

James, William and the Phenomenology of Religious Experience



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James, Brentano, and Husserl

William James is widely known as the father of American psychology and a leading American philosopher. Religious studies scholars also know him as a founding father of their field. Surprisingly, however, James's vital contributions to the development of phenomenology, in general, and the phenomenology of religious experience, in particular, are virtually unknown or overlooked. Nevertheless, historically, James influenced phenomenologists Franz Brentano and Carl Stumpf and, in turn, Edmund Husserl himself.

Edmund Husserl was a German phenomenologist who worked in the early twentieth century. He is typically credited with founding the contemporary phenomenological tradition. Scholarship on the topic has shown that Husserl's development of the phenomenological method was

inspired by his teacher, Franz Brentano, as well the work of William James. Although the term "phenomenology" had already appeared in German philosophy in the works of Johann Heinrich Lambert and Immanuel Kant, it did not find widespread notoriety as a method until it was spread rapidly by Brentano's students. In Brentano's school of thought, phenomenology was conceived of as descriptive psychology. One of the earliest known uses of the word in that sense appears in a version of Brentano's notes for a course he offered in 1888. The course notes bear the title "Descriptive Phenomenology," although he later changed the title to "Descriptive Psychology" (Rollinger 2009).

Edmund Husserl studied under Brentano from 1884 until 1886 and liberally acknowledged his influence, praising Brentano as his "one and only teacher in philosophy" (Spiegelberg 1971). Through Brentano's connections, Husserl also studied under Carl Stumpf at the University of Halle at Wittenberg, Germany, beginning in 1886. Stumpf had met William James in Prague and the two men nurtured a lifelong friendship. After years of correspondence with James, Stumpf suggested to Husserl that he should read James's work, *The Principles of Psychology*. Husserl read *The Principles* extensively and came to greatly admire James's work. In the opening sentences of his 1904/05 lecture series, Husserl writes that James was a figure "whom I still study and from whom I have experienced strong momentum" (Husserl 2007). Recent scholarship

shows how the connection between James and Husserl helps illuminate the phenomenological structures in James's work (Meierdiercks and Snarey 2016).

James's Phenomenological Approach

William James scholar James Edie acknowledged that the intrinsic and logically necessary convergences between James's work and the work of the phenomenologists show that they "make contributions to what is, in essential respects, the same program; that they hold fundamental doctrines in common; and that these doctrines are thus intrinsically and necessarily fated to the same philosophical triumph or failure" (Edie 1987). Edie believed that James strongly influenced the development of these fundamental doctrines that were to become essential to phenomenology. Meierdiercks and Snarey (2016) supported these findings and showed that James presented distinct methodological similarities with early phenomenology in that he sought to return to experience and investigate states of consciousness and how their objects in a manner that is true to how they appear.

The following sections detail a few ideas central to the phenomenological approach, and their appearance can be traced to James's phenomenological investigation of religious experience described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. *The Varieties* was groundbreaking in its approach to describing religious experience through a psychological, as well as phenomenological, lens. In *The Varieties*, James carries out the psychological and phenomenological method that he began in *The Principles*. This approach is called the "phenomenological psychology of religion" by scholars such as Franklin Davis Duncan (1974) and Meierdiercks and Snarey (2016).

Experience and Intentionality

For James, experience is a dynamic "stream of concepts, images, intuitions, feelings and intimations, much of which may only tantalize our awareness at the fringe, but which colors and tints the whole of our experience in pervasive

and profound ways" (Blum 2015). This conception of a "stream of concepts" includes an argument for the intentionality of experience. Following James and Brentano, Husserl characterizes experience as intentional as well, emphasizing the necessity for any act of consciousness to be a consciousness *of* something. Religious experiences often involve a vague, ineffable dimension of experience, and thus its inclusion is significant in broadening the understanding of what one can investigate phenomenologically. James did not shy away from those experiences in his formulation of intentionality.

When James began to collect personal testimonies and various source materials for the formation of his lectures, he intended to describe religious experience in a methodological manner while staying true to the richness of those experiences so that we might understand what makes religious experience identifiable as such. In his lecture "Circumscription of the Topic," James writes, "The essence of religious experiences, the thing by which we finally must judge them, must be that element or quality in them which we can meet nowhere else" (James 1902/2002). For *The Varieties*, James considered as data the numerous personal accounts of religious experience. Edie notes that "William James's greatest single contribution to the study of religious experience was to show us how it could be found, delineated, and defined in a manner which would remain faithful to the uniqueness, the primordially and the intrinsic complexity of the experience itself" (Edie 1987). Part of this faithfulness to experience is James's analysis of several experiences which may not have otherwise been typified as religious. Throughout *The Varieties*, James considers as religious experience "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the Divine" (James 1902/2002).

The Natural Attitude and the Epoché

Consciousness of the transcendent and the question of God's existence were issues that occupied James's mind throughout his life (Bridgers and Snarey 2003). However, in *The Varieties*, James

brackets the question of God's existence. This bracketing is an approach that would become typical of Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl critiqued the positivistic sciences for failing to reflect upon their epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions. The presuppositions that Husserl argues we must take into account include our beliefs that reality is independent of the mind and independent of experience. He argued that we must bracket these beliefs in order to examine our experiences as they are given to us in experience. Husserl identifies this act of bracketing as the phenomenological "epoché." This bracketing allows the investigator to reconsider the world in the phenomenological attitude. James's method features a similar move towards a presuppositionless focus on phenomena as they are given. As John Drabinski writes, "Both James and Husserl express the following philosophical sentiment: The dualism at work in the modern period rests on abstractions, and these abstractions can be undercut if one properly examines one's lived-experience in its immediacy" (Drabinski 1993).

In *The Varieties*, James recognizes his responsibility to bracket presuppositions and embrace the phenomenological attitude. James's method shows that he is setting aside the natural attitude as well as his own beliefs and presuppositions to focus solely on the religious experience as described by the one who experienced it. James works to set apart the experience of the individual from questions about the factual nature of the theology behind the experience. To James, it is unimportant whether his reader believes in a god or even whether the individuals he is studying believed in a god. This perspective allows him to gather accounts of experience and analyze them without letting prejudices or pre-existing theological judgments interfere (Meierdiercks and Snarey 2016). James writes that from his "experiential point of view," one must identify even godless or quasi-godless creeds as religions according to the individual's understanding of what he or she considers divine. Thus, he does not investigate the origins of the phenomena or their possible purpose. James is interested in the experience of them: how they appear to us. This is the core of his phenomenological approach.

Essences

By examining intentional experience in this way, the phenomenologist works from examples of real, concrete, life-world experiences towards recognition of what constitutes them and how we recognize them as such. Husserl writes that phenomenology is ultimately concerned with being a "descriptive eidetic doctrine of transcendently pure mental processes as viewed in the phenomenological attitude" (Husserl 1983). Similarly, James's investigations begin with personal accounts of experience and then attempt to move towards the essential elements of those experiences. James's search for the essential qualities of religious experience culminates in the final few chapters of *The Varieties*. James writes that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, while all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (James 1902/2002). This flimsy screen parts when one is overtaken by a mystical experience. James describes the mystical experience as having four markers that justify our recognition of it as mystical. The first two marks, ineffability and noetic quality, are nearly always present in mystical experiences. The experience imparts a sense of gained knowledge upon the person experiencing it. James notes that this noetic quality carries with it a sense of authority for the person and a feeling of significance and importance that is difficult to detail. James writes, "No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it contains" (James 1902/2002).

The other two qualities that are nearly always present, but less distinctive than the first two, are transiency and passivity. The mystical state of consciousness comes upon the subject without their solicitation and cannot be solicited by repetition of circumstances. James notes that some practices may make one more conducive to bringing on a state of mystical experience, but that it cannot be controlled. The experiences are fleeting, rarely as long as half an hour, beyond which they "fade into the light of common day" (James 1902/2002). Their presence and quality can be

remembered vaguely after time, and yet in their recurrence, there is an immediate recognition of their connectivity and continuous development upon the individual. James's chapters on mysticism, as well as being the clearest markers for his phenomenological method, show clearly what James suggested at the beginning of *The Varieties*: that a religious experience forms religions in the first place.

In sum, James paved the way for a phenomenological psychology of the magnitude that Husserl pursued. Further, religious experience is central to James's investigation of religion, and his phenomenological approach continues to enrich contemporary religious studies.

See Also

- ▶ [Consciousness](#)
- ▶ [Daseinanalysis](#)
- ▶ [Heidegger, Martin](#)
- ▶ [James, William](#)
- ▶ [Phenomenological Psychology](#)
- ▶ [Religious Experience](#)

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