

Religious experience and the Intentionality of Consciousness in Husserl and Henry

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Dear Colleagues,

In this handout, I included only a concise summary of differences between Husserl's and Henry's conceptions of consciousness. The empirical data, and their interpretations in light of these two phenomenologies, are too voluminous to include here. I plan to use slides for the empirical findings, read some textual examples, and give oral commentary, in order to make the presentation more concise. If you would like to see the slides in advance of the talk, please email me at olouchakova@gmail.com

The Problem

My reason for bringing up a topic of religious experience to BSOG is that religious and spiritual experiences (RSE) can be powerful agents in inducing collective intentionality. It can be intentionality of ascetic withdrawal, intentionality in a ritual, or intentionality shaping religion in general, in its social contexts. Religious experience is of more importance now than it was, for example, in the 1950s, when American religiosity had more of a social character¹. Both the public hunger for personally meaningful metaphysics, and the rise of fundamentalist religious movements, some of which stress the value of individual revelation², also contribute to the importance of studies of religious experience.

Examples of famous religious experiences which induced broad scale social phenomena are St. Paul's vision on the road to Damascus; the Prophet's Muhammad's experience in the cave of Hira experience with an angel ordering him to "recite" the Qur'an; or Suhrawardi's

¹ Roof, *Baby-Boomers*.

² For the value of religious experience in Islam, see Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*. For RSE during political upheavals, see Louchakova, "Sohbet"; Louchakova, "Awakenings"; Wall & Louchakova, "Evolution".

waking dream of Aristotle confirming intuitional focus in the Philosophy of Illumination which was seminal for the further development of Persian philosophy, and many others. To these examples, one can add many less famous but individually important contemporary experiences, such as those in *dhikrs* or *darshans*, *bhavas* or village *satsangs* which are important in sustaining corresponding religious communities; channeling or speaking in tongues as contributing to resilience against stress in immigrant Baptist communities; experiences with Our Lady of Guadalupe in rural Southern Latino immigrant communities³, etc. It is also well known that religious and spiritual experiences often have a transformative effect on character⁴, and/or a biological impact on health (e.g. in studies of the impact of spirituality on cancer survival rates⁵). However, the social role of RSE is ambiguous: for example, they can work both towards and against violence, and even be themselves manifestations of violence (as e.g. suggested by Girard), or trauma⁶. And, despite a massive textual and empirical evidence of facticity of RSE, RSE is a problematic category. It is not clear what makes experience into religious experience, what are the conditions of possibility for it, whether it can be phenomenologically or scientifically researched, and above all, whether it even exists.

The clarification of experience is generally a task of phenomenology. However, while the classical phenomenological method has clarified some forms of cognition, such as, e.g., thinking in chess or decision making⁷, it proved to be inapplicable for RSE, for the reasons which I will explain in this paper. As I will show, consciousness studied by the classical method does not include the horizon of essence for this class of experiences, prompting researchers to ascribe the dimension of “religious” in experience to mere hermeneutics. Thereby, qualia, which are the phenomenal contents of experience, remain likewise undetermined. This makes it difficult to find cognitive or neurobiological correlates of RSE; in neuroscientific research, RSE are reduced to attentional strategies, i.e. something which can be scientifically studied. This brings up the main thesis of this paper, which is that the phenomenological ontologies of knowledge, which are implicit in the concepts of intentionality, are not epistemologically as neutral as phenomenological philosophy asserts. This, in fact, reflects the situation with the empiricist conceptions of consciousness, from which classical phenomenology borrowed its concept of consciousness as intentional idea-consciousness.

Henry’s relations with classical phenomenology

An alternative to classical phenomenological conception consciousness comes from the work of the French phenomenologist Michel Henry. Henry’s phenomenology of life takes its origin in classical phenomenology. However, despite his acknowledged debt to thinkers such as Heidegger and Husserl, he stated that the horizon in which they positioned phenomenology

³ Ref to APA talk

⁴ For the characterological effects of RSE, see Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis”.

⁵ Elisabeth Targ

⁶ Girard, *Violence*; Wall & Louchakova, “Evolution”.

⁷ For examples, see Giorgi

“pushes to the absolute the presuppositions and the limits of philosophy of consciousness since Descartes and even of all Western philosophy since the Greeks”⁸. Even though in the recent years classical phenomenological discourse attempts to reify itself by focusing on embodied subjectivity and emphasizing the concepts of passive synthesis and primal impression, Henry points out critical distinctions in understanding the essence of consciousness between classical phenomenology and the phenomenology of life. Where classical phenomenology sees just a set of pure informational relations, the phenomenology of life suggests that the essence of appearances abides in phenomenological materiality. In the argument of classical phenomenology, there is no concept of phenomenological materiality; instead, there exists a concept of hyletics, which is misplaced from subjectivity into the world and on most occasions, reduced to mere sense data. In the argument to follow, I will adduce results of empirical studies which suggest that the essence of RSE cannot possibly abide within the stratum of consciousness as defined by classical phenomenology, and should be instead sought in the horizon of phenomenological materiality.

State of current research of RSE

Current research of RSE is of two kinds, anthropo-psychological, with data from live subjects, and from texts regarded as recordings from first person experiences. Examples of anthropo-psychological approaches are in the work of Tavis on the Course in Miracles (2016), Lührman on Evangelical Christians (refs), or the present author on the Hesychastic Prayer of the Heart, Islamic *sohbet*, *dhikr*, Vedanta and the so called Spiritual Awakenings in New Age circles (refs). As distinct from limitations in textual evidence⁹, anthropo-psychological research allows a more nuanced differentiation between different categories of experiences, for example, those intentionally caused by some form of meditation, and those which are more of *sui generis*, emergent quality. Regardless of their origin, RSE stand out of the ordinary flow of consciousness which is, in our understanding, a secularized consciousness: one of my recent informants characterized this quality as being “transfixed”. Recent debates in the philosophy of religion echo the Kantian argument that since God is not an object, religious experience doesn’t exist¹⁰; this further leads to suggestions that religious experience is simply a phenomenon of language¹¹. However, for phenomenological research, a suggestion that RSE must be predicated on God’s existence doesn’t operate. The logic here is reversed: the study of experience as such clarifies its constitution, and thereby, the emergence of idea of Divinity out of it. In other words, phenomenology studies not the possibility of revelation, but the nature and facticity of the experience of revelation. Husserl believed that RSE (which he termed “intimations of transcendence”) disclose some constitutive (and not optional) aspect of consciousness¹². If

⁸ Henry, *Essence*, xi..

⁹ For an example of restrictions of research of RSE via texts, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Approach”; “Theophanis the Monk”.

¹⁰ For an view that RSE are a myth, see Zangwill....

¹¹ Ciolkozs.

¹² In Ales Bello

RSE contains specific aspects which are essential to consciousness, it is from here that the ontological conclusions can be further drawn. It has been suggested that RSE must be viewed as a set of ideas constructed by texts or biologically generated by social practices¹³. If this were so, the phenomenological essence of RSE would be limited to reflective strata of consciousness and/or be totally interpretive. However, Schleiermacher, Otto, Van der Leeuw, Lonergan, Marion, Steinbock, Nancy, Marcel, and Henry (to name a few) asserted that RSE possesses a phenomenologically distinct expression, even though the suggested essence or structure of RSE differs from author to author¹⁴. In the present author's work, at least some forms of RSE indicate a presence of a synchronically and diachronically stable pre-reflective essence, which is independent of cultural constructs¹⁵.

The usual philosophical first person authority is a complicated matter in phenomenological research of RSE. First, RSE are not commonly shared experiences, and reporting them can meet ethical or status-related objections. The clandestine character of research contributes to the alleged polymorphism of RSE, and makes them less recognizable in psychological second person research¹⁶. We cannot reliably distinguish cases when RSE are experiences of "God", or of "intimacy with God", from cases when they express some other quality termed by subjects "spiritual" or "sacred". However, one shared feature of RSE that everybody agrees upon is the sense of "ultimacy" or certainty¹⁷, not a specific certainty with regard to something, but certainty as such. As in the example of Sufi "unvelings"¹⁸, there is a sense of certainty that a religious experience has taken place. If, as it is for Ricoeur, constitution of religious experience happens in and by the symbolic horizon of consciousness¹⁹, whereby the essence of such experiencing is determined by whether a religious symbol meets and fulfills the intentional contents of experience, one must inquire how is it that endlessly mutable symbolic objects can fulfill intentional contents correlating to the persistent sense of truth or ultimacy.

If *Erlebnis*²⁰ undergoes ongoing temporal constitution, as impression-protection-retention, this defeats any attempt to place the essence of RSE as such within the horizon of intentional consciousness. One would wish to link RSE to something much more permanent than fleeting thought or mental images which empirically degrade a matter of seconds²¹. Henry's "reversal of phenomenology" suggests that the essence of all appearances should be sought after in the horizon of phenomenological materiality, and that it is the horizon of

¹³ For RSE as a construct induced by texts, see Penner, Gimello, Flood; for RSE as a figment of social cognition, see (Geertz and Jensen)

¹⁴ For more on phenomenological structures of religious experience, see *Dadoski*, Structure; Steinbock, *Phenomenology*

¹⁵ For more on stable and repetitive structures in RSE, see Louchakova, "Ontopoiesis"; Louchakova-Schwartz, "Approach" ; "Theophanis the Monk".

¹⁶ For an example, see Kuhar; Palmer.

¹⁷ e.g. as shown in the recent collection of studies on religious experience by Hunt and Caputo, or in recent *Truth Within* by Flood; Winters in..... directly terms such experiences as "experiences of ultimacy".

¹⁸ Chittick

¹⁹ Leuven book.

²⁰ *Erlebnis* is Husserl's term for phenomenologically purified experience, regarded as a flow of meaning, or idea-consciousness, or intentional consciousness (Hopkins)

²¹ Kozhevnikov; Kosslyn

phenomenological materiality which comprises a foundation for all other horizons, including temporality. Of course, Henry doesn't focus his account on the facticity of separate instances of RSE, and the fact that he is a believer and a Catholic philosopher shows strongly in his writings. Analyzing experience as such will be largely irrelevant to his purpose, which is to demonstrate the genetic connection between the essence of appearances and the Christian religious myth. However, if one uses Henry's findings to formulate a phenomenological approach to the study of experience along the lines of presuppositionless human science, there is another advantage in such an approach, apart from it suggesting a presence of stable qualia-like ground for the sense of ultimacy or truth in RSE. In Henry's phenomenological universe, the above mentioned argument by Kant becomes irrelevant. Extending material phenomenology towards epistemology opens considerations for non-intentional knowledge, i.e. knowledge without an object. A paradoxical nature of such knowing is exactly what is stressed in the *Philokalia* by St. Hesychios the Priest, who talks about the "enfleshed" prayer which produces experience of the "sure knowledge of incomprehensible God" (St. Hesychios the Priest, page), i.e. experience of knowledge of God which cannot be comprehended as things. Another example is Vedantic *aparoksha*, i.e. knowledge without an object, of itself by itself.

Clearly, one needs to look for conditions of possibility for non-intentional perception, i.e. manner of knowledge that doesn't require an object. In traditional texts, descriptions related to such knowledge can be confusing²²: since reflective knowledge is always of an object, significations of phenomenological materiality, hyletics, embodiment etc. are among the most difficult to recognize in textual evidence. In anthropo-psychological research, tension between the embodied certainty of religious in experience, and uncertainty with regard to what kind of knowledge such experience delivers, and thereby, its existential status, is characteristic for this whole field of study of RSE. When subjects describe RSE in terms of "energies", tangibility, density, vibration, degrees of subtlety and light, these variations in constitutive engagement of phenomenological materiality are often mistaken for a metaphor, or, in a Husserlian type of analysis, left out or reduced to hyletics. Hence, I will now present the summary of distinctions between Husserl's hyletics, and Henrian phenomenological materiality, with regard to their participation in the constitution of consciousness.

Intentionality-hyle relations in Husserl vs. Sentience-Phenomenological Materiality in Henry

Table 1. Summary comparison between the Husserlian Hyletics and Phenomenological Materiality of Henry

Concept	Henry	Husserl
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²² For an example of confusion with signification in the translation of medieval Islamic philosophical text, see Louchakova, "Approach" .

Consciousness [Fig 1, Slide 1].	Intentional relation which has as its essence phenomenological materiality. Constitution of consciousness is possible because phenomenological materiality is self-affective, or sentient (not limited to crudely understood emotion).	The intentional relation of no explained nature, added on top of the hyletic matrix. The hyletic matrix is a continuation of the world, and somehow got embodied and then somehow intentionality became added on top of it. Consciousness equals intentionality, is purified of hyletics, and of all aspects of the natural attitude
Hyletics	Doesn't play an essential role in his philosophical system.	Accounts for sense data; in later works, is assigned a limited constitutive place; hyletic, i.e. sensory, continuum, which is embodied by the living subject.
Intentionality [Fig 2 , Slide 2]	Develops out of sentience implicit to materiality. Sentience is primary; intentionality is secondary, reflective relations. Metaphor: like reflections in mirrors facing each other.	Set of relations devoid of any sensory quality, but somehow these relationship "has a feel" to it, a certain "tension" of reaching outside of itself. Intentionality can be actional, and in "fringes", non-actional; it is not clear if the "clear seeing" of internal time-consciousness is actional intentionality. Non-actional, intentionality is not objectifying; it is not clear if it is somehow thematizing, can be thematized, or if there are regions. It seems to be characterized by simple "thereness" or "being".
Phenomenological materiality	Central category, the "ultimate constitutor", not available in any objectification, can be	Materiality reduced to hyletics, can be observed and is fully objectifiable.

	perceived in self-affection, i.e. in itself by itself. Given only in subjectivity (via absorption), not given in any intentional relation. There can be no “awareness of” with regard to materiality because materiality = awareness	
“Thereness” of things, phenomenality, or appearances	The essence of appearances is in the phenomenological materiality	The essence is in appearances themselves
Inside and outside, transcendence, intentional relations	Everything is inside, (in life = sentient phenomenological materiality), there is no transcendence, and no <i>ek-stasis</i> (of being).	There is an external world, and consciousness transcends itself in order to grasp its content and create representations
Knowledge	Has its essence in phenomenological materiality	Has its essence in intentionality
Sentience	Self-affectivity = livedness of experience, that what makes experience into “lived experience” ²³ . Responsible for intuition of life, and is the essence of appearances.	Livedness of experience = sensuous self-awareness, primal self-valuing of experience, never becomes material from which consciousness is “made”

What in Husserlian account is the “sensuous data, the lowest level of matter, are a primitive form of directness or intention that calls for the constitution of the phenomenon” (F 123), i.e. the elementary material (T.25) creating “an impressional phase of consciousness”, in Henry’s account is the essence of consciousness.

The above accounts seem ontologically close, but make a huge difference in the analysis of constitution. Taipale asks : “How, then, should we characterize inner time-consciousness without neglecting this elementary material?... If the form (impression-retention-protention) is nothing

²³ Taipale, 25, bases his analysis on Husserl, but mixes in “Henry and others”. Henry believed though that his system is different..he takes this “livedness” towards materiality-consciousness, not pure consciousness.

without content, then what constitutes the *necessary material* of temporal self-awareness of experiences?”

Notes on Introspection

In order to reach the layer of experience which is equated with the conscious contents of experience, classical phenomenology applies the first phenomenological reduction. *Erfahrung* subjected to phenomenological reduction becomes *Erlebnis*, “phenomenologically relieved” consciousness, or consciousness as such, which is a current of objectifying intentionality²⁴. From this first reduction, the phenomenological method proceeds towards clarification of the layer of consciousness-knowledge, understood as intentionality. Theoretically, in clarification of RSE (as a form of experience), the same should be applied. However, if intentionality indeed “stands for the tension that connect us with what seems to be outside of us”²⁵, such an understanding of consciousness immediately kills RSE as a subject matter of research. RSE disclose something which is intimately “inside” us. Religious experience and religious cognition are always associated with internality. Ales Bello referred to interiority as a privileged point of departure in the formation of religious sense²⁶; Crowe earlier stated that as soon as we decipher introspection, we will know the genesis of revelation²⁷. Even Flood (2013), who studied interiority thoroughly in its cultural contexts, and believes it to be a configuration in the idea of the body (as opposed to body qua mine, as in Marcel²⁸) avoids interpreting his data as the study in intentionality of consciousness along the lines of classical phenomenology²⁹.

Notes on self-awareness, and critique of Husserl’s approach to non-objectifying self-awareness by Henry

Introspective awareness in RSE can be understood in terms of modifications of self-awareness. Taipale (2014) indicates that “[W]ith Husserl, we can define subjectivity as self-aware consciousness, while selfhood refers to the dimension of self-awareness in consciousness”³⁰. He also indicates that prereflective self-awareness is primarily non-objectifying³¹.

In early classical phenomenology, intentional consciousness is completely abstracted from hyletics, with the latter interpreted as sense data onto which meaning is bestowed. The route of self-rectification in phenomenology (which was influenced by Marcel’s perspective on body as

²⁴ Hopkins, *Intentionality*

²⁵ Ferrarello, *Practical Intentionality*, 102

²⁶ Ales Bello

²⁷ Crowe

²⁸ Marcel in the

²⁹ Flood beyond phenomenology

³⁰ Taipale, 23

³¹ Taipale 23.

self, Merleau-Ponty's analysis reversibility and flesh, and perhaps, Marion's writings on the "self- of flesh", and Henry himself) brought out a less divisive idea of self-awareness. However, the relationship between hyletics and intentional consciousness were never fully clarified in classical phenomenology. Henry's critique of this is as following: "this route of self-corrections, from the idea of consciousness as something which can be easily abstracted from the other components of experience, to embrace of the idea of consciousness as a field of human entanglement in the world [which is the reason to reengage hyletics in the analysis in classical phenomenology], doesn't help understand the basic feature of consciousness, which is that it's content is filled up by things other than itself, known as transcendence." The descriptions should be disclosing the "how" of constitution, but "the study of intentionality tells us nothing about the real nature of intentionality; the study of reversibility of the body tells us nothing about the real nature of reversibility of the body, and the rehabilitation of sense-data from mere repository of intentional contents to constituting hyletic data do not help understand the essence of appearances or appearing " (Henry).

Further, Henry argues that this nature will remain out of reach as long as phenomenology commits itself to having a beginning and an end in the study of consciousness. In Henry's account, the point of departure in philosophy should be life, not consciousness, and not being. Life, for Henry, is given to itself, both factually and in direct intuition, as distinct from eidetic intuition (which emerges in life upon reflection).

Henry's work on the phenomenology of life can be grouped in three sections. First, his material phenomenology occupies a structural place similar to the method and descriptive phenomenology in the phenomenology of consciousness³², but is not developed to the same degree as to the detailing of operative concepts. The second in his analysis, his descriptive phenomenology of life, produces the metaphysics of manifestation³³. The third section of his work is the philosophy of religion, which is dedicated to the analysis of Christian revelation. The intuitional givenness of life emerges out of its irreducible phenomenological materiality, whereby any thought is phenomenologically material thought, even though this fact is masked by the Cartesian mind-body split of the natural attitude. Consequently, both the subordinate quality of hyle, and the equation of knowledge with purified intentionality of consciousness, belong to natural attitude³⁴. For the proper phenomenological analysis, this "masking" has to be suspended, in epoche towards life as opposed to classical epoche towards the regions of intentional consciousness. This uncovers a subjectively given principle of phenomenological materiality, of which implicit quality is sentience³⁵. So, the first reduction, from experience to life, is followed by the second reduction, from life to sentience-materiality. Phenomenological materiality-sentience then becomes a subject matter of the phenomenological investigation, and is shown on both side of subject-object, individual-world equations, atemporal in some aspects and incorporated into temporal extension in other, and given directly in absorption into bodily

³² Henry material phen

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³⁴ Consciousness -nwhen the term etc.

³⁵ Intimations of transcendence point to constitutive not optional; materiality-sentience, not intentionality, as an essence of manifestation or appearances.

subjectivity, and reflectively in appearances. There is no transcendence in this essential materiality; transcendence will be an artifact of objectifying awareness.

The sentience of materiality in Henry's account plays itself out as self-affectation of life. Interpreted in his earlier works as emotion, in his later work it comes through as a principle which knows itself by itself, = materiality = awareness. It would be close to the aristotelian idea of matter, but in subjectivity this matter is disclosed as sentience, and is phenomenologically derived. Taipale refers to similar aspects as "feeling of existing", and Husserlian scholarship comes close to this in the notion of "primal impression", or "primal sensation"³⁶, but there appears to be always a gap between awareness, or seeing, and impression. There is self-affectivity, but there is no sentience... so, it appears to be either much more cautious, or like analysis stopped half way.

Objectifying awareness masks materiality. Non-objectifying awareness, e.g. in absorption, reveals materiality in RSE, and the instances of emergence of religious sense (as the sense of the sacred) in orthogonal absorption of attention into the core of the body. **Slide.**

Taipale asks : "How, then, should we characterize inner time-consciousness without neglecting this elementary material?... If the form (impression-retention-protention) is nothing without content, then what constitutes the *necessary material* of temporal self-awareness of experiences?" This remains unanswered in phenomenology of consciousness. The phenomenology of consciousness places primal impressions in the horizon of internal time consciousness, while Henry does exactly the opposite, i.e, places the horizon of internal time consciousness into indivisible sentient materiality. I will give now an example of emergence of RSE involving such materiality, and then proceed to the empirical dimension of time in RSE.

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³⁶ Taipale e.g. 25.

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