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Phenomenology - What is it? And what does it do?

by Ian R. Owen MA

This paper demonstrates how phenomenology is useful in studying the personal and social facets of making psychological knowledge and searching for philosophical truth. Most introductions miss the full span of Husserl's writings. This introduction aims to give a brief overview of the sum total of his theory and practice.

Phenomenology is a radical psychological and philosophical practice that has been a central influence in European philosophy this century. The early protagonists have influenced psychology, social psychology, sociology, psychopathology and anthropology (Brentano 1973, Husserl 1970a, 1975a, Heidegger 1962, Macann 1993, Jaspers 1963). Phenomenology also has links to structuralism, linguistics, theology and deconstructive literary criticism. It is also linked to existentialism which began before phenomenology in the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. When Heidegger summarised phenomenology and applied it to existential themes, he produced existential-phenomenology, the investigation of the ontological essences of humanity (Heidegger 1996). When Husserl died in 1938 aged 79, he left behind 45,000 pages of unpublished shorthand notes, 15,000 of which have now been published as the twenty nine volumes of his German collected works, the *Husserliana* (Husserl 1950).

Husserl was a transcendental philosopher of science and philosophy (Kocklemans & Kisiel 1970, Husserl 1980). What this means is that he was primarily interested in the conditions for science and philosophy to be grounded in an absolute manner. His writings cover many psychological subjects including: truth and verification, perception, imagination, lived experiences of the body, empathy and identification, as well as temporality, choice, value, willing, feeling, signification, potential and heterosexuality (Husserl 1970b, 1981a). Phenomenology aims for truth, logic, and rigorously self-critical thought. All forms of knowledge including the sciences, are regarded as being ultimately grounded on lived experience in relations of orderly, regular structures of consciousness. Phenomenology starts with what appears: primarily non-verbal awareness, and studies the overall relations of meaning that

appears through sensation to verbalised thought, which may also include the awareness of others, history, teleology, ethics and values. In general, it attempts to ground any academic discourse in its definitive experiences.

It is claimed that all sciences are founded on the subjective experience of making finely detailed judgements, categorisations, and interpretations. Phenomenology is the method of turning abstract philosophical thoughts and imperatives towards regularising this grounding, by a detailed analysis of object-directed awareness. Phenomenology in any of its forms does not assume causality or try to assume anything which cannot be derived from what is given to conscious experience primarily. What it claims to do is to ground all distinctions with a new future context that it is building for itself.

Overview

In the 1907 definition of phenomenology Husserl states that the starting point for his method is to reflect on the connection between immanent appearances for consciousness and the transcendent beliefs and alleged nature of the world (Husserl 1964). He is anguished and searches for epistemological answers: How can objective truth occur about what is outside of consciousness itself? How might humans be able to have reliable knowledge about what is not immanent to their own senses? Phenomenology is primarily a method based on the work of Descartes, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Mill, Kant, Dilthey, Natorp and Brentano, rather than a set of specific beliefs imposed onto the world. Husserl's thought went through many twists and turns. Reading his work is complicated by his fondness for inventing alternative terms for the same concepts. Three identifiable periods in his work begin with an early mathematical, Brentano-influenced period of 1887 to 1901, and an idealistic middle period lasts from about 1905 to 1927. A final mature period of his retirement from 1929 to 1938 is the most informative for psychologists who wish to build an alternative vision of theory, research and practice.

Phenomenology argues that eidetic assumptions or prerequisites are necessarily in place for shared understanding to occur. Phenomenology is primarily a study of essences (definitive reflective acts) and the meanings of exemplary cases, to find the possibilities for objective thought. Seeing essences is primarily about attending to the sensual experience of that which appears. Secondly it involves naming the definitive whatness of any object, and hence, is about the categories for naming. For instance, sciences are built on the essences, categories and boundaries they draw up, which define legitimate academic discourse. The study of essences

aims is to find out how "the same things" are recognised as such. It wonders what key characteristics, something or someone must have, to enable them to be categorised as the same, or as different. For instance, if a hundred representations of an apple are viewed, they may all be different, in the sense that they are not identical. But they can also be recognised as being of an apple. Husserl was interested in essences because he wished to turn philosophy into a process which could find logic, laws and absolute facts, founded on a perfect method. Husserl hoped that his method would have no crises of its foundations, by which he meant that it would contain no paradoxes, whilst being internally coherent, and based on indubitable self-evident truths (Husserl 1981b).

Phenomenological psychology

Phenomenological, or "pure" psychology has shared aims with conventional psychology and social psychology, as well as areas of its own concern. It does not rule out an empirical approach but argues that a philosophical analysis should be carried out first. This is because all unself-critical, biological and physiological aspects of psychology are excluded for being part of the provisional truths of physiology and the natural science approach. Its method is to reflect on the possibilities for any lived experience to be able to occur, which it calls a priori eidetics. Initially, phenomenological psychology rejects all animal, quantitative, simplistic and statistical approaches, as being inappropriate to studying the nature of human consciousness. Only when philosophy has been applied to the problems by this method, can an empirical psychology begin.

Phenomenological psychology is not about specific people or generalised people. It begins with describing single exemplary essences of researchers' experiences of the true nature of a subject - and certainly not some rehashing of their own initial biases and beliefs. Therefore, phenomenological psychology stands in relation to conventional empirical psychology, in the same way that geometry stands to real figures. In fact Husserl calls this discipline a "mathematics of psychology" (Husserl 1977a: 36). One aim is to provide understanding as an end in itself. Also, what is both present and absent to consciousness form its subject matter (Ibid: 137). "Pure psychology" aims at the direct seeing of psychological essences to produce understanding (Ibid: 4). Husserl called pure psychology immanent, in the sense that it seeks out the intrinsic aspects of an experience. The approach is non-reductionistic and relies on the possibility of accurate verbal descriptions of essences in which the true nature of the object may be allowed to shine forth from itself in some way (Husserl 1982: 44).

Phenomenological psychology leads back to one's own, and the specific experiences of others. Its methods are founded on the perception of oneself by oneself, called apperception or "egology" (Husserl 1977b, Heidegger 1977: 115). Phenomenology sees individuals as caught up in an object-directed way in the world to such a degree that people are intimately interrelated with the norms of others' behaviour, thought and assumptions. For instance, phenomenological psychology would rename social psychology as intersubjective psychology, as the word intersubjective emphasizes the co-construction of these norms and the communal stream of the psyche through time. Intersubjectivity strictly means *that which exists between subjects*, and so refers to all that is face-to-face, discursive, social and cultural (Husserl 1989). Intersubjectivity is a neutral term not implying any lack of attention to ethics.

Phenomenological psychology is also a *meta*-psychology as it aims to be self-reflexive and so reform itself and the other human sciences by finding proper starting points, methods and reasoning. So, it checks its own practices with the outcome it wishes to achieve. It criticizes the assumptions of its own stance, as well as those of other approaches, and tries to clarify and develop itself in a regular manner that can be employed by other colleagues. As we can see from the method below, taken from Husserl's middle period, there is much in Husserl's work that is a counsel of perfection.

Overall method

Husserl believed that every science should have its own pure subject, and create methods for itself which can find the true nature of that subject. In doing this, one key term is the *reduction*, from the Latin *reducere*, meaning to lead back to actual experiences. This is used synonymously with another key term, the *epoche*, from ancient Greek philosophy, which means the suspension of judgement, and is used in two ways in the method below. Consequently, phenomenology aims to reject all a priori assumptions and impositions, and studies the essences and meanings of the phenomena of consciousness (Husserl 1991, Ströker 1993).

Step 1. The *psychological epoche* accepts all the immanence-transcendence of consciousness and stays in the "natural attitude" of naive assumptions of the everyday world. But unlike hard psychological science and the scientificizing, non-reflective engagement with the everyday appearances themselves. In the psychological reflection we remain in the world and involved with others and our object, but we reflect on our subjective awareness about it. Try to lay aside

all assumptions and start afresh. Imagine that you have never seen the object of your studies before, and that you know nothing about it. Contemplate, notice and observe. Treat your experience of it as unique.

Step 2. Attempt accurate description of what appears to your senses. For Husserl phenomenology does not entail hermeneutics. Describe both what you experience; and the manner in which you are experiencing it. At this stage of producing verbal descriptions do not add, subtract, distort, generalise, theorise, explain, or jump to conclusions. Do not repeat the conventional wisdom about it.

Step 3. Try and directly see the invariant essence of the object. Interpretation of the data produced by the two steps above aims to find the essence of the appearance itself, and so move towards producing accurate and reliable eidetic knowledge. The analysis aims to find both immediate and hidden universals by imaginative variation, a technique for varying one or more qualities of a scene to find out which are more crucial than the others.

Step 4. Phenomenological philosophy starts with a transcendental reduction for rejecting the natural attitude and all biological aspects and assumptions of psychological causation. This second reduction allegedly "turns off" the natural attitude to facilitate moving from particular instances to universal transcendental essences. This *transcendental epoche* is the experience of "pure philosophy" by attempting to exclude what is one's own, and factual, by turning off the everyday belief and assumptions of the existence of taken for granted claims, beliefs, theories and assumptions that go beyond what appears in immanent experience. Therefore: suspend all your current formal factual and empirical claims, as well as informal psychological knowledge, expectations, theories and received wisdom. Is there any transcendental claim about it which you cannot doubt? This is a method of trying to become open to the nature of its existence and describing this, after this deliberate act of scepticism, for finding out what is truly occurring, as it can be directly perceived from experience. This will reveal what you think exists for yourself, which can be compared to what other researchers have found through the same method¹.

¹ Also, by way of adding a postscript to Husserl's method and introducing an historical note, it is important to note that there are interesting links between Franz Brentano and Sigmund Freud, as several authors have noted (Barclay 1964, Ellenberger 1970, McGrath 1986, Freud 1990, Stanescu 1971). Barclay and McGrath tell how Freud as an undergraduate was deeply impressed by attending Brentano's lectures on the

Transcendental phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology is an applied experiential philosophy conceived of as a science of science (Husserl 1969, 1973, 1975b). The starting point is to find out how we find ourselves to be human beings who share the same intersubjective object-meanings in one fundamentally shared world. This philosophy bases its study on a pure "transcendental consciousness". What is this? It is perhaps easiest to introduce transcendental consciousness by mentioning Rene Descartes, who tried to find indubitable facts by attempting to doubt everything. Descartes found he could not doubt the self-evidence of his own thought. So he proclaimed, "I think therefore I am". Husserl takes a similar route. He states that transcendental consciousness is produced by a change of attitude, away from the acceptance of the existence of anything and the world. In Husserl's terminology, abstract transcendental essences are the truth about the world and of an individual's experience of it and of others. Finally, similarly to the psychological method, this philosophical method is also a meta-philosophy, that seeks to keep itself in check, and order its aims and methods in a self-critical manner.

Conclusion

It is now possible to see how radical and iconoclastic the phenomenological approach to psychology and philosophy is. For Husserl, psychology has not yet begun. What currently passes for psychology is based on anything but pure psyche. There is a rising interest in "new" qualitative psychological methods, and some attention to the intersubjective and discursive in social psychology, but such interest mostly ignores phenomenological psychology's preparatory work on the invariant structures of consciousness, epistemology, method, evidence and the interpretative aspects of making objective empirical knowledge. After Heidegger and Gadamer, phenomenology moves conventional psychology further towards hermeneutics, the study of how things are interpreted to be what they are. Such an approach in consciousness would also result

association of ideas and dream phenomena. For instance, there is great similarity between Freud's concept of cathexis and Brentano's idea of intentionality. Now we can see how the methods of free association and free-floating attention in psychoanalysis are very similar to phenomenological investigation. In both of these methods the researcher does not know what is significant or what is being looked for until some way into the investigation when the significant themes begin to show themselves.

in an emphasis on rigorous qualitative methods, by making understanding and methods which closely fit the nature of the lived experiences under observation. As regards contemporary philosophy, phenomenology regards post-modernism as an illness that requires the cure of grounding.

The consequences of phenomenology for conventional psychology and social psychology are that it refutes the tenets and applicability of Platonic and Galilean "natural" science, with its multitude of empirical claims and methods for attempting to know truth about the other, through which it claims objective knowledge. Transcendental phenomenology aims to be objective and acknowledges the great difficulty in attempting this, when human nature is unpredictable, temporal, historical and intersubjective. Whilst phenomenological psychology is forever relativistic and only a half way step toward transcendental phenomenology.

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It depends on what you mean when you talk about "phenomenology". If you're thinking of the continental tradition, Heidegger tends to be heavily emphasized, although Husserl is taken to be just as important. Analytic philosophy seems to (fairly justifiably, for what it's worth) push Heidegger to the side, unless they're doing work in something like pragmatism. He does appeal to Husserl in his attempts to address phenomenology. I think you'll find, besides Kant, a lot of the big names in the early 1900s phenomenology were actually people doing work in psychology since the two were so closely related. Effectively, phenomenology is understanding the way that senses interact with that they are perceiving as is interpreted by the mind. What makes an experience conscious is a certain awareness one has of the experience while living through or performing it. However, as Heidegger has pointed out, we are often not explicitly conscious of our habitual patterns of action, and the domain of Phenomenology may spread out into semi-conscious and even unconscious mental activity. Phenomenology, as it is known today, however, is essentially the vision of one man, Edmund Husserl, which he launched in his "Logical Investigations" of 1901, although credit should also be given to the pioneering work on intentionality (the notion that consciousness is always intentional or directed) by Husserl's teacher, the German philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano (1838 - 1917) and his colleague, Carl. 1. What is Phenomenology? 2. The Discipline of Phenomenology. 3. From Phenomena to Phenomenology. Does this awareness-of-experience consist in a kind of inner observation of the experience, as if one were doing two things at once? (Brentano argued no.) Phenomenology as we know it was launched by Edmund Husserl in his Logical Investigations (1900-01). Two importantly different lines of theory came together in that monumental work: psychological theory, on the heels of Franz Brentano (and also William James, whose Principles of Psychology appeared in 1891 and greatly impressed Husserl); and logical or semantic theory, on the heels of Bernard Bolzano and Husserl's contemporaries who founded modern logic, including Gottlob Frege. What does it mean to teach or research religious studies digitally? Does religious "data" make digital religious studies distinct within the digital humanities? What is a digital religious studies research project you think more people should know about? How can departments and the field better support digital methods and pedagogies? Six scholars gathered at the AAR's groundbreaking THATCamp to discuss these questions and more!