

THE ACT OF DISTINCTION**HENRI BORTOFT**

Editor's Note: *To appreciate the great depth in 'Taking Appearance Seriously' (Floris Books) the following commentary of Henri in his own words arises spontaneously as he reads pages 21 paragraph 3 – page 27 end of chapter 1. The idea of this commentary is to point more firmly to the depth of the book in which Henri felt his ideas had found their ultimate form of expression. The commentary is not taken to represent anything final outside the content of the book itself.*

Transcribed and edited by Philip Franses with due permission.

I first got into recognising the importance of distinction through working on description in the 1960's. So this goes right back to 1964,1965 when we were working on a way of trying to describe experience in a direct way, without introducing certain notions of time. So you could describe how experience appears if you could just do it in the present moment – as a philosophical exercise. Description was for me a practical activity (and very difficult). You think when you describe something that you look at what's there and you put it into words. When you get to this level I am talking about, it really isn't like that at all, because it isn't there. Actually you find it's not there until I describe it. Describing it, distinguishes it and it appears. In 1963, 1964, 1965 we worked on description and we saw there is a great deal hidden in description. People say, "that's merely a description, what we want is an explanation." The mystery was the description. That was the remarkable thing. Once you've got a description you can invent explanations ten a penny.

No one should feel that they can't do this. Everyone should have the confidence that they too can do this. Even something that you are not accustomed to, or if you are more tempted to entertain the idea, "I am not that sort of person, I can't do that sort of thing, others do that sort of thing, I'm not interested in that kind of thing I want to go and dig the earth or something." Whoever you are, whatever your background, everyone should feel that they can do this kind of thing. What inhibits us, makes us feel we can't, is the set of assumptions we bring, presuppositions we bring from elsewhere as to what kind of activity this is. And it turns out to be not that kind of activity at all. So we should all be confident we can do it: including me!

I can think of these things directly because that is what you do in philosophical work. In English you say you think about something. This is not what you do. You think it, you don't think about it. You think distinction, not think about distinction. And by doing this, you can develop all of this. This is the basis of German idealism, Hegel and others. This is what you do: you think it. And particularly for the Anglo Saxon mind and I am English – you try to find concrete cases which serve as practical instances from which you can learn and then you work more imaginatively. So it is very useful for us to do this. You have to find examples of things. So when you spot one it is really a marvellous opportunity. This crops up in Oliver Sacks in an essay 'Witty Ticky Ray' from 'The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat' and I thought "O yes!"

"In 1884-5 Gilles de la Tourette, a pupil of Charcot, described the astonishing syndrome which now bears his name. 'Tourette's syndrome', as it was immediately dubbed, is characterised by an excess of nervous energy, and a great production and extravagance of strange motions and notions: tics, jerks, mannerisms, grimaces, noises, curses, involuntary imitations and compulsions of all sorts, with an odd elfin humour and a tendency to antic and outlandish kinds of play.

It was clear to Tourette, and his peers, that this syndrome was a sort of possession by primitive impulses and urges: but also that it was a possession with an organic base – a very definite (if undiscovered) neurological disorder. There was always, as Luria remarked of his 'mnemonist', a fight between an 'It' and an 'I'.

Charcot and his pupils, who included Freud and Babinski as well as Tourette, were among the last of their profession with a combined vision of body and soul, 'It' and 'I', neurology and psychiatry. By the turn of the century, a split had occurred, into a soulless neurology and a bodiless psychology, and with this any understanding of Tourette's disappeared. In fact, Tourette's syndrome itself seemed to have disappeared, and was scarcely at all reported in the first half of this century. Some physicians, indeed, regarded it as 'mythical', a product of Tourette's colourful imagination; most had never heard of it. It could not be accommodated in the conventional frameworks of medicine, and therefore it was forgotten and mysteriously 'disappeared'.

In 1969, I started to speak of 'Tourettism', although I had never seen a patient with Tourette's.

Early in 1971, the New York Times, which had taken an interest in the 'awakening' of my post-encephalitic patients, published an article on 'Tics'. After the publication of this article, I received countless letters, the majority of which I passed on to my colleagues. But there was one patient I did consent to see – Ray.

The day after seeing Ray, it seemed to me that I noticed three Touretters in the street in downtown New York. I was confounded, for Tourette's syndrome was said to be excessively rare. It had an incidence, I had read, of one in a million, yet I had apparently seen three examples in an hour. I was thrown into a turmoil of bewilderment and wonder: was it possible that I had been overlooking this all the time, either not seeing such patients or vaguely dismissing them as 'nervous', 'cracked', 'twitchy'? Was it possible that everyone had been overlooking them? Was it possible that Tourette's was not a rarity, but rather common – a thousand times more common, say, than previously supposed? The next day, without specially looking, I saw another two in the street. At this point I conceived a whimsical fantasy or private joke: suppose (I said to myself) that Tourette's is very common but fails to be recognised until it is recognised (and, thereafter, is easily and constantly seen)." (Sacks, p.89)

Once it was recognised, you could see someone on a street corner and recognise it. You can't say it was always there. That's the trouble. People think it was always there. It was only there'd when it was distinguished. It is only there in appearing. It doesn't mean it came out of nothing. This disease hadn't existed before. Of course it existed. But it hadn't appeared. And therefore it wasn't there.

All these things turn out to be instances of appearing. This brings us to what phenomenology is really about. This is the fundamental phenomenological step from what appears to the appearing of what appears. It is important to recognise that it is the appearing of what appears, you haven't separated the appearing from what appears.

We shift the focus of attention within experience from the outcome into the happening which results in the outcome. This statement, the next one, is in Husserl's lecture *The Idea of Phenomenology* in 1907. Husserl wrote in a way in which you would expect today no one could understand anything. In his own day, because he was working in a context, the people of that day could understand him. And indeed it an extraordinary thing in his own day that people came from all over Europe to listen to his lectures.

People picked up the fact that he was doing something extraordinary. Now if you turn to his writings you would get such a shock. Because you wouldn't see anything extraordinary about them at all, you wouldn't understand them – I don't. But they really affect people, he really had a lot of followers. They realised this was a way of seeing and you can go in many different directions. It fired people up. It was a real revolution in philosophy, it's the unknown revolution of the twentieth century. His first work was *Logical Investigations*.

"The word phenomenon is ambivalent because of the essential correlation between appearance and the appearing. A phenomena is not only something which appears, but something which appears as *appearing*." (Husserl, 1907: p. 11)

He captures the whole thing. It appears as appearing. It doesn't just appear. There is the shock of appearing. A phenomenon is not only something which appears. It is something which appears as appearing. And this doesn't get understood. When people talk of phenomenon they talk of something which appears, they don't talk of something which appears as appearing. So what phenomenology is about doesn't get understood.

This is the phenomenon - the appearance of what appears. The word appearance has a double meaning. It can mean the look of it. But it also can mean the appearing of it. You have to make the shift it's not merely its appearance. For phenomenology it is the appearing of what appears - that is the key thing.

The happening of appearing, the appearing of what appears, is a manifestation of the thing itself. It actually is there. It is not a representation of it. It is direct, because it is appearing. If it appears it must be the thing itself. That's an astonishing thing. Phenomenology takes you right away from the representational picture which says all we have is a representation of things, we can't have things themselves. No we can have things themselves. They appear directly. They may appear under some circumstance, they may not appear totally, completely, there may be more to come, but it is nevertheless the thing appearing, not something subjective. Subjective in the subjective sense, of locked up in our consciousness.

Consciousness has the connotation of a box with things in it. What happens in phenomenology is the term consciousness just drops out of use. We have gone beyond consciousness, to the appearing itself, so we no longer need it. That's extraordinary really. If you focus on the appearance you can't say that it is the thing itself. But if you experience it as appearing then it must be the thing itself. This is the great step forward of the twentieth century, it just hasn't been noticed. Which leads straight to a quite remarkable quote from Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

"Being means appearing. Appearing is not something subsequent that sometimes happens to being. Being presences as appearing." (Heidegger, p.107)

"Being means appearing." (Appearance is the thing itself.) "Appearing is not something subsequent that sometimes happens to being." (There is being, that might appear or might not. Being and appearing have been separated throughout the philosophical tradition. What we now understand when we move into the appearing, the appearance is being, the thing itself. It is not that there is being hanging around there and suddenly it appears.) "Being presences as appearing."

This does cause some difficulty. Because people say, 'Well the thing must have been there'. Well, the things are there of course. Things exist, but they haven't appeared. There is a depth in appearances and that depth is the appearing. The happening of appearance is the depth in appearance. If you start from the appearance then the depth in that is the appearing of the appearance. So there is a depth where being is now hyphenated to be-ing, not an entity behind – a being which then appears. Be-ing is appearing. It is now verbal. This is the dynamic depth of the coming into being. In English the word being is both a noun and a verb. There is no two world ontology, but it is not reduced to a flat land, there is a depth. The depth is the appearing itself, which is dynamic. It is a miracle, the world is totally dynamic. It can't be understood in any other way. This is remarkable.

It does depend on us. Ian McGilchrist writes about this:

"There is a process of responsive evocation, the world 'calling forth' something in me, that in turn 'calls forth' something in the world." (McGilchrist, p.230)

And I like to put it this way:

"There is a process of responsive communication, which is reciprocal. Something in the world calls forth something in me which in turn calls forth that in the world which called it forth in me. "

It appears. That is *appearing*.

Now it's perfect. Now I'm happy. Now we can stop.

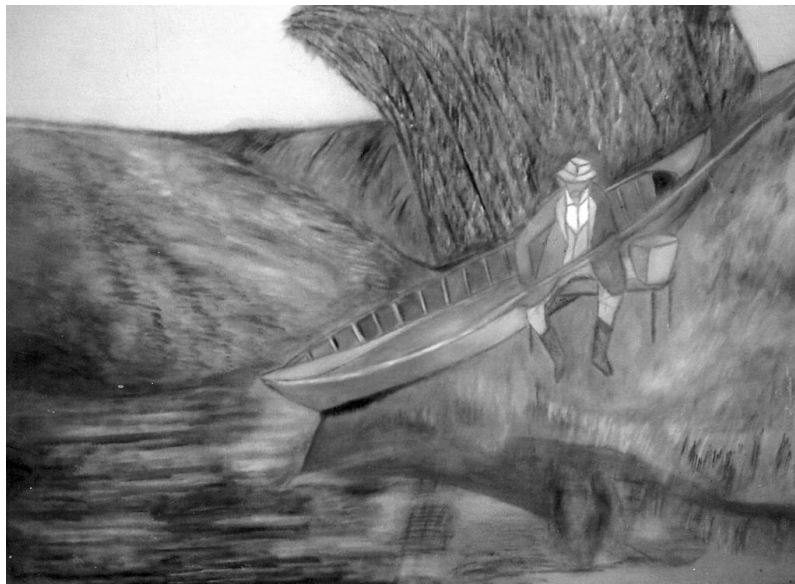
References

Husserl, Edmund (1964) *The idea of Phenomenology*; Martinus Nijhoff

Heidegger, Martin (2000) *Introduction to Metaphysics*, New Haven Yale University Press

McGilchrist, Iain (2009) *The Master and his Emissary. The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*; New Haven Yale University Press

Sacks, Oliver (1986) *Witty Ticky Ray from The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Pan Books



River Marne, France – Original Painting by Patrick Henry