

Phenomenology, Existentialism and Process Work

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Abstract

To understand a discipline, you must know its history. Process Work is a discipline, in the way it follows a particular paradigm, it has boundaries and it is inculcated through learning and internship. There is an apparent absence of theory perplexing interns and new members. Many members after years of experience still look for a basis of process work in this or that framework. Some look at ancient Indian treatises on Yoga to discover a link with Process Work. There is a need to grasp this phenomenon of looking for theoretical validation.

I suggest, both Phenomenology and Existentialism provide the basic toolkit for the discipline of process work. Both have a philosophical under-pinning and a methodology to follow. Both originated in a particular epoch of human history and hence their study would reveal important dimensions of the discipline of Process Work. First, the historical roots would clarify the broader role of Process Work in society. Secondly the philosophical roots would illuminate many of the rituals that we follow in Process Work. Thirdly the methodological features of both Existentialism and Phenomenology would help practitioners to be aware of and sensitive to the boundary conditions for the practice of the discipline.

Introduction

Process work is an applied discipline. I was exposed to it nearly a quarter century ago thanks to Prof Pulin Garg. Then I completed my internship at the ripe age of 49 and started as a resource person and later as a facilitator. Through these stages along with work in small groups and large community, there were a few concept sessions, many reviews and reflections. In facilitation, there were faculty building, evening meetings, and faculty closure. There were also metalabs. So I went through an intricate system of experiences, and yet there was no manual or textbook of Process Work. I never felt the need for it, as the dictum of ‘Learning from Living’ was firmly imprinted on my mind. Of course, I had heard the terms, ‘phenomenological’ and ‘existential’ and saw them as constituting levels of experience below that of the transactional or interpersonal one. But I didn’t give much thought to the origin of these terms. Instead I turned to Samkhya, since Pulin had mentioned it more than once as one of the sources of Process work paradigm.

What struck me in Samkhya, was the direct and forthright claim made in favour of Discriminative Knowledge of the manifest, the unmanifest and the cogniser/knower of the spirit. Only such knowledge can help overcome the three kinds of pain that is a part of the human condition and not the scriptural knowledge. Here is the most ancient school of philosophy talking about the knowledge of the self as a means of overcoming pain and suffering. It then goes into describing properties of matter and spirit and the ways of extricating spirit from the labyrinth of matter. Samkhya identified the triad of internal organs, Will, I-Principle and Mind, as the key to discriminating the subtle difference between the Experience and the Experiencer.

Discriminative knowledge is an everflowing current and not a reservoir of collected water, which scriptural knowledge is.

In turning to a study of Samkhya, I was also trying to find legitimacy and authority for the practice of Process Work. An ancient source has this quality of sounding eternal and mystical to me. It also establishes me as a descendant in an unbroken line of hallowed tradition. It does something to my worth as a practitioner of a discipline. In the process I get drawn into the world of conventions with its own rules for assigning importance to things. I presented a paper at an Aastha conference about Samkhya and felt good that I had brought it to the notice of other process workers. Though it was not on my mind, but the feeling arose from getting noticed for it.

Sanskritization

This is not only an individual phenomenon, but there seems to be also a collective one that goes nearer a process called Sanskritization, first identified by an eminent sociologist MN Srinivas. In its original form, it refers to a tendency among the lower castes in India to raise their proximity to a higher status. “ The lower castes seem to have always tried to take over the customs and ways of life of the higher castes.” Sanskritization also means the adoption of (new) ideas and values, which have been expounded in Sanskritic Literature. For instance, Gurgaon, which supposedly stood much lower than Delhi in its status index, tried to gain respectability by renaming itself as Gurugram. In our case, a search for roots in ancient (Sanskrit) literature seems to be driven by a need to provide legitimacy and authority to the practice of Process work. Ancient works exude

an aura of timeless wisdom and hence carry for many Indians unquestionable and undisputed authority.

Pulin also used to mention that the Process Work practised by him was a blend of Indian and Western philosophies. He never cared to explain the particular schools that had come to be blended. Perhaps he didn't want both attention and interest to be diverted from the central tenet of "learning from living." Process work by its nature is a discipline that evolves from a way of life. It is not a pedantic or scholastic pursuit. But as a discipline that aims to serve both the participants and the practitioner, Process Work has a strong connect with some philosophical schools, Samkhya of the East and Phenomenology and Existentialism of the West. In his persona, Pulin represented the blend very well. His dress and diet were Indian, the language he used would alternate between Hindi and English and he was fond of the latest technology. And he had an independent and original view of life and matters and it was fluid, not frozen.

Westernization

Concepts and frameworks in western theories are notable for their rigorous definitions and clarity. Also Western theories are known over large parts of the world unlike most Sanskrit sources. For these two reasons of clarity and spread, western theories become attractive to those of us who like structure and stature. Structure promises reduction of anxiety and standing by a Western theory seems to enhance stature in the eyes of the Westernized world. Our corporate sector in India too leans heavily on Western theories. It is my experience and I have seen it in other colleagues of mine too. There is a thin line separating the usage of concepts to clarify aspects of own experience from their usage *as experience*. Take the term *motivation* for

instance. My motivation in writing this paper is to clarify for myself the work of Heidegger, with which I have struggled for many years. I am not happy with the outcome. Colleagues in Aastha prodded me to write. Did they motivate me? That's an additional reason to focus on the problem and share its outcome with a knowledgeable audience. Again the motive is to enhance my understanding, which can happen better in this setting. In saying 'they motivated me', I simply use the concept without clarifying what the motivation was. So the important thing is whether I use concepts in the unfolding of my experience or in folding it up neatly. In the latter case I use concepts to validate my experience, while in the former it is my experience that also validates the concepts.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a discipline in philosophy is concerned with the study of how we experience things and is closely connected with meanings which things have in (my) subjective experience. For instance, "Research" has a conceptual meaning of 'addition to knowledge', while the phenomenon of research is experienced by many as a frustrating struggle to arrive at provisional truth. The important feature of the discipline is to study conscious experience from the first person point of view. This was brought out by the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, through his two treatises published in the first decades of the twentieth century. Thus each person would have *his/her* way of looking at the object, conceptualising and understanding it. This simple notion that people understand and experience things in their subjective ways can pose grave challenges before power structures that do not brook dissidence. Dissidence arises from people who experience things in ways different from those of the establishment. The question of separating the object from our experience of that object led Husserl to locate the

world of objects and focus on our experiences. His one time student, Heidegger took Phenomenology to another level by arguing that the being that experienced things was always present in the world. Heidegger wrote his first famous work, *Being and Time* in 1927, within a decade of the end of the World War I, the first earth shaking chain of events in the history of mankind. Science and Technology were not showing us the ideal truth; rather they were being deployed by us for our own ends. For Heidegger therefore the being that experienced things was of primary concern. There is, according to him, a consciousness of things in the phenomena experienced and also a consciousness of itself, which is pre-reflective. Consciousness, according to Husserl, reaches out to the world of objects with intentionality. We look, but never without intentionality. There is a purpose we carry that connects us to everything that we see, do and think. Heidegger's Being is more a field or region, fluid, dynamic and free-floating rather than a fixed or stable entity like the one conveyed by the term, personality. This field holds and has space to hold different ways in which we think of ourselves and other human beings. It has room for contradictions and many such rooms. For Heidegger, man as Dasein, "Being-in-the-world", is necessarily involved in both authentic and inauthentic modes of ek-sistence."

The phenomenological methods that came to be practiced concerned their search with the way participants in any situation experienced things, made sense of their context and thought about the choices before them. It led to the notion that each actor in a situation might have his or her version of the situation experienced by them. Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* presented multiple versions of reality in a dramatic manner and became one of the all time great films. For those who wield power, it may come as a rude shock that their subjects are people, who experience their rule quite differently.

The period of early twentieth century saw the rise of the Industrial Society, which deployed technology for improving the standard of living through mass production of goods and services. In all aspects, it moved toward becoming a Mass Society: mass production, mass education, mass media, mass entertainment. It created and pursued a vision of Modernity that would organize life in efficient, rational and consistent ways. The two World Wars however brought out the wide gulf between the Vision and the practice as also the conflict of interest among industrial powers. The war, the genocide and the massive destruction of life also shook up the credibility of leaders everywhere.

The French philosopher, Sartre, took the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger on a different plane. He was taken a prisoner of war in World War II and started writing his *Being and Nothingness*, which was published in 1943. For him, the being or the sense of self was the continuing flow of outcomes of sequences of acts of consciousness. He also included radically free choices in the acts of consciousness.

Existentialism

In his famous lecture, *Existentialism is Humanism*, (1946) Sartre explained his position that *existence* came before *essence*. What he meant was that man first exists, engages with the world and then comes to define what his essence is. “ Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism,’ said Sartre in his lecture. The consequence, Sartre explained, was that existentialism “places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders”. He goes on to say that personal choices do not

remain individual but concern all of us in many ways. That further enhances the sense of responsibility. This is extremely important for Sartre, since 'from the moment that (man) is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.' Heidegger used the term 'abandonment' to signify this state in which human beings find themselves. It implies, 'we ourselves decide our being'. One implication of this realisation is that we create our reality by acting upon our choices, conscious or otherwise. Our choices, our actions and 'undertakings' cumulatively create our life.

For Sartre and the existentialists, there is no human essence that can be considered fundamental. There is no human nature that can be conceptualised in any generalised way. There are no natural human types. What can be generalized is the basic human condition: that human beings are thrown into this world to be on their own and they constitute themselves through a series of choices they make at every step. So in understanding the human, we focus on the particular, specific and concrete aspects of human behaviour. Values, beliefs, meanings and principles are neither divine nor natural but are product of human actions. This understanding restores to human beings the full subjecthood of this life and the world.

The Existentialist view has two more important aspects. First, existentialism views the human being from the point of his *being* and *acting* in the world. These actions and interactions lead to the formation of "essence". (Heidegger does not accept the notion of "essence", since in his view the question of 'essence' does not arise for a Being that is constantly in the process of being in the world.) This means that a human being can be understood in terms of acting and interacting with others who constitute her environment. Secondly, even actions of single individuals can have larger significance, in that they show how the human condition is dealt with

in a concrete way. But this is not the same thing as a universal quality or value, to be imposed on masses. For instance, a college dropout sets up a venture and builds a startup enterprise, which grows over the years into a big corporation. He becomes an instance of a possibility but not a pathway to success.

Post War World

Together phenomenologists and existentialists created the ground for restoring the primacy of the human being and human experience, removing the influence imposed on them through religion and power structures. The end of World War II had nurtured the hope for lasting World Peace, but the Atom Bomb and its aftermath led to armed conflict in South-East Asia, arms race and the cold war. Common people in the Far East, Europe and the US had borne the brunt of war in terms of destruction of life and property. In the late sixties, they rose in protest against the repressive policies of their respective governments, disregarding calls for Conscription (in US), slashing of expenditure on Education while supporting Indo China War (in France) and for Civil Rights movement in the US. Liberation from state repression was the most common current in all these protests. The underlying theme was that people's experience of war held primacy over declarations of national interest and patriotic intent by political and religious leaders.

Of the various dissenting groups such as the New Left and the Civil Rights movement in the US, it was the Hippies who tried to create their alternative mode of living outside established social and political orthodoxy, emphasizing the values of peace, love and personal freedom. It is important to note that Pulin's years at Berkeley were marked by the rise of the Hippy movement

there. Hippies were described by some scholars as 'seekers of meaning and value.' This seeking had its origins in the influence cast by Existentialist currents of thought originating in Europe. At the same time, Hippies showed great interest in Eastern religious traditions which centred on personal spiritual experience. These included Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism. The famous Hippie trail took thousands of Hippies by overland route to Goa, Kovalam and Kathmandu in the quest for such experiences. The movement and its legacy had wide and varied ramifications for the Western society in terms of social institutions like marriage, sexuality, art, fashion, personal computers, open source technology and sustainable development.

Philosophy and practice of the discipline

Our process work takes place in groups which are constituted from participants and facilitators. They sit with the participants at the same level. Importantly, facilitators make sense of participants' sharing from their own being, which means they share their data and their meanings. These are not prescriptions. It is important to note that our way of process work recognises and hence squarely places the responsibility of our life on our respective shoulders. So prescriptions have no place. In fact they would stand in the way of an authentic mode of living. The principle of responsibility comes into play very early in the life of a group, when facilitators wait for participants to claim their space. Claiming the space has many implications. At one level it is to open up to the world and accept one's human existence as one of being in the world. At another, it is to take responsibility for what happens to me as an active agent. It makes me reflect as well on the role of passive recipient that I may have grown used to. There may lie a whole universe of passivity, aggression, fear, compliance, conformity and

powerlessness. I may also get in touch with my choices of location and identity as I wait for invitations.

The process of experiencing, making meanings, sharing and making choices is always on. I may not be in touch with it. Then I may slip into inauthentic mode of living, by attributing to others the source of my actions, feelings and suffering. In process work programmes, various community sessions may bring me to the realisation that the process is always on. This happens when my alter ego speaks up to articulate my unstated feelings and choices. The alter ego speaks of her experience from my location. She remains true to her experience. I may become aware of what I am doing and how.

The sharing and reflections in the group are at the core of Process Work. To open up to the world is to accept one's reality without reservations and claim both the freedom and responsibility to be oneself. I have to own up myself as a human being in front of all power structures without feeling guilt or shame, for that is what I am in all truth and humility. Secondly, it also means that my reality is both mine and that of my world consisting of others. It is so because my being is always the being-in-the-world. The way they experience life can illuminate some aspects of my experience which have remained hidden from me. Thirdly and equally importantly, the group setting also serves to reiterate the phenomenological view of communication. My statements will be received by others in the way they interpret them according to their frames and the converse is true. To relate to others is to share my meanings and their source in my experience and to do the same with their meanings and experience.

The group setting of Process Work also is based on the notion that the Being is always a Being in the World, or as Sartre would say, 'I am always placed in an interpersonal situation'. I get a truer grasp of where I am and what and who I am, when in front of the world.

The existential position is that I make myself through my actions in the world. Acting the withheld is the acid test of taking charge of life. I have to make my choices and stand up for them. It also means that I take responsibility for the consequences of my actions. Two steps that I take in that direction are more crucial than two miles that I may traverse on being pushed by others. Hence it is of vital importance in Process work that the participant chooses to act in his or her own way and face the consequences. Suggestions, advice, invitations and prodding are likely to be counterproductive at this stage. Many participants want Process work to give solutions to their problems. That would go counter to the aim of Authentic action in the existential sense. What it would reinforce is the same pattern of depending on others to show the way to lead my life. Of course, there are situations that would call for counselling and therapy, but then we do not regard such individuals to be ready at those times to participate in Process work settings.

Prof Garg and Process Work

Prof Pulin Garg (Pulin, hereafter) combined these several strands in his Being and ventured out to offer it (his being) in a unique blend of Process Work. His life was not different from his work. That is why the blend of Samkhya, Phenomenology and Existentialism was organic in him and not a contrived one. In him I did not find either the tendency toward Sanskritization or

Westernization, to which I referred earlier. In a sense, both processes are artificial and run the risk of being inauthentic.

At the base was his insistence on validation of human experience. My experience of phenomena is valid for me and does not need validation from any external source. I do not depend on any theory or expert to figure out the meaning for me. I am willing to look at it and uncover both different parts of it laterally and different layers vertically. But what I accept is entirely left to me. Here authenticity as a value comes to the forefront. I can truly voice what I experience in a space that is safe for me at a given juncture. I have seen Pulin insist on participants' sharing their meaning of a particular phenomenon. If it was too abstract, he would consult a dictionary, but never regard it as the Ultimate meaning. I remember an occasion when we had organized a private Mushaira (poetry recital) at IMDR. I was hesitant to read out my poetry, since I was quite diffident about its literary merit. He insisted that all present should read their own poetry and learn to take whatever consequences follow. That was the first time I read out my own poems.

Pulin explicitly termed the different levels of touching an experience as Phenomenological and Existential. From the interpersonal or transactional events and happenings, follow our experiences of self, others and the world. Our experiences are in terms of our thoughts, feelings and actions. The Husserlian notion of 'intentionality of consciousness' is applied in Process Work in the question, where are you in it. We have some intentionality connecting to every experience.

At the next level of existentialism, Pulin created a blend of different insights. My experiences of transactions could be good, bad and or ugly and also repeatable or avoidable or worthy of neglect. But these are from a chosen location. I am either in front, in the thick of it or in the background or periphery of happenings and so on. Then comes another layer of choice. What made me choose that location? Here Pulin used the concept of identity from psychoanalytic field, but again in a different way. Identity has two dimensions: what I see myself to be and what I see the world wanting me to be. Thus I may have multiple identities, and some of them are not quite familiar to me, although I can see them operating in some way. Again incorporating Heidegger's notion of Dasein (Being in the world), Pulin proposed that identities are not frozen, but can find their own rhythm and life. It's for the individual to take charge. He would often refer to things as in a flux. Pulin's idea of Process Work centred round exploring roots of experience in the location and identity that people choose consciously or unconsciously as they went through life. Exploration of the intrapersonal world distinguished Pulin's work from other process work.

Transition from state A to state B was a mechanical concept. What happened in life was better captured by the term transience, in which things emerged from the merging of several streams and created something unique. Any intervention that you make in state A is going to interact with the phenomenological world of others and they are going to react and respond to the interventions in their own way. The sumtotal would hardly be the desired state B that you set out to create. The outcome would be transient or emergent.

Heidegger and Sartre accepted the notion of the world. Pulin made a distinction in the level of proximity and used the terms 'system' and 'collectivity' to denote the difference. But in both

cases he stuck to the phenomenological position that both the system and the collectivity were constructed by the individual from and through his experience. What is out there is known only through what I have made of them in here. Was Pulin conservative in social matters? Was he influenced by the Hippie movement? He did not have much faith in the Establishment, but he cared for institutions, which to him were the values and beliefs people cherished and practised.

Our discipline of Process Work is based on the paradigmatic framework of Phenomenology and Existentialism. Its broad aim of humanization is based on the tenets of Samkhya, which advocates the deployment of one's discriminating intellect above everything else to distinguish between the real and the apparent.

In the words of the great Argentinian thinker and teacher, Silo, the broad aims of the Humanization project are, "It is to surpass pain and suffering; it is to learn without limits; it is to love the reality you build."

There is no path but there is a territory open for exploration. Safety is cultivated by co-holding the boundaries of the space in which exploration takes place. These subtle aspects are a muted expression of concern and dignity for the human being. The faith is in Learning from Living. This is in short the legacy Prof Garg left us.

This brief tour of the provinces in which our type of Process Work is located would hopefully clarify the historical roots of our discipline and help Process workers in its creative practice.

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