

**AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANNA-TERESA TYMIENIECKA**

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1. The “pragmatic test” of phenomenology

During your time at Berkeley, it is well known that you had a number of philosophical controversies with Stephen C. Pepper and Alfred Tarski. These controversies seem to have culminated in Tarski’s challenging you to detail the relevance of phenomenology to contemporary science. The challenge resulted in your *Phenomenology and Science in Contemporary European Thought* (1962). How are we to understand this “pragmatic test,” and how did you address it? Looking back today, has phenomenology successfully passed this test?

When I first arrived in America in 1955, Tarski’s wife found me a position at the University of California. Tarski and I met, and he became interested in listening to what I had to say about Husserl and his eidetic analysis. Right away his mind was inflamed. We read Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* every week and I discussed phenomenology with Tarski the entire year. At that time Tarski –formerly a pure theoretician– had started several technical assignments. He was starting technical projects for marine and other government agencies and was thinking about the application of mathematical statistics and his theories to practical matters. You see, he himself had shifted in that direction –he became operationalized, so to speak. And he was telling me all the time: “*Well, but these Husserlian analyses are all theoretical and abstract, but to what do they lead? There is no practical result from them. There are no plans and no technical innovations, no solutions to problems of the world.*” *You see that was the lack of the pragmatic test.*

He was worried that we were just playing a game of the mind having no practical implications, and this is when I wrote the book. Fascinating as it was, phenomenology was seemingly just hanging in the air. I was really challenged by this. No work is ever more fascinating than trying to convince a colleague about the truthfulness of your ideas. That was the point –not to convince the public in general, but to show him that phenomenology had been applied pragmatically to psychology, to psychiatry, to the fine arts, to critical analysis, and at that time there was literature available.¹

At that time, the book was a complete novelty. It was published by an avant-garde press. It appeared in paperback, and in the first year it sold ten thousand copies. This modest book was used in seminars as an introduction to phenomenology. How much it was an introduction to phenomenology is another matter. It was not meant to be that, and in any case it was its pragmatism that fascinated and held the attention of the American public.

Looking back today, we see that phenomenology has entered all sectors of knowledge, and in praxis, as much as much as in theory. Phenomenology is discussed in physics, embryology, and elsewhere —not by everyone, of course, but by some. So its relevance is a simple matter of fact nowadays, but in 1955 it was a problematic question that I addressed.

2. Eco-Phenomenology

To most people the climatic changes and the ecological crisis we experience today is all perceived as a physical problem, trusted to be resolvable through technological innovation. For phenomenologists, and especially for eco-phenomenologists, this crisis also seems to have a metaphysical dimension that calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of human values and our relationship with nature. Do you think phenomenology is able to challenge the basic conceptualization of utility in our modern, industrialized civilization?

Actually, my account of *ontopoiesis* is an eco-phenomenology. Ontopoiesis reaches to the very germs of ecology: development and genesis. I have published several essays related to this. *In The Passions of the Earth* [Analecta Husserliana, Vol. LXXI], *I show how the human being is an ecological fruit and how the human being is formed by the earth and sucks the juices of the earth. I have also written things about the cosmos and the cosmic dependencies of the human mind and human development. You see, the self-individualization of life, which is the basic instrument of ontopoiesis draws upon the laws of the cosmos and the earth.* This is the most fundamental ecology that can be done. So, we have just touched the essence of my philosophy, the base — our relationship to the earth and to the cosmos.

3. Humanism

Speaking of cosmology, is it correct to state that the origin of rationality and the emergence of human faculties are results of the evolutionary progress of the universe itself?

Yes, that is what I am saying. But here there is one thing you have missed completely, and which is completely essential to my philosophy.

There is no anthropology in my philosophy. I have dissolved the notion of anthropology in a essay which I published three years ago [“The Human Condition Within the Unity-of-Everything-There-is-Alive and Its Logioic Network”, *Analecta Husserliana* LXXXIX, Dordrecht: Springer, 2006]. *I arrived at the very central point, namely that human being can not be considered in itself as such, that there can be no anthropology that considers human being as such, in the middle of other things almost by chance. On the contrary, human being should be considered as a human condition within the unity of everything there is alive.* That means the human being unfolds and generates in a mutual contributive relation to all the other living beings.

So, the central point of my earth and cosmos situating of life is accentuated by the emergence of *the imaginatio creatix of evolution* which allows our type of individuals to grow into their surroundings, in a very special way, getting above them. To my mind, individualization is the very special way in which life originates. Individualization is intimately related to the origin of life. Life originates precisely by progressive individualization. But I would not introduce types of measures of what is higher and lower. For me it is the unity of things which plays its role in each sphere. There would be no spiritual life without various phases of life preceding it and participating in it. Ours is a condition within the unity of everything alive, which depends on earthly and cosmic laws.

4. Theology

a) There are several lines of thinking in what you are asking. First of all, Husserl said that one of his main principles, and one which I applaud, is that: “Every experience which presents its intuitions in a self-evident way is a valid experience and cannot be denied as existence.” It is quite clear that the spiritual exists as an experience for the great majority of humans. In some way it must have developed, maybe in awareness, it might be taught and developed in childhood, or it might not be. But, as an experience it cannot be denied if it is properly analyzed. So, consequently in analyzing human life, you cannot deny that the cognition of things, the lifeworld, and the sensing of all things, and so forth does have the spiritual dimension. Now, I have devoted a volume of *Logos of Life* specifically to the origin of spiritual experience. How does it originate in human beings? What role does it have to assume? I titled this volume *The Three Movements of the Soul* [*Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. XXV], wherein I present a new phenomenological approach to this type of experiences, that is, new in relation to what phenomenology in the classical sense was presenting as the phenomenology of religion.

I am criticizing the way in which classical phenomenology, that inspired by Husserl, proceeds directly to the spiritual and so cannot grasp

the spiritual at all. It can just talk about it, but cannot grasp the spiritual intuition or spiritual experience. For that we need a completely different approach to this type of experiences. So to know how the spiritual develops in us, and it does, we have to find a way in which we can pursue it. And, in this small treatise I am pursuing this which I distinguish as three movements of the human soul, which actually leads to revelation. But I stop at the threshold. It leads just to this point, and I show only how the religious notion originates, how the notion of the sacred originates, and so forth.

b) You asked me whether this has any relation to theology. Really, yes and no. This original analysis of the origin of the sacred, does not lead to theology. *Theology is not like a science. It is very difficult to be adequate... in intellectual, speculative presentations of convictions concerning the divine in a certain revelatory perspective. So, you see, theology is the theory – speculative, intellectual – of the data of revelation. And, of course theologies divide according to the types of revelations which divide religions. Theology is not general. Theology is Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Judaic. In every sort of religion, the speculative theorizing of a revelation are presented.* So, when you ask how theology relates to my philosophy, I have to say there is no theology “from my philosophy” whatsoever, yet. I might develop it one day, that is quite possible, but I have not. As I told you, I have stopped at revelation. That means that from the sacred there is the possibility of moving into revelation, which leads to religion.

c) Does this metaphysics contain a telos, pointed towards God in the same way Leibniz sees it?

No, but now you are asking me what I am proceeding to think on! (laughs) about what I think I am going to write. These are great questions. We shall see what comes out.

d) Your work is fascinating and inspiring, with a metaphysics for fragmented contemporary science/ philosophy.

That is an excellent question. These are precisely the questions of this last book which I have in printing! And, obviously there is a way to do it, because I have done it in my forthcoming book (laughing), *The Fullness of the Logos in the Key of Life*, Book I (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

5. Phenomenology and life

Your phenomenological project of the analysis of life has been called a “complete revamping” of the Husserlian method and an extension of the three reductions (eidetic, transcendental, and the life-world). Could you please explain the motives for developing such

a new starting point of philosophy? In what way is this reorientation a new critique of rationality?

Well, that is a very essential question, and I wrote six hundred pages on the subject. I am not developing philosophy by argumentation and by discussing with my predecessors or all my colleagues. *I am inspired by Husserl, not by any method, and surely not by his, but by the approach of the analytic attitude toward experience, seeing that every experience which presents itself in evidence, undeniable evidence, merits to be considered faithfully and adequately, with an open mind. I am just following the evidences of various realms. To the first book of Logos of Life I gave the subtitle Creative experience and the critique of reason. Actually, this whole philosophy of mine is a critique of reason from the bottom up, and ontopoiesis is the basic point from which the unfolding of reason follows.*

And, you are talking about reduction. I do not think I have ever used the word reduction in my writings. I don't believe in method. I have learned this from my study of Leibniz. *I'm a Leibniz scholar. The best book I ever wrote was on Leibniz, many years ago. I have learned from Leibniz, more than from Husserl, really, in a different way. One of the things I have learned is that **Leibniz was explaining his method in all detail, but he did not apply it at all.** A method is a way to explain what you do, but that does not mean that what you explain is correct. Leibniz actually does something completely different. He calls his method induction and deduction, but there is no deduction in his method; he is an extremely intuitive and penetrating thinker.*

Now, does Husserl apply his method? And, what is really his method? Certainly the only philosophers that ever applied his methods were his students, and even they moved slowly away from it. Even Scheler who was a faithful student, who was applying Husserl's method almost blindly in the beginning, later was moving away from it. Now, Ingarden who was also applying the Husserlian method blindly—in his second printing, the second edition of his main works, he did not really follow it anymore.

Why do I still consider myself Husserlian? Because I do! I am strictly adhering to Husserl's evidence principle and to his horizon-principle, to the many analyses of his genetic phenomenology, and so forth, which I do not repeat. I have myself acknowledged them tacitly, without repeating them, considering them tacitly in scanning ontopoietic development.

And now you ask why I moved away from Husserl. Well, I did not do so consciously. I never argued with Husserl. I argued with Ingarden. I do not bother to argue. This is because the evidence of experience is teaching me how it should be treated, which is Husserlian, not to apply any exterior principle to it. So, I am with and not with.

Nietzsche said that all great philosophies are methods and not systems of theory. Do you agree?

No, no! As I just mentioned with Leibniz, Leibniz thought that he was applying such and such a method, and he was not applying it. Husserl was carried away with what he thought he should be doing, and actually in many cases he followed concrete analysis rather than his thinking. But that is, of course, not an orthodox view.

Could it at least be an attitude?

Well, an attitude is completely different from method, of course. I do not know. What can be said about what distinguishes one philosopher from another? I think it enters so much in a philosophy—in the beginning of original philosophy it enters still, so much that— well, I don't remember who said it— great philosophy starts from one or two ideas; what they are, inclination or attitude or certain other ideas, I do not know.

6. Vitalism

To a reader unacquainted with your philosophy, your phenomenology of life sounds unmistakably like some sort of vitalism. Is this correct? Does your thinking in any way relate to a Bergsonian *élan vital*?

No. Of course, it is a difficult question. I have been asked this several times. I do not remember what I used to answer. In general, I would resist using any universal name for my philosophy. I could not say that Bergson was not right in assuming a primitive originary drive for life. He was certainly right. It is incredible to see how life originates from between two pieces of stone next to each other, a tiny bit of soil below, and in a year you see all sorts of plants trying to get out, fighting for life.

*I am a passionate gardener. That is one of my great passions. When I am going away from home in the summer, I regret that the flowers will be flowering away before I get home. I follow the development of weeds very closely. It is a continuous struggle to maintain weeds at some proportion to cultivated plants, because weeds have a tendency to take over everything. And weeds are as beautiful as other flowers. So, my garden—which is rather enormous—is a weed garden. I have no heart to remove all the weeds. I have a special sensitivity toward the *élan vital* of plants. But there is such an agglomeration of originary elements which come together to generate life... and among them one which is most striking, namely individualization, be it of a weed or of a fish, or of a human being, which is an individualization of the Logos.*

It is the Logos which individualizes, and it is the Logos which has the force to come out of a little piece of soil. So, in this Logos there is, of course, the force of the life. I have great difficulty talking about this because I have spent so much time developing the fragments of these things, for instance, the force of life. There is, you see, something that is so fascinating—that the logos of life of this tiny plant that will emerge is not only a force to come, but is also a shaping force. It has also all the elements for individualizing it as this plant and not another, and not a worm, etc.

You have to ask yourself, “What are some final elements of this Logos of Life, such that they might have something to say, more than just this force for putting out individuals and shaping them. I call this something more sentience. I say that the Logos of Life is distinct from many other types of logos. There is the infinite of the primeval logos, which we do not know, which we only guess, which phenomenological reduction cannot yield. The other ways of knowing give us some hint about it. *The Sentience of the Logos—and here we are back to what you asked me at the beginning— which is at the very origin of it, is carried in various guises through all the individualizations of life, from the smallest, the most modest, up the highest spiritual developments of human beings. And, it is sentience which leads you towards the spiritual accomplishment of the soul, beyond revelation, to the divine. It has nothing to do with theology, because it is just a metaphysical tendency of life itself.*

And, consequently, you cannot call logos of life—which carries life from the beginning to end— vitalism, because you do not know exactly what is at stake. In this sentience, which develops from this first germinal coming forth of life, appearance of life, to the fashioning of the individual, which in the case of human being, with its highest sentient spiritual unfolding, this sentience is really carrying the divine.

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NOTE

¹ Afterwards, phenomenology was discussed across disciplines. Gurwitsch wrote a similar book several years afterwards and Spiegelberg wrote a really poor book about psychology and phenomenology, but he was very angry. He wrote in the introduction that my book was worth nothing. (It was awfully unkind, really; it ruined our relationship.)