PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF
PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURALIST
LITERARY CRITICISM

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The hermeneutical crisis in biblical studies, as well as the current climate in secularist humanities and social sciences, is promoting more hermeneutical self-consciousness in exegesis. In particular, we are seeing exegesis with self-conscious appeal to phenomenological and structuralist hermeneutical principles. The future is likely to bring more of the kind. More exegetes will recognize their "presuppositions." But, lest Van Tilians rejoice, I should say that this is no guarantee that the presuppositions involved will be biblical. People will indeed claim, circularly, that their presuppositions are biblical. They will be able to do so because the phenomenological and structuralist methods are each powerful enough to succeed, in a quite plausible manner, in reading their own presuppositions out of almost any literary material that falls into their hands. We have already seen this happen with Bultmann's demythologizing and with the new hermeneutic, both of which are but specialized forms of phenomenological literary criticism.1 Similar things are happening to a degree using structuralist approaches, in the hands of Güttgemanns, Crossan, Marin, Via, and others.2

1 Cf. Robert Detweiler, Story, Sign, and Self; Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary Critical Methods (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Missoula, Mt.: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 31-102. Detweiler stimulated me to write this article because of his steps toward tying the literary critical approaches in with a philosophical background. See also Vernon W. Gras, ed., European Literary Theory and Practice: From Phenomenology to Structuralism (New York: Dell, 1973), for a good sampling of approaches.

Exeges with a phenomenological or structuralist bent speak quite frankly about their hermeneutical precommitment to a given method of approaching the text. For example, Bultmann speaks of the pre-understanding of human existence in terms of which he questions the New Testament text. Thus, hermeneutical presuppositions become overt. On the other hand, metaphysical and religious presuppositions are likely to remain more covert, for reasons bound up with the genius of phenomenology and structuralism. (Bultmann is here more overt than most.) Evangelicals in general and Van Tilians in particular will want to assess the nature of these deeper presuppositions and the extent of their effect on exegesis.

I propose, then, to give a sketchy summary of what I see to be the philosophical presuppositions and tendencies of phenomenology and structuralism. Any such summary will inevitably run into over-simplification in trying to capture the Hydra-headed movements of phenomenology and structuralism. I shall have to concentrate on the main-stream, ignoring minor eddies and piecemeal uses of the movements. An over-simplification may still be useful—more useful, in some respects, than a more ponderous analysis—in helping the ordinary exegete to orient himself to these hermeneutical movements, and to know how to learn from them.

The absolute starting point for main-stream phenomenology and structuralism is the “death of God.” They ban not only the possibility of the existence of the God of the Bible, but also the possibility of meaningful discussion about him. There is no “Absolute Signified,” no ultimate reference point for human predi-


4 In this and other respects I believe that Bultmann’s demythologization is less characteristic of the phenomenological approach than is the new hermeneutic, and the new hermeneutic in turn less characteristic than secular phenomenological literary criticism. Bultmann was hermeneutically a transitional figure, constrained in a ground-breaking period by the exigencies of heavy debates with his more conservative neo-orthodox Lutheran colleagues. In general, phenomenological criticism as utilized by theologians still manifests uncharacteristic desires for a sermonically oriented conclusion to interpretation.

5 The selection from Gras, European Literary Theory, and Detweiler, Story, characterize the main-stream.
cation and discourse, but only an infinite play of signifiers.\(^6\) Equally, there is no Absolute Consciousness, no infinite personal presence in human experience, but only an infinite play of the experiences of consciousness. To be sure, it is permissible to speak of God in describing the religious beliefs of others. And, at least for some, it may be meaningful to speak of God in certain carefully circumscribed ways in connection with the mysteries of personal encounter.\(^7\) But any objectifying "metaphysical" discussion of God would be out of bounds.

Phenomenology and structuralisms are therefore twentieth-century transformations of the two poles of Kantian philosophy: the empiricism of Hume leads to phenomenology, the rationalism and mechanism of Newton and Descartes to structuralism. The one reduces the world to the flux of my experience, the other reduces consciousness, language, and history to a "mechanical" world consisting of abstract systems of relations.\(^8\) Perhaps, however, "mechanism" is no longer the right word for structuralism. For this "mechanism" is no longer materialistic (a world composed of atoms and matter), but abstract relationalistic (a world composed of symbolic systems). This "mechanism" is no longer preoccupied with causality or determinism, but with predictive and explanatory models. Similarly, the "radical" empiricism of phenomenology is not to be assimilated to the run-of-the-mill "empiricism" of modern science. Phenomenology starts not with the supposed "sense data" of logical positivism, but with more ultimate basal levels of experience before the theoretical articulation of a subject-object distinction supervenes.

Literary critical uses of phenomenology and structuralism represent the carrying over of empiricistic and mechanistic visions, respectively, to the appreciation of literary texts. Phenomenology and structuralism are capable of this as older empiricisms and mechanisms were not. For the empiricistic and mechanistic visions have here been broadened, purged (of the "sense data" and "matter" impoverishments), deepened, and in fact


specifically molded with a wide range of human behavior and cultural institutions in mind.

Even in this transformed setting, the empiricistic and mechanistic visions are still reductions. Phenomenological empiricism reduces, or better dissolves, the world into consciousness and free personality; structuralist "mechanism" dissolves man and personality into abstract symbolic systems. These two reductions need one another to feed on, as the growing dialogue between the two acknowledges.

But — let us not fool ourselves — even in isolation both are remarkably productive in insights. Phenomenology exploits the fact that man is in the image of God. Man reflects the world in his own consciousness by "thinking God's thoughts after him." Hence, everything can be understood in terms of its relation to human consciousness. Conversely, structuralism exploits the fact that man is made of the dust of the ground. In large measure, he is subject to the behavioral regularities and limitations of other creatures. In language, tool-making, religion, and other areas, man's capacities do exceed those of any other earthly creature. But even here the use of abstract models enables the scientist to assimilate human behavior to very general creational patterns, and to discern the regularities involved. Man is a creature, and as such he can be understood in terms of his relation to God's creation as a whole.

Phenomenology and structuralism also recognize within themselves a certain irrationalistic element. The irrationalistic element of phenomenology lies in the fact that if structure reduces to experience or consciousness, there is no longer any nonarbitrary way of talking coherently about experience or consciousness. Coherence requires structure. Hence consciousness by itself is empty. Similarly, in structuralism, if consciousness reduces to structure, there is no longer any creative describer of structure. Structure is empty without a consciousness to appreciate it and react to it. These fundamental irrationalities of phenomenology and structuralism also exploit Christian truths. Man himself as a finite image of God must explain himself not in terms of a direct divine knowledge of man, but in terms of the created order, and God's revelation into the context of that order. Hence, without the created world, man is empty. Conversely, creation
as a structured whole is not autonomous. Structure is empty apart from the word of God defining its meaning and purposes.

In sum, phenomenology and structuralism each have both a “rationalist” and an “irrationalist” side. On the rationalist side, they reduce the world to a fundamental starting point. On the irrationalist side, they acknowledge the impossibility of completing the reduction. On both the rationalist and irrationalist side, they exploit Christian truths about the correlation between man and the rest of creation.

Thus, phenomenology and structuralism are often uncovering true insights. Just because they have a generally non-Christian orientation and base, the Christian ought not to close his eyes to them. Van Til speaks indeed of the absolute ethical antithesis between Christian and non-Christian. He thereby forbids us from appropriating anything uncritically. But he speaks equally of common grace, encouraging us to learn from the opponents. We must learn while avoiding seduction.

The amusing and frustrating aspect of the phenomenological and structuralist programs is that by and large they attempt to spread empiricistic and mechanistic world views without any overt discussion of metaphysics and in the midst of a denial of the possibility of authentic “world views.” As Detweiler puts it,

Practitioners of the two methods therefore seek to adopt original perspectives that produce original perceptions, perceptions of difference; these in turn do not cohere into a “world view” but contribute instead toward the opposite, toward the recognition that one’s view or grasp of the world is never encompassing enough to permit an overview to form.6 Structuralism relativizes “world views” by producing awareness of the cross-cultural plurality of the structural systems by which such views operate. Phenomenology relativizes world views by correlating them dialectically with human personality and consciousness. If phenomenology admits that world views are a constraining horizon of consciousness, nevertheless it also insists that they are the free project of consciousness.

Thus phenomenology and structuralism overlay their empiricistic and mechanistic foundations with a heavy layer of twen-

6 Detweiler, Story, p. 197. Cf. Gras, European Literary Theory, p. 15. Applications to the biblical field still tend to be more dominated by the single-conclusion endpoint. Cf. note 4 above.
tieth-century relativism. For phenomenology, it is the relativity of personhood in history. For structuralism, it is the relativity of the plurality of systems. This inevitably exposes these approaches to the relativistic paradoxes. They proclaim the plurality of presuppositions while clinging to their empiricistic or mechanistic base. They assume the nonexistence of an Absolute Signified, while utilizing language itself as "the surrogate absolute." They proclaim the multiplicity and relativity of meaning while typically ending their own interpretations of any text with a predictable message to the effect that consciousness (phenomenology) or linguisticality (structuralism) is the root of understanding. As Detweiler points out, neither approach wishes to display "an 'imperialistic' attitude; neither wishes to absorb or control the entity it studies but rather to present and represent it to the self and the world." Yet that self and that world are themselves pervasively defined in terms of the ontology of an enormous framework of phenomenological or structuralist apparatus. Hence, these approaches metaphysically dominate everything they touch by means of a dialectical movement between self or world on the one hand, and the entity to be studied on the other.

Phenomenology and structuralism sustain themselves in the face of such paradoxes by the eschewal of overt metaphysics and its displacement into complex theoretical methodological apparatus, obscure language, loaded metaphor, paradox, or idiosyncratic interpretation. If this is the best that one can do in a relativistic world, it is the best that one can do.

No doubt, phenomenological and structuralist criticism can succeed even now in providing stimulating, illuminating, horizon-enlarging, tradition-shattering interpretations of biblical passages and the Bible as a whole. Evangelicals have much to learn from them now, more in the future. But the unanswered question is how these interpretations are related to the truth. Are they "true," or are they simply imaginative? How do we tell?

The answer, I think, must come from the Bible itself. As the phenomenological and structuralist critic knows (Rom. 1:19–21), the Bible can interpret us all in its terms. That implies, moreover, that God interprets us in his terms. He judges the world

10 Ibid., pp. 128, 197.
with righteousness. An infinite ramification of human interpretation, either phenomenological-self-generated or structural-system-generated, can never tell us whether we stand or fall before God. For that, there must be a distinction between correct and incorrect interpretation, good and bad interpretation; not merely a distinction between more or less interesting, more or less "authentic" interpretation. The man who trusts in the multiplication of interpretations will be judged for his misinterpretation.

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