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Howard R. Pollio, Tracy B. Henley and Craig J. Thompson

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PART I

**Existential Phenomenology and the
Science of Psychology**

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The Nature of Human Experience

In the beginning of his classic monograph, “A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men” (1934/1957), the European naturalist Jakob von Uexkull invited his readers to “blow, in fancy, a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions it alone knows. . . . Through the bubble we see . . . the world as it appears to the animal (itself), not as it appears to us. This we may call the *phenomenal world* or the *self world* of the animal.” Von Uexkell then went on to suggest that for many biologists these worlds will be invisible because of a prior commitment to conceptualizing animal life in purely mechanical terms. He advises us, as enlightened readers, to regard all animals, the human being included, not as machinelike objects but as subjects who live in their unique worlds that are as “manifold as the animals themselves.”

Von Uexkull was not the only one of psychology’s ancestors to call for a nonmechanistic and phenomenal view of human and animal life. A few years earlier, William James (1890) had written about the uniqueness of human perception, specifically in regard to four different Americans traveling in Europe:

One . . . will bring home only picturesque impressions – costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and structures. To another, all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices, population and drainage arrangements, door and window fastenings, and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theaters, restaurants, and public balls, and naught besides; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to tell little more than a few names of places. (James, 1890, pp. 286–287)

For two separate observers, concerned with two separate species and two separate realms, the significance of phenomenal experience was recognized early on as an important psychological issue, and from our present vantage point in the twentieth century, we must wonder why psychology chose not

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to follow their direction. Although part of the answer surely has to do with the fact that phenomenal experience could not easily be turned into directly observable behavior, a potentially more significant reason seems to be that there was no way in which early psychology could conceptualize “phenomenal” except as “subjective” – that is, as in opposition to “objective.” What this means is that human experience was considered as equivalent to the Mind of Cartesian philosophy (i.e., as both a valid mode of understanding and as a questionable topic for empirical study). When early psychology did study “mental” phenomena, the resulting introspectionist psychology could only describe them in terms of atomistic content bearing little relationship to what was usually meant by Mind both in philosophy and in everyday life.

Although such a state of affairs prevailed in American psychology, European philosophy (not to mention more esoteric and even less well-known Eastern theologies and philosophies) had developed or was developing approaches to human experience in which consciousness was viewed as neither self-sufficient nor as located in the unreachable interior of a thinking subject but, rather, as a relationship between the living subject and his or her world. This position, which in Western philosophy derives from Kant, gave rise both to a philosophy of consciousness known as *phenomenology* and to a psychology of perception known as *Gestalt*. Although it is true that certain aspects of Gestalt psychology ultimately did affect American psychology, it is equally true that early phenomenology had far less impact largely because it seemed more concerned with foundational issues in philosophy than with psychological aspects of human life. This view of phenomenology began to change, however, once it was explicitly joined to a philosophy of existence – initially by Heidegger (1927/1962) and more recently by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) – to yield the contemporary position known as *existential phenomenology*.

What is the nature of this philosophy that enables it to hold out the promise of allowing psychology to consider a multiplicity of first-person perspectives without resorting either to an inappropriate mentalism or solipsism? As its name suggests, it is a combination of two philosophies, one concerned with a certain perspective on human existence and the other with a certain mode of investigating that existence. This combination is the result of neither convenience nor historical accident; rather, both philosophies derive from a common interest in human experiences in the world of everyday human life. This interest does not view experience (or consciousness, in more technical terms) as a consequence of some internal set of events such as mind or brain but as a relationship between people and their

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world, whether the world at that moment consists of other people, nature, time, one's own body, personal or philosophical ideas, or whatever. What is sought by both existentialism and phenomenology is a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity. For existential-phenomenology, the world is to be lived and described, not explained.

Although existentialism began somewhat earlier than phenomenology, it was not until the advent of phenomenology that existentialism was provided with a method appropriate to its concerns. If existentialism begins with Kierkegaard in the mid-nineteenth century, and phenomenology with Husserl at the end of the same century, it is not until Heidegger that the two are combined into a single project – that of describing everyday human existence in uniquely human ways. Unfortunately for psychology, Heidegger is among the most philosophical of philosophers, and it remained for Merleau-Ponty to cast psychological insight and empirical research into a philosophical system more congenial to a psychological study of human existence. Indeed, the early Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963, 1945/1962) derived much of his inspiration, not to mention empirical support, from the work of Gestalt psychologists such as Köhler, Wertheimer, and Goldstein. If scientific psychology is to take an existential phenomenological turn, it must be grounded in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and only secondarily in Heidegger, Husserl, and Kierkegaard, however significant they may be to Merleau-Ponty's own thought.

At the center of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and of crucial importance for psychology, is his description of the "lived body." This concept is meant to provide a way of overcoming Cartesian dualism, especially as it manifests itself in certain current behavioral and cognitive approaches to psychology. There seems to be no more significant problem than that of providing a coherent way of dealing with the fact that human beings both have a body and are a body. The positions usually taken in psychology either assume a physical monism (as, for example, Skinner) or seek transformational relations to mediate between the world of events physically construed and the meaning of these events for some mental process (as, for example, early cognitive psychology). Most psychologists no longer worry about dualism but seem content to view it as a problem that time and biology will solve.

Probably the major problem to any position other than a dualistic one is that the human body, as an object of perception by any competent observer, has a clear boundary between "It" and everything else. The human body maintains its boundary for perception whether we move, sit still, type, or

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watch a movie. It is recognizable as a well-defined entity when we or someone else views it in a mirror, photograph, or videotape. We even see our body as a well-bounded object in dreams or fantasies. Observers such as physicians or physiologists also view the body as a bounded object; they, however, also are allowed to examine the body's contents – its internal organs, muscles, bones, and connecting tissue – and the idea of the body as anything other than a well-defined biophysical entity capable of containing other well-defined biophysical entities seems counter not only to common perception and imagination but to medical science as well. Everywhere we turn we are struck by the materiality and boundedness of the human body; our own, and those of other people.

There are, however, times when the bodily contour seems not only less well-defined but even problematic, and these times are most apparent when we change from a third- to a first-person perspective on the body. All of the self-evident evidence for the body as a distinct object derives from a third-person perspective – that is, when I look at my body in a photograph or mirror or more imaginatively in day or night dreams. It also occurs when I, as either physiologist, physician, or just plain person-watcher, consider the body of some other person from an outside (third-person) perspective. My body or someone else's body is well defined only when considered from the point of view of an outsider – that is, from a third-person perspective.

Adopting a first-person perspective changes radically the experience of my body as defined by a single, distinct contour. If I extend the possibility of a similar change in experience when you consider your body from your own first-person perspective, we both should become much less comfortable with a description of the body in which it is characterized as an object. The body, which a moment ago from a third-person perspective was so stable, coherent, and unequivocal, no longer seems from a first-person perspective to end at the tips of my toes, nose, fingertips, and head. Rather, it has become a less distinct and more mobile event that sometimes resides in the natural world in the form of a rock, tree, or animal; at other times, in some aspect of the human world such as a person, book, or building; and at still other times, in some personal past in the form of an idea or memory, or, right now, in some object with which I am involved such as a pen or typewriter. Except for the case where I am directly aware of my body, my usual experience is that I am least aware of my body as an entity and most aware of some aspect of the world that has called to me. This class of personal experiences is described in the philosophical literature by the concept of intentionality, a concept very much at the heart of an existential-phenomenological approach to human existence and one of the defining properties of human experiencing.

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Characteristics of Human Experience*Intentionality*

The concept of intentionality, first introduced to modern phenomenology by Brentano and Husserl, is meant to capture the descriptive insight that “every experience has its reference or direction toward what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of expression to which it is present” (Ihde, 1979, pp. 42–44). Within philosophy, intentionality is taken to imply that experience and world co-constitute one another for some person. It is extremely important for psychology, however, to note explicitly that intentionality is not an intellectual process connecting a thinking subject with a world outside its ken; rather, intentionality is meant to emphasize that human experience is continuously directed toward a world that it never possesses in its entirety but toward which it is always directed.

Intentionality, as the phenomenologist uses the term, is also not to be confused with the more common concept of intention. When a person says “I intend to do . . .,” the implication is that the person has a plan or preset agenda to carry out. Intentionality, on the other hand, is a basic structure of human existence that captures the fact that human beings are fundamentally related to the contexts in which they live or, more philosophically, that all being is to be understood as “being-in-the-world.” Intention describes one mental state among many; intentionality describes a basic configuration of person and world.

A simple example should serve to clarify the difference. Imagine that Person *A* makes a statement which Person *B* experiences as upsetting. *A* might then say to *B*: “I didn’t intend to upset you.” What this means is that Person *A* did not make the statement with the explicit plan of upsetting *B*. But what, then, is the *intentionality* of the situation? For *A*, there is the experience of *B*’s being upset; for *B*, there is the experience of the world as upsetting. Intentionality describes the structure of the situation for each participant although the specific natures of their engagement in that situation differ. Situations also may arise with (or without) mental intention; every situation, however, is always characterized by a specific configuration of person/world from the point of view of the person. Even though human beings can and do act without prespecified plans, every situation is intentional (i.e., embodies a relationship between the person and some aspect(s) of his or her present world).

Other implications follow from considering intentionality as the fundamental structure of human experience. One of the more significant is that

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the experience of myself does not precede my experience of the world – the “You must come before the I,” as Nietzsche once remarked. What seems to be the case is that we learn and relearn who we are on the basis of our encounters with objects, ideas, and people – in short, with every different kind of “otherness.” The other side of this relational state of affairs is that what we are aware of in a situation reveals something important about who we are. If, for example, we come into a room and notice only the furniture, we are likely a very different person from someone who notices only the people, the food, or the artwork. The objects of our awareness reveal what is noteworthy for us, and if the self comes into being on the basis of its encounters with otherness, what gets noticed in that encounter reveals what that self is like in terms of what is significant for and to us. William James also knew this (see Preface).

What we experience is also never separate from the culture or language in which we live, talk, and act. Our actions – linguistic, conceptual, and otherwise – take on meaning only within some sociolinguistic framework. Although culture is conceived by existential-phenomenological thought as an organized and organizing structure, it is not construed as a causal force. For example, the structure of language does not “cause” us to speak, but if we are to speak, a certain language must be used. As Gadamer (1960/1975) put it, language speaks us as much as we speak it. Culture also is not an encapsulated entity but one that grounds all that we see and do. For one person, going to a local shopping mall may be experienced as an adventure (such as hunting for unadvertised sales); for another, it may be experienced as a laborious chore. The reference of the experience (i.e., going to the mall) and its alternative meanings (adventure or chore) are but two of many culturally given possibilities. Understanding the meaning of some experience requires us to describe the intentional stance (or situated perspective) of the event from the point of view of the experiencing person.

The Intentionality of Human Activity. The description of experience that emerges from an analysis based on the intentionality of experience may seem far removed from human action. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both identify a type of intentional relationship between person and world – an operative or functional intentionality – that is concerned neither with judgment nor reflection but with action. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the lived body represents his attempt to describe first-person experiences of human movement (what is usually termed *behavior*) in such a way as not to lead us to conclude that “I am in my body,” which is then “In the world,” but rather to suggest that “I am in the world” directly. Behavior, for Merleau-Ponty, is a direct relationship between me-in-the-world in much

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the same way that perception is a direct relationship between me-and-things-in-the-world.

The best presentation of such direct experiences of a lack of separation between me and my world are provided by first-person descriptions of skilled acts by highly practiced individuals such as a professional football player catching a pass or a cold philosopher chopping wood for a winter fire. Pollio (1982) describes the case of one professional football player who notes that when he catches a football he is aware of nothing but, as he put it, “me and the ball.” If we attempt to capture the experience of skilled behavior from the first-person perspective of a professional athlete, the event as experienced is remarkably narrow and well described in terms of a direct relationship between the athlete and the ball.

Coaches often describe the athlete’s ability as “concentration,” but such a description implies that there is some separate *someone* to concentrate, and some separate *something* on which to concentrate, or the more usual categories of mind and body, with mind serving to focus body. The skilled performer did not say “I first decide to blot everything out and pay attention only to the ball.” What he said instead is that catching the ball becomes all of the world and that he does what is necessary to achieve this end. In talking about “concentration,” the coach speaks from a third-person perspective that sees the movements of the athlete; the athlete speaks from a first-person perspective in which body, will, and outcome are experienced as a single, unified event.

If an athlete’s experience is so immediate, how does the world – the game situation – regulate his or her actions? Here there are no sure answers – only a few hints from the German coach/psychologist H. G. Hartgenbusch (1927), who asked athletes to provide first-person descriptions of several different sports. In soccer, for example, Hartgenbusch found that the goalkeeper standing before a rather large goal opening seems to be where the ball is hit more often than should be the case by chance. Hartgenbusch points out that the goalkeeper is the most dominant part of the goal mouth and for the ordinary soccer player serves as an aiming point, a target to be shot at. The expert player has learned to disregard this target point and shoots instead at the open space surrounding the goalkeeper. A good player then, is one who has “learned to reconstruct his field to change the phenomenal center from the goalkeeper to another point in space [and] this [new point] comes to have the same attraction as the goalkeeper had before” (Hartgenbusch, 1927, p. 49).

There are a number of unusual words in this description such as *attraction*, *phenomenal center*, and *field* which suggest that the first-person world of the athlete is not determined by first looking over the situation, next

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deciding what to do, and then doing it, but that it all occurs in a more immediate, unreflected, and ongoing way. “As soccer players move toward the goal, they see the playing ground as a field of changing lines whose direction leads toward the goal. . . . When I asked the player what he saw, [he said] I only saw a hole” (Hartgenbusch, 1927, p. 49).

The world of a skilled athlete illustrates the structure of a direct intentional relationship between person and world in a particularly clear way. A second example is provided by the philosopher Ihde (1979) and concerns his experience of chopping wood for a winter fire. In describing this experience, Ihde reports that while chopping he does not pay attention to or think about his experience. Following an earlier description by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), the intentional nature of his actions is described in the following terms: “I am outside myself in the world of my project.” A different and more differentiated description of this experience is “I-am-in-the-ax-directed-toward-the-wood.” Even for a philosopher, thinking and the experience of self are at a minimum during the process of chopping wood, and the focal point of awareness is on the wood to be chopped and not on the self; if the self appears at all, it appears only when the philosopher reflects on the intentional nature of the relationship between him and the wood or when someone else describes observing him chop wood. The first-person world is a relational one in which some aspect of the world is focal and in which the self as a clear and distinct entity appears only to third-person perception or to my own later reflection. Unlike the worlds of reflection and/or third-person perception, first-person experience, even of movement, does not have a constant shape: All that is constant is a focus on some event or situation as it relates to what from other perspectives could be called “me” or “I.”

The Intentionality of Human Thinking. Both ordinary perception and skilled behavior reveal that we regularly experience ourselves as directly related not only to the objects of our perception but also to the worlds in which we move. Neither perception nor action separates us from our world even if there are times when we may be uncertain of our perceptions or unsure of our actions. It is only in those cases, in which there is some hesitancy about what we are to do, that we may experience drawing back from the world into the “interior” world of thinking and/or planning. Yet even here, the situation may be described in terms of intentionality, for what now happens is that I am directly aware of ideas and possible situations, and the intentional structure relates what is experienced (an idea) and my mode of experiencing it (thinking about it). Although “what” I experi-

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ence is now a mental event, and “how” I experience is by thinking, there is still the first-person experience of connection that is as clear and relational in the case of thinking as it was in the case of chopping wood or catching a football. Thinking, as a human event, yields a different experience of “how” the self relates to its objects and/or plans; it does not, however, require a change in the way in which first-person experience is to be described from a first-person point of view (i.e., as intentional).

In discussing this issue, Pollio (1982) wondered if thinking exhibits a vastly different intentional structure from other, more observable, activities such as are usually grouped under the term *behavior*. Somewhat playfully this concern was framed in terms of the following question: “Is thinking about thinking different from just plain thinking?” The answer he gave was as follows: If we are thinking₁ about thinking₂ the first and second “thinkings” are not the same. The first thinking is a process, something immediate and ongoing; it is what I am doing right now. The second thinking is the object of my present, ongoing activity and is obviously different from the process of thinking itself. In terms of intentionality, thinking₂ defines the relational pole of thinking; as such the characteristic pattern for thinking – in this case, thinking₁ – is no different from any other human experience, even if its intentional object is thinking itself.

The possibility that we are able to think about anything and everything – thinking, our self, and the natural world included – has been taken by philosophers since Descartes (and before) to endow thinking with some special meaning as *the* fundamental activity defining what it means to be human or, even, what it might mean to exist. As Hazel Barnes (1956) points out in her introduction to *Being and Nothingness*: “The consciousness which says ‘I am’ is not the consciousness which thinks . . . and Descartes’ ‘cogito’ is not Descartes’ thinking; it is Descartes reflecting on the doubting” (p. 11). What a Cartesian approach, and those that derive from it such as much of contemporary cognitive psychology, end up by doing is to separate the (first-person) experience of thinking from the thinking person. Having done this, they are led to describe perception as depending upon the interpretation of a stimulus, and behavior as the output phase of some internal plan developed on the basis of prior or ongoing cognitive activity. For a Cartesian-based psychology, thinking is the connection between perception and action; as such, it serves to remove the person from direct contact with the world and leaves him or her isolated in an internal storehouse of ideas, images, representations, and plans.

While the description of any psychological activity, be it walking, seeing, or thinking, in the form of impersonal third-person processes is extremely