean is a major advance in human freedom...

c) Because you recognize others as being in the same basic condition of vulnerability and fallibility, you can have compassion, you can put yourself in the other's place and are careful in making judgments that have an impact on others.

d) Increase in Freedom: Become aware that you have the power to make these changes in attitude regardless of circumstance.

CONCLUSION:

The value of these exercises in **Phenomenological Seeing and Hermeneutical Awareness**: We become 1) less caught in our meanings, therefore 2) less selfish, less judgmental. The first experience reduces our insecurity and fear in life and the second leads to an awareness of others as ourselves: reciprocity (often called the Golden Rule).

The Presense of Thereeness and Meaning

The great mystery that we try to penetrate with language in our religions, philosophies, and sciences is that there is anything at all, that there is something rather than nothing that shows itself in intelligible ways, i.e., we can say something about it. But even more mysterious than the fact that there is something there for us and that we are always making something of it, is that there is a "there." This is the basic feature of meaningfulness, the basic feature of being for us: that it is immediate and concrete in a "there" and we further interpret (explain and abstract) from this given into all our "stories." The world is meaningfulness that always shows itself in a concrete immediate way, is always a meaningful presence or "there" for us. But we bury it under our interpretations and miss the "being there," the presence of anything, which is more fundamental than what we have made of it in our religious, metaphysical, scientific, common sense, and personal narratives.

It is this shared condition of "being there", of meaningfulness, and our vulnerability that is universal and unites us. There are no foundations for our claims about truth, knowledge, and reality, but there is this universal condition of being there, of things mattering to us, being meaningful. Things only show up as interpreted within the horizons that our language, culture, and personal finite experience make possible. But we can see this "showing up" itself without getting caught in the meanings, the "truths" that enable this showing up, this presence. The horizons of our awareness are our inhibiting and our enabling limits. They give us our openness to everything, but are also the limits of our understanding and are the source of much of our conflict, our casting the world in terms of good and bad, but more ominously, good and evil. We create enemies out of "difference" that threatens our habits, patterns, truths, and goals. We confuse importance, that things matter deeply to us, with "truth" about what we take to be important. Out of our insecurities and need, truth becomes most important without any awareness that this is what has happened. Ironically, this cuts us off from our spiritual and ethical core. We fail to see that there is something more basic than truth, namely that things matter, that it is the "mattering" itself, rather than the "what" that is most primordial and provides the most basic ethical communality. What matters is always a meaning, an interpretation within finite temporary horizons of understanding and that is why truth matters because these truths are interpretations with which to meet the challenge of our finitude, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Whatever commitments or leaps of faith we make, it is the deep need to have such connectedness that is basic, not this or that interpretation. Meaning-giving is most primordial, not this or that meaning that we call "truth." It would be instructive here to remember what one of the greatest Christians, Augustine, said about interpretation: To paraphrase the last chapter of his book *My Confessions*, since a sacred text is a text aimed at spiritual transformation in the lived experience of the reader, no interpretation can claim to be "true." Rather, if the interpretation brings the reader to live in the presence of the sacred, then the interpretation was "true." As long as one approaches the sacred with the attitude of deep humility and unknowing and does not have the arrogance to claim to know the truth, then one has the appropriate attitude with which to approach the sacred. This is entirely unsatisfactory from an historical, scientific, or logical/textual approach. But Augustine warns that logical and historical thinking should guide us when looking at the world, but not when we approach God/The Mystery. Likewise, to historicize or logicize a sacred text is to undermine its purpose and power. The sacred, which for Augustine is not something that can be addressed with historical or logical thinking, can only be approached with the deepest of humility, with the attitude that one knows nothing with regard to the deepest mysteries.

The exercises here can be used for self-discovery and self-overcoming, the process of always returning to the place of humility in the face of one's finitude, fallibility, and vulnerability.

Transformative insight: Transformation of Horizons of Meaning

The following are a few succinct insights from philosophy and religion to contemplate. There are many more that will be used from world philosophy and religion. Wisdom or profound insight often seems ridiculous when stated outright. Think on these until they begin to make sense, until they speak to you powerfully enough to transform the attitude with which you approach life.

1. "Love your enemy" (Jesus, Buddha) "No harm can come to a good person." (Socrates/Plato)
2. "It's not what happens that upsets us, but what we make it mean." (Epictetus)
3. "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Socrates/Plato)
4. "Think not of the ignorance and faults of others, but of your own." (Kung Fu Tzu)
5. "The beginning of wisdom is the recognition of your own ignorance." (Socrates/Plato)
6. "Treat others as you yourself would be treated." (Kung Fu Tzu, Jesus, many others)
7. "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." (Zen proverb)
8. "O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell, if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty. (Rabia, Muslim Sufi)
9. "I pray God to make me free of God." "If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God." (Meister Eckhart)
10. The view that "All truth is relative" is a non relative universal absolute statement, hence self-contradictory.
11. "Become who you are." (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*)
12. "All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language." (Gadamer, *Truth & Method*)
13. "Security is mostly a superstition, it does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits is strength undefeatable." (Helen Keller)
14. "Time tends toward non being." (Augustine, *Confessions*)
15. "The root of all evil is thoughtlessness" (Hanah Arendt)
16. "Always look life in the face, then... know it for what it is, and finally... love it for what it is." (Virginia Woolf)
17. "What was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but something else-let us say, health, future, growth, power, life." (Nietzsche)
18. "We can only talk about what we say there is." (Quine)
19. Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew nothing, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. I was carried along to objects and acts by a certain blind natural impetus. ...My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith... I was not conscious of any change or process going on in me... When I learned the meaning of "I" and "me" and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me... It was the awakening of my soul that first rendered my senses their value, their cognizance of objects, names, qualities, and properties. Thought made me conscious of love, joy, and all the emotions. I was eager to know, then to understand, afterward to reflect on what I knew and understood, and the blind impetus, which had before driven me hither and thither at the dictates of my sensations, vanished forever. (Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*, 1908.)

20. To be fully rational requires surrendering unconditionally to the throes of wonder instead of clinging to the given; it means allowing oneself to be cast into the abyss of the unknown instead of trying to find a way to secure oneself from that vertiginous possibility. (Jerome Miller)
21. "For the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty." (Rousseau)
22. "The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world...The prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*)
23. "Hermeneutics has the task of informing; of making each Dasein, in its being, accessible to...itself; of going back to the self-alienation with which Dasein is oppressed. In hermeneutics the possibility is of Dasein's becoming and being for itself understandingly. (Martin Heidegger)
24. "The philosophical way of life is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in living logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory -that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well — we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way. (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*)
25. Understanding is an event, something that happens to us, not something we do. "The capacity for understanding is a reception, in the sense of pathos, rather than an activity,...Hermeneutics looks to understand what the understanding is, over and above the ease of a purely technical control of it." (Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*)
26. Some things are up to us and others are not. Up to us are opinion, impulse, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is our own action. Not up to us are body, property, reputation, office, and in a word, whatever is not our own action. (Epictetus, *Handbook* 1, p. 287)
27. We live in our meanings
28. We are not fundamentally biological beings, but beings capable of creating powerful explanatory biological theories and models.
29. Suffering is not pain. Suffering is what you do with your pain.