

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEAR

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INTRODUCTION

Fear has been the subject of extensive study by experimental psychologists (see Strongman, 1973; Zuckerman and Spielberger, 1976 for complete reviews). It has also received attention from physiologists (Levi, 1975), sociologists (Becker, 1973), and countless fictional writers. However, apart from a small group of phenomenological philosophers and psychologists — a sampling of whose work we will examine later — it has received little clarification regarding its first person, lived meaning. That is, fear has been interpreted to be an objective event rather than a subjective experience.

Most researchers, presupposing that they understand the phenomenon, have focused almost exclusively on its objectifiable characteristics. For instance, fear has been studied in terms of its central nervous system underpinnings (Levi, 1975), the environmental stimuli which precipitate its occurrence (Miller, 1948), and the social ramifications which follow its onset (Watson & Rayner, 1920). While the results yielded from these studies have broadened our appreciation of the phenomenon, they have overlooked the *internal* dimension of fear as experienced by the subject. Approaching the phenomenon from a natural science paradigm, they have treated it, as well as other human emotions, as measurable entities. They have ignored the meant aspects of this emotion, what fear signifies.

This paper will be a phenomenological inquiry into fear. It will attempt to elucidate what fear means and how it is experienced. The motive for this study emerged from an earlier work (Arcaya, 1976). In that article, the public's perception of crime

was examined. Fear was a significant theme which arose in connection with that phenomenon. Here we hope to give a more complete investigation of the emotion, fear. Specifically, we want to accomplish two things: 1) describe the meaning of fear for the individual, and 2) integrate this understanding of fear with some traditional perspectives from clinical psychology.

In this work it will be assumed that the reader has a modicum of knowledge about the aims and background of phenomenology.¹ Moreover, given the scope of this article—the study of fear using the phenomenological method—no in-depth review will be conducted of the traditional studies of this topic. Instead, we will trace how fear has been investigated from the experiential, first-person perspective, directing our attention to the way in which human beings feel, act, and think when fearful. While this limits our attention to only one school of thought, it allows us to omit the very predictable debate which usually ensues when a phenomenologist contrasts this approach with the natural science paradigm. We do not desire to discover the “causes” of fear. Moreover, it allows for a closer examination of those who have followed the descriptive-reflective method.

The study is divided into five parts. The first will review from a generally descriptive viewpoint, the literature concerned with fear. The second will concern itself with explaining the methodology employed to research this phenomenon. The third will present the results in the form of a structural² description of fear which will describe *what* fear is and *how* it is experienced. The fourth will elaborate on the important aspects of the findings, especially regarding a more profound understanding of emotions in general. The last will focus on the interrelationship between traditional approaches to emotion and our methodology. In particular, implications will be drawn for the treatment of phobias and other fear-related psychopathologies.

A. Background Literature

Phenomenology is the disciplined attempt to clarify the manner in which the object of experience appears to consciousness. As such, it is concerned with how we are aware of the world and the manner in which we discover meaning in the world. Since many experiences, such as emotional sensation, seem blind, undirected, and mechanical in nature, the question arises: how are we to give