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PhD Application
Writing Sample 1
1/3/12

Writing Sample 2:

The following writing sample is from a paper that I delivered as the first of a four-part presentation leading to a discussion of Neurophenomenology in Helene Furjan's Architecture Seminar 711-003, "Spectacle/Post-Spectacle", at the University of Pennsylvania. As the major 20th century Phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre) were being presented by another group, I was asked to pull together a sketch of the Classical roots of the field to give it some historical depth. Given the impossibility of delivering a comprehensive overview of such a broad period in 20 minutes, the presentation's development as a romp through the history was necessitated. In order to make the experience of the presentation more phenomenologically sympathetic, I edited together and projected a video of a mouth with broken teeth illuminated by a side projection, with the black shadows of the mouth image keyed out in Final Cut to reveal cows following after a truck filled with hay. This was the frankest vision I could come up with that illustrated how I feel when reading Heidegger.

Concerning Named and Unnamed Classical Sources of Modern Phenomenology

Good morning, my name is Tra Bouscaren and I'm an artist.

--Meaning, if I do anything 'funny', or 'odd', you can now safely write it off as merely, 'artistic'. [As the video comes into focus on the screen]

That said, the only degree that I've earned as of today is in Philosophy.

I've had a love/hate relationship with the field for nearly 20 years. Though it is relatively easy to argue that the subject is actually just a headache, and it is even easier to point out its almost total lack of historical progress, it can be bizarrely addictive. To that end it has also been described as an illness.

On the other hand however, however we consider Philosophy now, we must also acknowledge the fact that she is the mother of all academic subjects in the West and it is to her that every field in contemporary academia is most deeply indebted whether we like it or not.

Many would tell you that Aristotle was the greatest philosopher of all time, and it would be almost silly to try to argue against them. By the time of his death in 322 BC, he had produced a body of work that was far more systematized and complex than that which had been produced by his teacher, Plato. Aristotle's life work managed to encompass major essays and entire books on subjects ranging from poetry, to logic, music, theatre, the plastic arts, rhetoric, linguistics, politics, government, ethics, zoology, biology, physics and metaphysics. All of these branches of thought sprang from his central core (or cores as some might argue) of both physical and metaphysical theory. Though his theories of physics would remain influential up until the time of Newton, his basic assumptions within the placement of 'reality' in his metaphysical thought is where many such as Heidegger would posit that the real story of Phenomenology gets its start.

Plato (or Socrates) posits that true 'being' is of the *Forms*, and that the *Forms* are *not here*. What is here then or what we perceive when we do not understand the Forms is merely a kind of shadow of true reality.

Aristotle takes this other-worldly ontological situation and compresses it into this world. 'Being is right here, not elsewhere', he wants to say—this is the essence of Realism. The simplest way to sum up Aristotle's Realist argument against Plato's Idealist Philosophy is to say that the move is a simplification, and is thus 'more elegant' and therefore better, according to the scientific method¹. Aristotle and his Realist followers would say the

¹ --for which he is also widely given credit

Idealists are just doubling everything up, that making two out of everything doesn't serve to explain either one, nor one through the other. Aristotle's position offered an alternative to what could be derided as the solipsistic nature of Plato's Idealism in as much as Aristotle's Realism begins with the assumption that there is an ontological reality that is independent from, but at one with, our intellectual faculties.

Over the centuries, the arguments over the location and nature of being became a kind of intellectual sport, a game of ontological ping-pong. This game went on for more than two thousand years. In the 19th century however, around the time of Schopenhauer's wonderful, but clumsy attempt to map Vedantic principles onto Kantian Idealism, Philosophy was in the process of backfiring, regurgitating its early classical role as the mother of all subjects and being ironically devoured by her progeny like the story of Cronos in reverse.

Kierkegaard compelling re-invoked one of the very early faces of Idealism in the form of a transcendental spirituality leading to a version of Existentialism that outstripped its Idealist roots. Darwin's Theory of Evolution through Natural Selection launched the most shattering argument that Idealist philosophy had ever faced. Marx uncorked a whole new realm of social and monetary Realism utilizing a Hegelian methodology. Nietzsche made a fool out of the practitioners of metaphysics in his pursuit of intellectual genealogy while fashioning aesthetics the new ruler of ethics. Freud's impact in his own lifetime was perhaps the starkest in the outrage he caused by drenching our thoughts, even our purest of philosophy, in sexual motives. By the turn of the century, Philosophy as it had been practiced, had been torn to pieces. Metaphysics was gone, ontology was rendered impossible, enter Phenomenology. As the most brilliant European Philosophers of the 20th century struggled to wring opportunities for insight out of "others", and "faces", and "nothing", they twisted their language to its breaking point looking for ways to mount realist

fingers onto fundamentally idealist armatures that, in my opinion, never got them where they needed to go. That said, the kind of meticulously incestuous reasoning that philosophy bred through its self-imposed limits of (no) assumption have produced some excellent tools for the critique of the progress of other fields (such as in the sciences²), which is one of the only areas of leverage that I see Philosophy hanging onto for dear life these days.

At any rate, my goal here today is to try to articulate some of the Classical roots of the philosophical discipline of Phenomenology as they pertain to how the field was formally developed in the 20th century and is currently being explored by both the contemporary Continental tradition as well as by Analytic Philosophy of Mind proponents, Psychologists, and Neuroscientists for sundry applications both academically as well as in the ‘real worlds’ of advertising and marketing.

Given the essentially infinite field of information that is available to us today, we are necessitated to choose a point of entry as to *how* to begin looking at *something somewhere*—this fact also happens to encapsulate what is essentially at stake in Phenomenology. There are those (there are frankly many) among contemporary art practitioners and theorists who choose to privilege the most recent twist of any given idea as that which is most relevant. This choice, though seemingly superficial, is actually poignant in the sense that it makes its decision to self-locate in the *now* based on the assumption that what has come before has already been culturally digested. In this sense, many contemporary theorists who might be looking at Damien Hirst’s, “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living”, for example, would be more likely to reference Paul Thek than Holbein—much less Plato--that is if they were even willing to go back as far as Thek.

² A la Feyerabend in, “Against Method”

Personally I prefer to examine something that is new and to try to observe the concepts out of which it has been built³. Though I can't establish grounds to privilege this method over another, I've always been naturally inclined to work back upstream towards the origin of a visual idea to see how the local decisions surrounding its progress inclined it specifically, how it could have gone another way, and/or how we might re-read it from the beginning all over again so that we might be able to extract a new reading.

In order to begin to talk about Phenomenology as it exists today, it makes sense to go at least as far back as the Akademia, founded by Plato in 387 BC. The Akademia was the first institution of higher learning in this hemisphere and it was there that Plato taught Aristotle for 20 years. Common knowledge would have it that Aristotle is the grandfather of Phenomenology. Though according to a strict reading of the conceptual geneology this is obviously true, I think it is also possible to consider the relationship of Aristotle to Plato's work and in it Plato's relationship to Socrates in such a way as to develop an alternative reading of the central questions of Phenomenology, at least as it existed in Continental thought for the first half of the 20th century.

Before I get back to the Akademia, however, I feel compelled here to note that some data indicates an institution of Indian higher learning called Taxila or Takshashila⁴, located in what is now Pakistan, that pre-dates the Akademia by quite a bit, going back as far as the 6th century BC. I bring this up because I wish that we had made time to at least acknowledge the fact that Indian philosophy has carried the deepest continuous tradition of the study of Phenomenology in the world. The separate but related Indian traditions of Hindu and Buddhist thought have been and continue to be almost wholly looked-over or thrown aside as

³ This is both how and where Visual Studies and Phenomenology overlap.

⁴ Hartmut Scharfe (2002). "Education in Ancient India. Brill Academic Publishers. ISBN 90-04-12556-6 bibliography

mere 'religion' in the West both by modern academic philosophy and psychology. Personally I think that it is this prejudice that needs to be put aside. Although I am in no way qualified to stand here and lecture on Hindu or Buddhist Philosophy, what I have studied of it (and will continue to study) reveals an extraordinarily nuanced and sophisticated approach to the subject of Phenomenology, one from which even the great Aristotle probably could have learned. That said, however, there is scant evidence that there ever was any real cross-over between the Ancient Greek Akademia and their Indian counterparts. Despite the fact that Aristotle travelled at one point to Asia Minor and did some writing there, there is nothing in the writing (at least in the writing that still survives today) that references any of the great Eastern thinkers. Given our project's common telos in contemporary Phenomenology (as it is practiced in the West) and my own lack of expertise in Indian Philosophies, I'll leave it at that for now.

There was, however, at least one pre-Socratic philosopher writing from Ephesus (contemporary Turkey) who offered a legitimate phenomenological (pre-)counter-proposal to what we have mentally inherited of Plato/Aristotle's stamp of dualist thought. Heraclitus, the 'weeping philosopher', whose work is largely lost, what we have of which is more often cryptic than clear, insisted on at least one basic point that is widely accepted which was that everything is in flux. *Panta rhei*, "everything flows", the most famous (and impressively open-ended) aphorism attributed to Heraclitus that thinking of 'things' existing with the same identity from one moment to the next doesn't make sense. He is interesting not only as historical footnote but also because Plato himself heard this argument and found it necessary to respond to it in his dialogue, "Cratylus", in which he argues that the principle of flux is anti-epistemological in that a state of constant flux would undermine the ability of a subject to observe one state and compare it to another—an ability Plato clearly takes for granted.

The root of this assumption is of course at the core of western dualist thinking and it persisted into the 20th century. Despite the fact that it has come under some fire by theorists⁵, it would be futile to argue that this dualist mentality is not still dominant in the language of our everyday lives.

At any rate, finally moving into the era of the Akademia, we encounter one of the most interesting and famous lineages of pedagogy in the teaching of Plato by Socrates, the teaching of Aristotle by Plato, unto the teaching of Alexander the Great by Aristotle. As much as I would love to try to go after the impact of Aristotle's realist thought on the very real-world exploits of Alexander, I'll try to keep it 'inside the Academy', so to speak, for reasons both of finitude with respect to this presentation, and more importantly because that was how the Akademia was itself founded, both intellectually and structurally set apart from the 'real-world' of the capitol city.

Established outside the city walls of Athens, the Akademia was enclosed within its own walls thus setting itself off as an "other" from its inception both conceptually and architecturally. The facts of both separation and self-containment with respect to the 'real world' (the city of Athens) going on beyond the walls of the Akademia, set a tone that offers a valuable reflection of and metaphor for the primary concerns of Phenomenology in the modern era.

The walls surrounding Plato's Academy contained an olive grove dedicated to Athena, the grey-eyed Greek Goddess of Wisdom. I do not know whether or not students or teachers at the Academy actually prayed to their culture's goddess of that which they loved

⁵ Heidegger, for example, would return to grapple with Heraclitus and what he offered to Phenomenology in a seminar on the pre-Socratic's work in 1966.

(Philosophia) as part of their course, but it is a somewhat darkly comic thing to consider at any rate, for several reasons. Even the presence of such a garden within the walls of the Academy is doubly ironic as Plato's teacher, Socrates himself the father of irony, had been put to the death in 399 BC by the state for 'corrupting the youth', and 'impiety'. --More specifically, Socrates' accusers cited his "failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges"⁶—that meaning gods such as Athena, who's garden was tended to within the walls of the Academy that his student, Plato, had established.

Socrates had publicly insisted on his theory of the Forms over and beyond what he believed to be the sometimes useful, but fundamentally metaphorical teachings of the local religion, which we now know as Greek Mythology. The State killed him for it. Whether or not he set himself up to be killed (as he has been supposed by some to be a proto-Christ⁷ figure) in opposition to Athenian democracy remains unclear. At any rate, the "bad conscience" that this garden of Athena certainly embodies 'within' the walls of the (body of) the Academy can also be read as a kind of haunting proto-echo of much Existentialist work that also served the movement of Phenomenology.

Little is 'clear' with respect to what Socrates actually said. He is more than less a 'character', in actuality a kind of ghost, spread across the evolving fictions or facts of Plato's pen⁸. For this, Plato's work as we read it today remains a slippery endeavor. Socrates was both the instructive real-life teacher, but also the constructed protagonist, of Plato's philosophical and literary endeavor.

⁶ Plato's, "Apology"

⁷ --almost as though he were already competing with Jesus Christ, the only Idealist more famous.

⁸ --and to a much lesser degree, the works of Xenophon and Aristophanes.

Though there are discernable differences between Plato's early, middle and late periods which the philosophical community tends to assume to be reflections of Plato's philosophical maturation (as it emerges to become semi-distinct from the thought of Socrates), we cannot actually know where the one mind ends and the other begins because they were both recorded by the same pen. This literary collapse or conflation of this ghost of an "other"—(who just happens to be the father of irony!)—into the conceptual architecture of his own philosophical 'son's' (student's) construction represents and embodies exactly the type of mind-boggling flux of appearance, meaning and authenticity with which modern Phenomenology is deeply concerned, and perhaps even confused.

To continue with the parallels, Socrates as a character represents the notion of the *other* from the core of his identity as it is formed through the development of his method: the Socratic method, otherwise known as the Elenchus. That his method of the Elenchus was itself both the form and the invention of irony should not be lost on us in this moment. It's almost too poignant. All the major 20th century Phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty) also claim that Phenomenology is, "not only worth doing, but that it aspires to be the method for philosophy."⁹ In that both the Elenchus and the methodology we know as Phenomenology are built on the (supposed) collapse of knowledge.

The relationship that history must grapple with between Socrates and Plato continues to generate an uncanny and literary strangeness that immediately calls into question (and to some degree throws out) the *location* of authorship along with the notion of *authenticity*. Shifting metaphors again, if we read Plato as the representation of a, or the, phenomenal (known) representation of Socrates' noumenal (unknown) position, we find with 20th century

⁹ Cerbone, David R., Understanding Phenomenology, (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006) pg. 134

Phenomenologists that all we have, actually, is the phenomena—and we're right back where we started.

In my opinion, Phenomenology's deepest roots are either victim to or the production of this particular literary heritage much more than is commonly acknowledged. Almost all of modern Phenomenology's primary concerns are played out like so much theatre across the actual life relationships between Socrates and Plato. No wonder the leap to Aristotle and Realism was necessitated by this scene. No wonder Phenomenologists in the 20th century begin by denouncing Plato. By denouncing Plato they turn him into *their* other—and so the wheel spins.

From the death of Socrates for denouncing the local gods, to the walling off of the Academy, built outside the city, to the entrapment within the Academy of the garden of the Goddess of Wisdom, to the character of Socrates as it evolves under the pen of Plato—it's all right there. As the story of what both captivates and motivates Phenomenology, it couldn't be written any better.

Now, to be clear, from Heidegger to Husserl over Hegel and back to Aristotle, there's no question that the conceptual genealogy of Phenomenology is based on a rejection of Plato and the embrace and development of a Realist position that ultimately falls out of Aristotle. While I am in no way trying to claim that that lineage is in question, I am merely trying to illuminate some of these strange and strangely parallel resemblances between the actual concerns of the 20th century Phenomenologists and the relationship between Socrates and Plato through the Academy. That the Phenomenologists self-identify as anti-Platonists only twists the point further home in as much as this can be read as a fundamentally ironic rejection of the man who invented irony—at which point I for one crack up. I find it hilarious.

In addition to the above, I think it might be important here to note that while Philosophy in general is notoriously poorly written, Plato's work is eminently readable—enjoyable even. It often reads very much like a good play, which makes sense given the dramatic circumstances of its origin.

By contrast, many other philosophers seem to be trying to either bore or contort us into submission with their torture of language. That Plato's work has an aesthetically attractive quality¹⁰ rhymes in a certain sense with the romanticism of his idea of the Forms as both, 'perfect', and, 'not here'. In my view, the '*not hereness*' of the 'reality' that he presents is entirely reflective of the ghost of Socrates that haunts his body of work as a whole.

What we read of Aristotle was not written by him directly, but are rather the compiled notes of his students¹¹. What we read of Aristotle is essentially a pile of papyrus notes that his students took, which might be somewhat out of order and/or poorly transcribed—we'll never know. Despite and because of all that, his work was so incredible that his fame eclipsed Plato almost completely for many hundreds of years. Compared to any other thinker who came before him, Aristotle's work is almost unimaginably impressive, both in its scope and cohesiveness. To paraphrase Heidegger, '*if you want to study philosophy, go read Aristototle for 10 or 15 years and then come back.*' Not by contrast, but in addition, I would say that if we want to grasp what Heidegger is getting at, we would do well to the story of Plato and Socrates in the context of the Akademia.

¹⁰ --not just today, but for centuries Plato's work has appealed to readers on an aesthetic level.

¹¹ --the ghost of Socrates and his student again...