

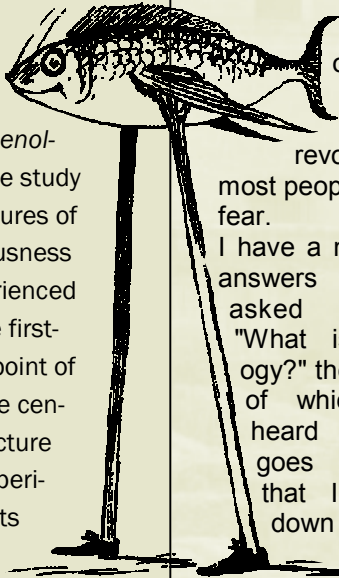
# A4ria

## P H E N O M E N O L O G Y

F A B R I Z I O P A L O M B I O N G I A N - C A R L O R O T A A N D H I S D E F I N I T I O N S O F P H E N O M E N O L O G Y

### DEFINITION OF THE WEEK

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object.



Very few people are able to understand phenomenology. The basic message of phenomenology is simple, but far too revolutionary, and most people reject it out of fear.

I have a number of stock answers I use when asked the question, "What is phenomenology?" the most shocking of which I probably heard from Rota. It goes without saying that I had to tone down Rota's language, as in the sentence:

**"Phenomenology is the formalization of context dependence."** For some time I believed this answer comes close to the truth, but one day Rota destroyed it for me. After singing the praises of "formalization" for ump-

teen years, one day without any warning he turned around and started claiming that no one knows what the word "formalization" means. It was back to square one for me.

As a backup, I picked up another of his "definitions" of phenomenology: **"Phenomenology is the most extreme form of realism."** Again, I made use of this second definition for a while to get rid of embarrassing questioners, until one day I realized — this time without Rota's help — that I did not have an inkling of what the word "realism" means. How do you convince a hardened materialist who believes that the only reality there is is the reality of atoms and molecules that he is not being realistic? How do you find his Achilles' heel? What is the answer to this ques-

tion, Mr. Rota?

Rota told me one day that people are inexorably subdivided into two kinds: materialists and transcendentalists. If you are born a materialist, there is nothing phenomenology can do for you. No amount of phenomenological argument will convince you of the absurdity of materialism. So far, so good. Next, he turns against the transcendentalists. If you are born a transcendentalist, you are likely to find phenomenology to be the statement of trivialities. Does this mean that you do not need phenomenology? "Hardly," says Rota. **"Phenomenology must be used to stop the transcendentalist from becoming overly transcendental."**

### S T R I P O F T H E W E E K

