Concerning the Phenomenological Methods of Husserl and Heidegger
and their Application in Psychology

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Introduction

It is fairly well recognized that Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) were the two giants of phenomenological philosophy during the 20th century. The beginning of the movement took place, of course, with Husserl’s publication of his Logical Investigations, and Heidegger was his student who likewise first achieved worldwide fame in the twenties and thirties of the last century. Husserl was a mathematician, logician, epistemologist, and basically a philosopher interested in grounding theoretical and scientific knowledge. Heidegger, while touching upon scientific thought and the arts in his writings, was primarily motivated to think about the question of being and was interested in articulating issues related to fundamental ontology. Both thinkers claimed to use the phenomenological method: Husserl consistently, and Heidegger initially in terms of nomenclature, but what evolved for him as a method seemed radically different from what Husserl described. Because Husserl was a logician and an epistemologist, he was interested in grounding secure knowledge and because of his invention and use of the phenomenological reduction, he gave priority to careful description. Interpretation was, for Husserl, an articulation of the given object that was relevant to the experience, but not limited to the strictly given. For Heidegger, the question of being dominated his thinking, and since he traced the question of being back to Dasein, the being who raises the question of being, and discovered that Dasein has to interpret the meaning of being, Heidegger gives priority to interpretation. For him, “the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation.” So, for Heidegger, at least with respect to research into Being, priority is given to interpretation, and description is a type of interpretation.

But our purpose in this article is not philosophical investigation, but investigations at the level of human science. Since psychologists have already adapted both Husserl’s and Heidegger’s methods for psychological purposes, it is at the scientific level that we want to examine the legitimacy and the adequacy of both methods, i.e., according to how they were adapted.
**Husserl’s Phenomenological Method**

Husserl’s goal was to try to establish secure philosophical and scientific knowledge, and so he realized that his point of departure had to be consciousness, since, without it, nothing more could be achieved with respect to knowledge. He also realized that there were obstacles to careful descriptions and so he invented some strategies to help achieve careful, precise descriptions. Husserl’s method involves three steps: (a) One assumes the transcendental phenomenological attitude, (b) one brings to consciousness an instance of the phenomenon to be explored, whether actual or fictional, and with the help of free imaginative variation, one intuits the essence of the phenomenon being investigated, and (c) one carefully describes the essence that has been discovered.

With Husserl’s method, the key step is the first one—the assumption of the transcendental phenomenological attitude. To assume the transcendental perspective means to adopt an attitude of consciousness that transcends the orientation toward the human mode of being conscious and that is also free from worldly and empirical assumptions. To be in the phenomenological attitude means two things: performing the *epoché* (or “bracketing”) and the reduction, which refrains from positing the existence of whatever is given. To bracket means to put aside all knowledge of the phenomenon being explored or investigated that is not due to the actual instance of this phenomenon. Thus all past knowledge derived from readings or other secondary sources, as well as one’s former personal experiences with the phenomenon, are meant to be excluded. The reduction refers to the fact that one has to refrain from positing the existence of the given that is encountered as normally happens in the natural attitude. One considers the given, even if it is real, simply as something present to one’s consciousness without affirming that it exists in the way that it presents itself. It is taken to be something present to one’s consciousness—a phenomenon, not a reality. It is a reduction from existence to presence.

To employ imaginative variation means that one imaginatively varies different aspects of the phenomenon to which one is present in order to determine which aspects are essential to the appearance of the phenomenon and which are contingent. If the imaginative elimination of an aspect causes the phenomenon to collapse, then that aspect is essential. If, on the other hand, the variation of an aspect of the given hardly changes what is presented, then that aspect is not essential. Once the essential features of the phenomenon have been determined, they are carefully described. This means that nothing is to be added to or subtracted from what is actually present to consciousness. The descriptive task is a strict one.

Now, every feature of the above method can be transferred to the psychological level except the adoption of the transcendental attitude, although other modifications have to be added, in order to do research in a phenomenological psychological way. Instead of the transcendental reduction, the phenomenological psychological reduction is performed, which Husserl acknowledges to be a legitimate variation. This means that while the objects...
of consciousness are still taken to be phenomena, i.e., presences, the acts of consciousness to which they are related are seen as belonging to a human, world-related consciousness. In other words, it is construed as a consciousness that is affected by the world and the body which is the condition for consciousness at the psychological level of functioning.

The modifications to be added to the Husserlian method for psychological purposes are (a) the descriptions to be analyzed are obtained from others, who remain within the natural attitude, but the researcher does assume the phenomenological psychological reduction, (b) one tries to determine the psychological essence of the phenomenon rather than its philosophical essence—or, the psychological perspective is adopted first and then the essence, or the most invariant meaning structure for a specific context, is determined with respect to that perspective—(c) the imaginative variations that are employed are done in dialogue with the empirical variations that are given in the descriptive data, and (d) the eidetic structure that is discovered and described is considered to be typical rather than universal. All of the modifications that are mentioned are responses to the demands of contemporary scientific practices.

I shall not explicate this method further. The concrete steps have been specified elsewhere along with many examples. With respect to the purpose of this article, I think that the phenomenological character of the method as employed in psychology is fairly evident. It follows Husserl as strictly as possible: it uses intuition, it is descriptive, it acknowledges eidetic findings and it employs the pretranscendental reduction along with imaginative variation.

**Heidegger’s Phenomenological Method**

Heidegger claims to work within a phenomenological perspective although his sense of method is quite different from Husserl’s. As stated, his purpose in his philosophy is the pursuit of the question of being. The question of being leads Heidegger to the realm of the a priori. He writes: “The term denoting this character by which being precedes beings is the expression a priori, apriority, being earlier or prior. As a priori, being is earlier than beings.” Because of the a priori nature of the question of being, Heidegger is led to phenomenology. He writes:

The a priori character of being and of all the structures of being accordingly calls for a specific kind of approach and way of apprehending being—a priori cognition. The basic components of a priori cognition constitute what we call phenomenology. Phenomenology is the name for the method of ontology, that is, of scientific philosophy. Rightly conceived, phenomenology is the concept of a method.
Thus, for Heidegger, phenomenology is primarily a method and he employs it almost exclusively in order to articulate and clarify the phenomenon of being.

Heidegger then demonstrates that he understands Husserl’s concept of the phenomenological reduction because he states its meaning correctly. He also states that in an ontological investigation, one always has to access some being first, but then the investigation is led away from a specific being and directed toward its being. His specific words are:

> We call this basic component of phenomenological method—the leading back or re-duction of investigative vision from a naively apprehended being to being—*phenomenological reduction*. We are thus adopting a central term of Husserl’s phenomenology in its literal wording though not its substantive intent. . . . *For us* phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the being of this being (projecting upon the way it is unconcealed).

Thus, at least at the philosophical or ontological level of analysis, Heideggerian philosophy requires a reduction. But Heidegger’s sense of phenomenological investigation requires more than that. Heidegger also says that the reduction from beings to being requires that “we should bring ourselves forward toward being itself. . . . It must always be brought to view in a free projection.” He calls this step “phenomenological construction.” But since there is a long history of ontological thinking, Heidegger adds that

> there necessarily belongs to the conceptual interpretation of being and its structures. . . . a *destruction*—a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are de-constructed down to the sources from which they were drawn.

Thus, the phenomenological method for Heidegger consists of reduction, construction, and destruction, with the special meanings assigned to these terms in his philosophy.

Some other comments are required in order to get a better sense of Heidegger’s understanding of his method. We mentioned above that Heidegger conceives of phenomenology as a method. He further states:

> The word [phenomenology] informs us of the “how” with which what is to be treated in this science gets exhibited and handled. To have a science “of” phenomena means to grasp its objects in such a way that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly.
It is here that Heidegger gives a special meaning to description as well. He claims that it has more of a sense of prohibition rather than a positive sense. He states that description means “the avoidance of characterizing anything without such a demonstration.”\textsuperscript{13} He explicitly states that description for phenomenology as he understands it does not mean the type of procedures that are used in positive or human sciences, whereby language is used to articulate the objects of study. What then is it about a phenomenon that phenomenologists want to see? For Heidegger it is “any exhibiting of an entity as it shows itself in itself.”\textsuperscript{14} He calls that expression the formal definition of phenomenology, but then he wants to give it a better phenomenological sense by deforming the term. Heidegger then states:

What is it that must be called a “phenomenon” in a distinctive sense: What is it that by its very essence is necessarily the theme whenever we exhibit something explicitly? Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and ground. Yet that which remains hidden in an egregious sense . . . [is] the Being of entities.\textsuperscript{15}

Because of this hiddenness, or the “covered-up-ness” which Heidegger calls “the counter-concept to ‘phenomenon,’”\textsuperscript{16} interpretation is required and therefore a hermeneutic becomes necessary. This hermeneutic turns to Dasein, since Dasein is the being that has some understanding of what it means to be. Being is somewhat uncovered to Dasein and the hermeneutic task is to tie into that uncovering movement. Yet, for Heidegger, Being is for the most part hidden, even to Dasein, and so phenomenology must be a hermeneutics.

There seems, to me, to be some ambiguities in how Heidegger presents his phenomenological method. Even though the philosophical method is not the theme of this article, I do wonder how Heidegger resolves the tension between the free projection required of Dasein and the accuracy required for depicting what is exhibited “as it shows itself in itself.” In any case, my interest is in how the method is taken over and used by psychologists. The book that seems to have taken up most deliberately a Heideggerian perspective in psychology is one by Packer and Addison,\textsuperscript{17} so we will use this book as an exemplar of Heideggerian interpretive analysis. Actually, the contributions in this book are highly varied with respect to methodological procedures, so we will concentrate on the contributions of the editors who seem to have followed Heidegger most closely.

It seems that what the authors have taken over from Heideggerian philosophy is the hermeneutic circle and a generally postmodern perspective that argues against positivism, objectivism, rationalism, universalism, etc., of the traditional type. They do not deny truth claims or useful knowledge, but claim to have discovered a more primordial way of knowing as articulated by Heidegger. They argue that we are in an era beyond rationalism
and empiricism, and that science must reflect such changes. (Although, in my view, the presentations of empiricism and rationalism made by the authors are so stylized and abstract that they are almost caricatures of those two perspectives. They are presented as ideologies rather than as how a scientist actually lives those two perspectives. And I write from the perspective of a non-mainstream scientist.)

The first important distinction made by the authors, and I agree, is that in psychology the analyses are ontical rather than ontological. Packer writes:

Heidegger’s analysis was an “ontological” one: describing fundamental structures of human being. A hermeneutic research project in psychology will be what Heidegger terms “ontical”: examining specific ways of being in a particular setting or settings, but it will nonetheless share certain similarities of approach with the investigation carried out in Being and Time. 18

The next key methodological step for these authors is to find the appropriate starting point for interpretive analysis, which means that one must enter the hermeneutic circle in the proper way. Here the authors assume a strong Heideggerian perspective. Heidegger’s existential analysis of Dasein is completely adopted and his perspective on preunderstanding, understanding, interpretation, and projection are all utilized to justify the procedures adopted. Projection is understood as “a structure of our way of being in the world,”19 and therefore Dasein is always already projecting and living toward future possibilities, and always already has some practical understanding and interpretations. Thus Addison immersed himself in the everyday life of the interns he was researching so that he could come up with a narrative account of the interns’ world based upon their everyday practices.20 However, Addison disclaims that his narrative account “corresponds with, represents, or reconstructs ‘reality.’”21 Rather, he calls it an “interpretive account” that contains all sorts of information about the world of the interns, but he allows that it can change, modify, or grow. Still, he used this account to notice if there were any “common or recurring practices or behaviors [he] thought might be a significant part of their process of becoming a physician.”22 The claim backs away from asserting anything affirmative, but the account nevertheless is used as though it did contain some helpful insights. The motivation seems to be to avoid any strong epistemological claims because of the priority Heidegger places on ontology.

The remaining steps of the method relate to how one articulates the interpretations that are developing and then how to express the outcome and/or evaluation of the interpretation. Of course, following Heidegger, the authors emphasize that the hermeneutic circle is not “vicious,” but rather “essential,” because without it “there would be no understanding at all.”23 So, having entered the circle by “choosing the right entity, and working out a genuine way of access to it,”24 the next task is to articulate the interpretation that is developing. It can begin because
interpretive inquiry taps into our engaged practical understanding . . . of a phenomenon by adopting what seems to be an appropriate perspective . . . and this articulation of a practical understanding into a thematic narrative turns out to have two sides: one negative, the other positive.25

Literally following Heidegger, Packer asserts that everyday practical understanding, while necessary as an access, “is an understanding within which events and entities are ‘withdrawn.’”26 The positive side of practical understanding relates to those aspects of understanding “to which the action makes reference.”27 Frequently, what is important here relates to how things are said rather than to what is said. Interpretation is fostered by “simple descriptions” and is aided by a tolerance for ambiguity. Tolerating ambiguity helps avoid premature closure.

Finally, we come to the outcome of interpretive inquiry. The outcome seems to be a description of what was discovered. Since how the results are presented is pretty open-ended, one can describe the results with whatever degree of complexity is required. Basically, the outcome of the interpretation tries to uncover what was covered over by the reports of the participants. The authors stress that, in interpretive inquiry, the researcher should also report anomalies and flaws in interpretation as well as those aspects of the data that remain incomprehensible. Addison, for example, found it useful to report back to the interns what he had found because he found that his interpretive account, being different from their own self-interpretation, opened up possibilities for the interns that they may not have realized on their own. He considers this a positive finding because of Heidegger’s view concerning how the future possibilities influence Dasein.28

At the end of their book, the authors go into a long argument defending their stance, not to speak about the “validity” of their findings, since such desires spring from traditional, mainstream research concerns, but they still want to affirm that an interpretive account can be true or false.29 They disdain the idea of a “timeless, universal essence”30 and choose a more pragmatic criterion when they state:

What is uncovered in the course of a true interpretation is a solution to the problem, the confusion, the question, the concern, and the breakdown in understanding that motivated our inquiry in the first place. In Heidegger’s view a good interpretation will not provide validated knowledge, or timeless truth, but instead an answer to the practical or existential concern that motivated our inquiry.31

They do not raise the question of whether the solution is an optimal solution or not, or whether it might be only a partial solution.
Let me summarize the hermeneutic method based on Heideggerian philosophy as interpreted by Packer and Addison. Basically, one has to enter the hermeneutic circle and this demands (a) choosing the right entity to start with, (b) working out a genuine access to it, (c) fostering the articulation of the interpretation through various strategies, and (d) describing the interpretative outcome, including its anomalies. What is interesting is that they do not mention the other components of the method that Heidegger listed. Recall that above we quoted Heidegger as saying that the phenomenological method required a reduction from being to Being, a constructive aspect and a destructive one. It seems to me, however, that in practice the latter two components are implicitly performed. After all, based upon the projective characteristic of Dasein, it seems that many aspects of the practical understanding are elaborated. As for the destructive phase, Packer admits that he tracked between a cognitive-developmental approach and a behaviorist approach in order to help clarify his own hermeneutic approach. He took the two traditional approaches to be misunderstandings of human action and so, in a way, he had to “destroy” them in order to come up with better concepts.

But what about the reduction that Heidegger affirmed? Heidegger said that in confronting an entity, he had to use the reduction to go from its being to Being. This placed him on the ontological level. But Packer expressly stated that his analysis was ontical, and I think that he was correct because otherwise he would be doing ontological analyses. While he drew from Heidegger’s ontological understanding of Dasein, Packer seemed to be applying the categories of being-in-the-world to the behaviors and experiences of specific individuals. But, still, not all issues are resolved. If the authors operate at the ontical level, defined as “specific ways of being in a particular setting or settings,”34 is the emphasis on the being of Dasein or its doings? If the former, the analysis could still be ontological, unless clarified further, even though dealing with a specific Dasein. Also, how does the ontical differ from the empirical? If there is a difference, it is never addressed by the authors. And how do those two terms differ from “factic life experience” that Heidegger uses? Finally, is there any reduction involved? Is the “object” being-in-the-world the proper object of psychology without further specification?

Moreover, since the authors speak of doing hermeneutic phenomenological analyses in psychology, precisely what is it about their analyses that make them psychological? Addison’s research could easily be seen as a sociological analysis and Packer’s analysis thematized moral behavior, so why wasn’t it basically a moral study? To call these studies ontical is simply to designate a certain level of analysis, but it doesn’t define a disciplinary perspective. Each science has a proper object of study that helps define it and the term ontical is not sufficient in and of itself.

The problem that emerges here is how to adapt and convert a philosophical method so that it is applicable to phenomena at a scientific level of research. This problem is much trickier than appears on the surface and many dimensions of the issue have to be thought through. This is especially true if one wants to break away from traditional, empirical scientific
practices and attempt to follow a theory of science based upon phenomenology, because there are very few precedents to follow. Packer and Addison go to great lengths to distance themselves from a traditional understanding of truth and to deviate from typical validating procedures. They follow Heidegger strictly, but they do not demonstrate how Heideggerian understanding is really better than the alternatives. Truth is understood as uncovering, but there is no discussion of how an uncovering of the ontic level has the same truth-value as an uncovering of the ontological level. They posit the priority of ontology over epistemology, yet they claim to operate at the ontic level. Also, priority is given to the “ready-to-hand” attitude, almost to the exclusion of the “present-to-hand” perspective. That is why traditional validating of procedures is always discounted. It is also why practical understanding and engagement are stressed, and all self-reflective or “detached” reflective terms are avoided. Perhaps this is the core issue that motivates the authors to work hermeneutically and, of course, this attitude belongs to Heidegger as well. It is therefore important to look at some recent philosophical research concerning Heidegger and the phenomenon of reflection, and contrast the findings with Husserl’s views.

**Heidegger and Reflection**

There is an interesting historical dimension to the issue of the role of reflection in philosophical research. Zahavi has researched this issue and come up with some interesting findings. He states that in 1912, Paul Natorp published a work entitled *Allgemeine Psychologie*, which was a philosophical work from a transcendental perspective. In that work, Natorp defined an object in terms of its accessibility to theoretical description and explanation, and the subject was *that which stands over against all objects*. The problem that Natorp posed to all philosophers was that if one reflected upon subjectivity, then it would become an object, and so one would no longer be studying subjectivity as such, but a distorted representation of it. Objectified subjectivity is not the same as functioning subjectivity. Moreover, as Zahavi notes, Natorp thought in a Kantian way and wrote that “the I is a principle and a condition. It is not a datum, it is not something given.” Thus one should not utilize categories that belong to objects when speaking about subjectivity. The implication was clearly that a direct study of subjectivity was theoretically impossible, a priori.

Heidegger was aware of Natorp’s critique of reflection, which had strong implications for reflective phenomenology of the Husserlian type, and he lectured on Natorp’s position. Zahavi reviewed these lectures and his conclusion is that “to some extent, he [Heidegger] seemed to accept it [i.e., Natorp’s critique].” Heidegger did not accept Natorp’s alternative for solving the problem, but it seems he was impressed enough with the critique to avoid using a reflective method in his own work.

Zahavi then claims that Heidegger was seeking a radically new phenomenological method that would not lead to “theoretical deformations of life,” either in terms of objectification or
subjectification of life.39 I am cutting through a long historical argument, but according to Zahavi, eventually “Heidegger argued that there is an intimate connection between experience, expression and understanding” and so “phenomenology must build on the familiarity that life already has with itself; it must draw on the self-referential dimension, the persistent care of self that is built into the very life stream.”40 In other words, Heidegger was seeking, and believed he found, an atheoretical, non-objectifying, and more primordial mode of self-apprehension than self-reflection. This method is the hermeneutical phenomenological method that Heidegger initiated.

However, after a critical analysis of the issues, Zahavi makes two telling points:41 (a) He believes that Heidegger’s hermeneutical method is a type of reflection after all, even though it does not result in an objectification of subjectivity, and (b) Zahavi claims that Husserl’s reflective phenomenological method does indeed alter (not distort) the prereflective consciousness, but in a way that actually enhances it. And (c), we would add, there is plenty of room in the Husserlian perspective for a non-objectifying presence to the prereflective because of the reflexivity of consciousness.

Zahavi acknowledges that Heidegger describes a more “fundamental form of self-acquaintance that is part and parcel of experience” and this familiarity has a “non-reflective character, and which must be understood as an immediate expression of life itself.”42 This kind of contact is, of course, not at all psychological but deeply primordial, at the level of factic life-experience. Zahavi, drawing from Heideggerian texts, then shows how Heidegger basically insists that being worldly and finding a self are equiprimordial.43 “Disclosing a world is always already a self-finding. In fact, the discoveredness of Dasein, its finding itself, constitutes its very mode of being.”44 The foregoing statement seems to indicate that Heidegger did find a form of self-acquaintance that is prior to reflection.

However, Zahavi objects to this conclusion.45 Zahavi gives many reasons to support the conclusion that Heidegger did indeed find a non-objectifying mode of apprehension but he states that

Heidegger’s hermeneutical intuition is in fact nothing but a non-objectifying type of reflection... Heidegger’s real contribution might be taken to consist in an analysis of this special type of non-objectifying reflection; a type of reflection that can exactly provide us with access to lived subjectivity that is not vulnerable to the objections posed by Natorp.46

The second point to be clarified is whether Natorp’s views on reflection were correct. There is no doubt that there can be objectifying types of reflection, but those are not the only types. While reflection alters the prereflected, not all alterations are distortive as Natorp presupposed. Some are enhancing in the sense that reflection can accentuate the prereflected-upon or, through more intense attention, it can disclose and explicate the
prereflective. As Zahavi states: “Thus, rather than being a reification, a reflection might be nothing but an intensification or accentuation of the primary experience.”47 While Natorp may have described some types of reflection, he did not describe all of the types, and clearly did not discuss the beneficial ones.

Finally, the very idea of a non-objectifying presence to consciousness is in Husserl. While often mistaken among social scientists, it is well known by Husserlian scholars that Husserl never said that intentionality is the essence of consciousness. It is an important characteristic of many acts, but it is not essential because there are aspects of consciousness that do not partake of it, e.g., hyletic data. More importantly in this context, however, is the fact that Husserl acknowledges that consciousness is reflexive as well as reflective. With reflexivity, consciousness is aware of itself independent of intentionality. This would provide a basis for a non-objectifying awareness of consciousness, but a proper understanding of certain types of reflection can perform the same function. Husserl mostly worked within the context of reflective phenomenology.

**Summary**

One reason that a hermeneutical phenomenology, with its own method, came into being is because Heidegger seemed to accept, at least partially, Natorp’s critique of reflection. Consequently, he was motivated to find a non-objectifying way of interpreting the activities of consciousness. However, Zahavi has shown that Heidegger’s strategies did not take him outside the realm of reflection and also that not all reflective procedures need end up with reification. Zahavi ultimately concludes that the distinction between the Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenological method and the Husserlian reflective phenomenological method is an artificial one, at least with respect to reflectivity.48

What Zahavi says may be true at the philosophical level, but the distinction is carried over into psychology with real differences, as we saw above. It seems to me that most of Heideggerian philosophy is driven by his extreme focus on the question of Being. Consequently, if one is interested in that question and one follows Heidegger philosophically, then one is possibly on the right track. However, to attempt to adapt Heideggerian thought to the level of psychology, one would have to work through the heavy role that Being plays in his thought. Psychological analyses are not ontological and it would seem to be incumbent upon the psychological researcher to work out the ripple effects of the removal of the focus on Being in following Heidegger’s method. Moreover, the lack of a reduction in the Heideggerian procedure almost guarantees that interpretive procedures have to be followed because the worldly consciousness of the researcher does not get purified in any way, and so the confidence in the findings have to be tenuous.

That is not a problem in Husserlian phenomenology. Husserl’s method is designed to deal with any type of object and its manner of appearance is the basis upon which investigative
procedures should proceed. In my judgment, it is the preferred type of phenomenology and its adaptation to psychology is much cleaner.

*Bibliography*


Endnotes

1 I would like to thank Richard Rojcewicz and John Scanlon for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.


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11 Ibid., pp. 22-23.

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19 Packer & Addison (Eds.). *Entering the circle*, p. 34.


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24 Packer. Tracing the hermeneutic circle. In Packer & Addison (Eds.), *Entering the circle*, p. 105.
25 Ibid., p. 106.

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