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THE UNVEILING AND THE UNVEILED

*Uncovering the Cornerstones for Metaphysical Dialogue between
Occidental Phenomenology and Islamic Philosophy*

PART ONE

All is the work of *logos*. Reason, spirit, life, human significance, partake of its innumerable lights. They manifest themselves in concrete phenomena within the orbit of living beings. Philosophy is one of those manifestations. Unique in its striving to reach cognitively behind the appearances in which phenomena manifest reality in their ultimate significance, with its differentiated questions, philosophy splits these lights. The human soul, through which all has to pass, the mind, the intellect, may see the *logos* clearly or dimly, through a glass darkly, or deviate from its rays. Hence, numerous philosophical attempts reach it only fragmentarily. Yet *logos* is itself one.

Well versed in phenomenology and a profound connoisseur of Islamic philosophy, the great scholar Henry Corbin introduced phenomenology to the study of Islamic philosophy with incomparable subtlety and saw the possibility of bringing these two great lines of thought together by appealing to the premise underlying the Husserlian attempt to ground the changeable, elusive world of appearances at the deeper level at which these appearances find articulation in a subjacent and lasting rationale.

According to Corbin's conception: "Phenomenology consists in 'saving the appearance,' saving the phenomenon, while disengaging or unveiling the hidden reality that shows itself beneath this appearance, the *Logos* or principle of the phenomenon. Phenomenology is thus to tell the hidden, the invisible present beneath the visible. It is to make the phenomenon show forth itself such as it shows itself to the subject to whom it reveals itself."¹

Corbin goes on to correlate that definition with the works of Islamic thinkers:

Is not then phenomenological research what our old mystical treatises design a *kashf al-mahyib*, the unveiling or revealing of that which is hidden? Is it not also what is designed by the term *ta'wil*, so fundamental in the spiritual hermeneutic of the Quran? *Ta'wil* is the prowess of tracing something to its origin, to its archetype (Persian: *chizi-ra be-asl-e Khwôd rasânîdan*). In the course of taking it back to its origin, it is made to pass through level after level of being, and it is in this manner that the structure of an essence is released (which does not in any sense mean structuralism). Structure in this sense means the *tartib al-mazdhir*, the system of the forms of manifestation of a given science.²

Two points are brought forth here. They are intimately correlated and of utmost significance to what we are proposing. The first concerns identifying the basis being sought for the appearances with the *logos*. The second makes specific reference to the ancient treatises of the Islamic mystics but, as we shall see, also applies to the overall pursuit of this *logos*. It is a matter of “tracing something to its origin, to its archetype,” of following it “through level after level of being.” Indeed, as we shall see, the phenomenological quest by no means quickly hands over the structure of the essence of the phenomena. Quite the contrary is this case, and there it meets squarely with Corbin’s statement expressing the affinity between Islamic thought and phenomenology. In the present study, I shall attempt to illustrate and substantiate Corbin’s statement, to chart the phenomenological itinerary through several levels of the constructive *logos* spanning the entire Husserlian investigation and beyond.

This elucidation will allow us to illustrate and clarify a common philosophico-metaphysical basis for dialogue. The formula of “unveiling” used by Corbin may be said to have been present in different guises throughout the history of metaphysics, from Parmenides to all the great thinkers of antiquity, whether Occidental metaphysicians or the great Islamic thinkers, through to our times. It is the *logos* of the phenomena which is at the center of our interest here.

The purpose of the projected dialogue extends beyond the comparative aim proclaimed by Corbin, yet is also narrower because it only focuses on the phenomenological body of thought. “Comparison” aims at the same depth of investigation that we propose and sets up the indispensable basis for moving on to the next level, the level of “dialogue” in my sense. This dialogue would consist of plumbing the depths of the notions being compared, penetrating down to their ciphers, that is, primal intuitions, and of seeking to unravel the coordinates of the latter. Namely, having determined the concordance of intuitions as embedded in two or more systems of thought, we should proceed by comparing the ways in which the context of this embedding, with the peculiar features and interdependencies it has within it, leads to differences in their formulation. This work of confronting the contexts should shed light that brings the intuitive, “essential” content into full disclosure and illuminates the darker aspects of the context itself. Since every primordial intuition *partakes of its context* in its exfoliation of meaning, it is of paramount significance to uncover an intuitive plane of the *logos* upon which the primordial intuition may be assessed until it is interpreted in its ciphering by the features that it acquires by being immersed within its context. This second step of our work, a *dialogue* between Islamic philosophy and phenomenological doctrine, between identical intuitions within different contexts, may contribute to renewing and invigorating input that will spur philosophical progress in general. This is the aim of our undertaking.

Yet, in the search for this ultimate, stable point of reference, the *logos* of the appearing phenomena has already been differentiated in three distinct phases of Husserl’s work. Husserl first sought it in the dimension of the ideal structures subtending appearances; then, upon finding that level in need of a deeper substratum, he located it in the structures of human consciousness; and finally he

apprehended it in the rules of the genesis of appearances within the process of consciousness itself.

In this last development, Husserl was breaking through to a further level, though one never unfolded by him. Rather that work has been completed by recent phenomenological work, something that I shall return to later on.

Furthermore, while maintaining allegiance to his thoughts, Husserl's numerous followers have blurred his classic distinctions in their personal reflections and brought new insights. Consequently, in view of these developments, which unfolded after Corbin set forth his views, when talking in an in-depth way about phenomenology, we have to investigate anew its two principle foci for conceptualizing: those of the phenomenon and the unveiling. These new perspectives, having been uncovered, should by now expand and metaphysically ground the great comparative perspective of Corbin. But, as a matter of fact, as I have pointed out in my preface, studying his presentations of Islamic thinkers, one clearly sees that he himself already extended the Husserlian search for the "essences" of the *logos*. As Professor Azadpur states in his study (Chapter XIX), in his presentations and interpretations of Islamic philosophers and sages Corbin did not confine himself to the "essential" analysis of Husserl's first period. As I explained in the preface, by spontaneous intuitions, he reached far beyond to the spiritual, mystical, and religious spheres. After what I have stipulated concerning the expansion of phenomenological vistas as the condition for a phenomenological approach adequate to meeting up with Islamic thought, it is clear that we have to ponder anew how the phenomenon, its manifesting, and its unveiling are to be understood. As we shall see, Corbin's twofold recipe regarding the discovery of phenomena in their fullness in the sphere of the *logos* finds particularly strong resonance in phenomenological philosophy.

THE PHENOMENON AND ITS APPEARANCE

Is not what we consider the "depth" of a literary work, a novel, a poem, an epic, an attempt to bring to light what is obscure in the entanglements in which the emotional, social, and cultural spheres of our lives and the lives of nations are caught, sometimes cataclysmically so? It is up to the sensitivity and perspicacity of the author to bring to the surface the hidden "reasons" for what has been puzzling and obscure in the manifestation of life and its ways. Hence, the same events or developments recurrently find new interpreters, and literary history, indeed history in general, social studies, etc., thus move forward.

They all attempt to bring to the light of human attention the authentic significance of realities obscured by their presenting of themselves in phenomenal appearances.

From another angle, in the fine arts we see the same striving to reveal the substructures subtending visible or audible phenomena, where appearances change depending on perspective, where light is cast on one side or on the other, but remains in its inspiration more intimately tied to one, with tendencies, modulations, intensities artistically inclined toward cheer or gloom, violence or serenity. Hence, depictions of historical scenes that emphasize types of people, portraits seeking to reveal the "hidden" and "true" nature of the object, etc. (Following Merleau-Ponty,



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1336-2>

Asian Migrants and Education

The Tensions of Education in Immigrant Societies and
Among Migrant Groups

Charney, M.W.; Yeoh, B.; Tong Chee Kiong (Eds.)

2003, XX, 224 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1336-2