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# The Phenomenological Approach: An Introduction

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Phenomenology emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in the work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917) and his student Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as a radical, unprejudiced way of approaching and describing human conscious experiences. It may be characterised initially, very broadly, as a practice of attending to matters that manifest themselves to us (‘phenomena’ in the widest sense of the word). Phenomenology tries to develop a careful method for observing these phenomena—of whatever kind—aiming to get an unprejudiced, descriptive account of them, alert to the precise *manner* in which meaning emerges or is made manifest in the experience of these phenomena. Phenomenology aims to describe whatever appears to consciousness precisely in the manner in which it so appears without the imposition of theorizing or assumptions drawn from one’s background, religious assumptions, scientific education, or whatever. Phenomenology is a discipline, therefore, that tries to be extremely sensitive to the varieties of ways in which meaning presents itself to us as subjects open to the disclosure of meaning. There is a double-sidedness to phenomenological viewing. There is, on the one hand, the object meant or intended and, on the other hand, the act of meaning or intending, and an act that furthermore does not arise on its own but belongs to the entire life of an ego or subjectivity. Traditional philosophy has tended to be objectivist or subjectivist and have rarely sought to give credit to all sides of this complex correlation.

Originally, the aim of phenomenology as a philosophical approach was to make philosophy rigorously scientific, overcoming traditional factionalism, replacing groundless speculation and theorizing with genuine scientific description, and thereby overcoming the perennial dangers of scepticism and relativism. Brentano’s proposed reform of philosophy inspired Husserl to develop phenomenology as the method for transforming our approach not just to philosophy but to all the sciences. In Husserl’s view, philosophy had failed to make progress in the solution of these problems because it has not developed a clear scientific method. Traditional philosophy (and in his day, the legacy of Hegelian philosophy) had been pursued in an uncritical, speculative manner. Philosophical principles and concepts had

been introduced more or less at random. Discussions concerning the nature of God or the movement of absolute spirit in history might be offered as examples of this kind of traditional speculation. Husserl wanted to distance himself from all such speculation. He regarded it as ‘groundless’, by which it meant that it was not rooted in what was actually given in our experience. Phenomenology, then, had to deliberately eschew all forms of speculation. As Husserl writes in his Introduction to the *Logical Investigations* (1900/1901):

Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions – if by any intuitions at all – are not enough: we must go back to the ‘things themselves’.<sup>1</sup>

This phrase ‘back to the things themselves’, frequently found in Husserl’s work, soon became the catch-cry of the phenomenological movement.

Through Husserl, phenomenology quickly acquired the status of a reform movement in philosophy first in Germany and then across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, arriving in America around the mid century. In Europe, after around 1960, phenomenology began gradually to be displaced by other movements, first existentialism (which led to the new hybrid existential phenomenology), but also neo-Marxism, structuralism, semiotics, postmodernism and deconstruction, all of which in one way or another challenged phenomenology’s preoccupation with subjectivity. In the Anglophone world, on the other hand, phenomenology was largely ignored by analytic philosophy and by linguistic philosophy. Nevertheless, in recent times, phenomenology has once again attracted interest because of its strong defence of the ineliminability of subjectivity and its detailed analyses of the structures of conscious life and of the ‘life-world’, the ordinary, everyday pre-scientific world we inhabit.

As it originally emerged in Germany, interest in phenomenology was more or less confined to academic philosophy, an attempt to gain new insights and new modes of approach into traditional, intractable philosophical problems. But it was soon taken up and adapted by other disciplines in the social and human sciences (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, literary theory, art criticism, cultural studies, religious studies, and more recently, film theory, gender studies,

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2 Volumes, trans. J.N. Findlay with a Preface by Michael Dummett and edited with a new Introduction by Dermot Moran (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), vol. 1 p. 168.

and studies concerned with human embodiment), because it was seen to offer a fresh approach to problems and able to offer a subtle and sophisticated response to the kinds of meaning that emerged in these disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

While the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl may be considered the official founder of phenomenology as a *method* and a *movement*, he inherited both the name and the initial practice of the method from his teacher Franz Brentano, one of the acknowledged founders of modern experimental psychology, and an advocate of what he first called ‘descriptive psychology’, but somewhat later renamed as ‘phenomenology’.

<sup>3</sup> Brentano may have borrowed the term from the Neo-Kantians and Neo-Hegelians of his day but in his lectures and books he gave it a new sense: phenomenology describes how conscious states and acts are experienced from the perspective of the person undergoing or performing them.

In 1874, Brentano published the first edition of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.<sup>4</sup> This groundbreaking work of ‘empirical psychology’ appeared in the same year as Wilhelm Wundt’s *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, and both works are now regarded as foundational for the (then novel) discipline of empirical psychology.<sup>5</sup> Brentano wanted to rescue philosophy (which he regarded as a hopelessly confused mess of competing ideas and trends) and make it scientific by basing it on a well grounded and clarified psychology. Philosophy and the human sciences generally depend on judgements and reasoning that assume a certain understanding of the structure of our psychic lives, but unless this

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion of the different phases of phenomenology see Lester Embree and J. N. Mohanty, ‘Introduction’, in L. Embree et al., eds, *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), pp. 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the term ‘phenomenology’ was already in existence since the eighteenth century and appears in J. H. Lambert (as the ‘doctrine of appearance’), in Kant, Herder, Fichte, and most famously in the title of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). For Lambert and Kant, phenomenology involved distinguishing ‘appearance’ from truth, for instance, working out how an object may appear in different ways according to the laws of optics or the laws governing relative motion. Hegel’s concept of phenomenology includes these earlier meanings but also sees it as the ‘science of the experience of consciousness’, including the various forms through which consciousness develops in history. For a brief account of the meanings of the term ‘phenomenology’ in Hegel see the entry ‘Phenomenology’ in Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 214-16.

<sup>4</sup> Brentano, *Psychology from the Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Antos C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister, reprinted with a new preface by Peter Simons (London: Routledge, 1995), hereafter ‘PES’ and page number of the English translation.

<sup>5</sup> W. Wundt, *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, translated from the 5th Edition by E. B. Titchener (London: Sonnenschein, 1902).

structure is first delineated, it is not likely that the human sciences can advance scientifically.

In *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano contrasted empirical or ‘descriptive’ psychology with a more physiologically-based approach psychology (which he called ‘genetic’ psychology). By descriptive psychology, he understood an absolutely certain (‘apodictic’) descriptive science of all the elements of our mental life and their necessary structural interconnections. Brentano believed that ‘in spite of the great diversity of [mental] phenomena, the number of fundamental classes is very limited’ (PES 45). Brentano proclaimed:

Just as the chemist separates the constituent elements of a compound, it seems that the psychologist, too, should try to separate out the elementary phenomena that make up the more complex phenomena (PES 46).

In fact, he believed that there were only three fundamental classes of mental phenomena which he called ‘presentations’, ‘judgements’ and ‘phenomena of love and hate’. All other mental experiences no matter how complex were composed on these three fundamental classes.

In *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* Brentano went on to make a fundamental distinction between ‘psychical’ or mental phenomena and what he somewhat confusingly called ‘physical’ phenomena. He maintained we had direct access to ‘mental phenomena’ in so far as they are directly apprehended by us just as they are. What he had in mind was that so called ‘physical’ phenomena such as light and heat (nota bene: as we *experience* them) do not exist at all in any form similar to the manner we apprehend them, whereas when I have a thought or feeling or wish, it is exactly as it appears to me. For this reason, Brentano believed that, in a certain sense, psychology was more exact than physics. For him, the domain of psychical phenomena possessed ‘actual existence’, whereas the domain of physical phenomena had merely phenomenal existence. In other words, we can be sure that the way we feel heat is a precise transparent manifesting of what a feeling of heat is like, but we cannot be sure that the heat felt is anything remotely like its cause (whatever that might be in the external physical world). Following Descartes and the modern scientific tradition generally, Brentano held that we only had indirect access to the bodies in the external world, and, like the physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, he believed that we infer what the real world is like based on our sensory experiences which are caused by that world which is unknown in itself.

In contrast to our experience of these ‘physical phenomena’, we are in direct contact with our mental states: ‘our mental phenomena are the things which are

most our own' (PES 20). Furthermore, our mental acts are exactly as they appear to be (PES 20), Brentano maintains, paraphrasing the Irish philosopher George Berkeley, their *esse* or 'to be' is *percipi*, 'to be perceived'. Because these mental or psychic acts can be grasped immediately with absolute certainty, Brentano says they are given with *Evidenz* (self-evidence). We can make real discoveries about the nature of the mental which have the status of a priori universal laws though they are grasped with insight on the basis of even a single instance. Evidence, furthermore, is not to be equated with a psychological intensity or force of conviction, a mere feeling, rather, evidence is the direct grasp of something as it presents itself to be. This conception of the direct evidential givenness of our mental life to us was crucial for Husserl in his development of phenomenology.

Brentano proposed to describe our mental phenomena through a kind of close reflective inspection which he called, perhaps misleadingly, 'inner perception' and which he contrasted with traditional introspection (which he called 'inner observation'). Brentano and later Husserl were both suspicious of *introspection* as a reliable method in psychology (Wundt was a champion of the introspective method). Both recognised that it is not really possible to observe a particular mental state while occupying it at the same time. The attempt to introspect one's anger while one is angry is likely to lead to dissipation of the anger itself. It is therefore a mistake (albeit one very commonly made) to assume that phenomenology advocates a kind of introspectionist approach to one's conscious experiences. It is better to construe phenomenology as involving a kind of careful and self-conscious reflection carried out according to a very strict procedure.

Brentano, following Descartes, took the evidence of this inner perception to be completely reliable. As is well known, Descartes had revolutionised modern philosophy by arguing that our first-person conscious experiences in their actual execution are immune to philosophical scepticism of even the most radical kind. Even if I am doubtful about everything, even whether I have an actual body or even that the world is real at all, I cannot doubt that I am in fact experiencing doubt. To doubt that one is doubting is still to doubt. This means that, taken strictly, our mental experiences are given to us with apodictic certainty, at least at the very time we perform them (although of course, it is rather difficult to be precise about what exactly is given with this self-evidence). Indeed, Descartes generalised from this claim to the view that *all* conscious experiences, at least while being performed or occurrent, are indubitable. His famous expression, *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am, is constantly used by Brentano and Husserl to indicate this kind of apodictic self-givenness of conscious acts. No external evidence of any kind can ever shake the security of my knowledge of my own experience.

For Descartes, the *cogito ergo sum* was to be the Archimedean point on which he wanted to construct the whole of science (including the physical sciences) anew. It was something of an irony that his effort to secure scientific knowledge should lead to it being founded on one's own personal, subjective experience. Both Brentano and Husserl seized on Descartes' discovery and saw it as a starting point for an entirely new science, a *science of the experience of consciousness*, a genuine *science of subjectivity*, which describes things as they appear in the manner that they appear to consciousness, and a science wherein the evidence available would meet the highest standards for any evidence, namely absolute indubitability or 'apodicticity'. For instance, Husserl writes of evidence in his *Cartesian Meditations*:

Evidence is in an *extremely broad sense*, an "*experiencing*" of something that is, and is thus; it is precisely a mental seeing of something itself.<sup>6</sup>

Husserl goes on to argue that Descartes' insight can be reformulated as the recognition that science needs absolutely grounded insights, and a radical science cannot simply accept apparent evidence. In this regard, he proposes, following on from Descartes' doubt, a 'radical overthrow' in which the very world itself is not accepted as existing but is treated as an 'acceptance phenomenon'. We shall return to what this means, but, for Husserl, this altering of regard with respect the world and its existence is the very beginning of the philosophical attitude. Ultimately, for Husserl, this new attitude will reveal that all meaning, validity and being are actually the product of a certain constitution which arises from I myself as some kind of 'pure ego'. With Husserl, then, phenomenology moved very quickly into the realm of transcendental idealism.

Of course, Brentano himself conceded that the apodictic knowledge yielded by inner perception was quite restricted, specifically to *my* own acts and then only when they are attended to properly and more or less immediately after their actual occurrence (since, as he recognised, memory is notoriously unreliable). The further something fades into the past, the more room there is for misperception and error. Brentano also maintained, incidentally, that I have direct access only to *my* own thoughts (PES 92), whereas I have only *indirect* awareness of the inner perceptions of others (PES 37). Husserl too will see this as a distinctive feature of our experience of others as others. I can never have authentic or genuine first-person experience of anyone else's immediately given first-person experiences, rather these are given through what Husserl called 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*).

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<sup>6</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967), § 5, p. 12.

Brentano himself believed in developing a refined way of perceiving our own experiences and his descriptive psychology placed a great emphasis on accurate self-perception. For instance, when I look up at the bright dazzling glare of the neon ceiling light above my table, I experience both a sense of being dazzled and almost a kind of pain in my eyes from the glare. Brentano would reflect carefully as to whether these were two aspects of the same visual experience or whether they were two separate experiences (visual sensation of light and sensation of pain) happening to occur together. Similarly, if I cut myself with a sharp blade, do I feel the knife? Or only myself being cut? Or do I feel at the same time the *sharpness* of the blade? As Brentano writes:

If we hear a pleasing and mild sound or a shrill one, harmonious chord or a dissonance, it would not occur to anyone to identify the sound with the accompanying feeling of pleasure or pain. But then in cases where a feeling of pain or pleasure is aroused in us by a cut, a burn, or a tickle, we must distinguish in the same way between a physical phenomenon, which appears as the object of external perception, and the mental phenomenon of feeling, which accompanies its appearance, even though in this case the superficial observer is inclined to confuse them. (PES 83).

In his discussion of these kinds of complex psychological event, Brentano often introduces elements from physiological science (he claims that the same nerves transmit both types of sensation), which tends to somewhat confuse his descriptive psychology with evidence drawn from physiology, but Husserl would be more careful in this regard to keep the realm of phenomenological description uncontaminated by scientific assumptions. Nevertheless, one can see clearly that the practice of Brentanian descriptive psychology would produce a very refined or fine-grained way of approaching one's own experiences. A wine-taster, for instance, who has learned to discriminate accurately many different aspects of the taste of wines, and has also developed a system for describing them in words and classifying them (when was the last time you ate oak, for instance? And yet wine is described as 'oaky'), is a kind of phenomenologist in practice. One can see the benefits of phenomenological description for medical diagnoses, e.g. the correct recognition of symptoms, and so on. One can also see that literature is a vast repository of such phenomenological description and disambiguation, e.g. consider the explorations of jealousy, possessiveness, envy, and so on, in Shakespeare. Of course, the ability to make fine discriminations (as in the case of the professional wine-taster) has to be matched with an equal ability to translate these discriminations into appropriately



fine-grained linguistic communication. Husserl himself recognised this problem but did not address it centrally at least until some of his later writings, for instance his essay ‘On the Origin of Geometry’ where he accord to written language an enormously important role in fixing the meanings of ideal objectivities such as occur in mathematics so that they can be accessed as the same over and over again. For Heidegger, however, the issue of language became inescapable and marked a major turning in his conception of phenomenology and its possibilities. Subsequent phenomenology (Derrida, for instance, in so far as his work is motivated by phenomenology and continues to work within the phenomenological *epoché*, as he himself has attested) has had to grapple with the complexity of the relationship between language and experience in ways that have frequently challenged many of Husserl’s assumptions

Husserl’s phenomenology, as the direct successor to Brentano’s descriptive psychology, also wants to pay the closest attention to our experience as it happens and in the manner in which it happens. Husserl very clearly articulates the phenomenological approach to consciousness in his *Crisis of the European Sciences* where he writes:

The first thing we must do, and first of all in immediate, reflective self-experience, is to take the conscious life, completely without prejudice, just as what it quite immediately gives itself, as itself, to be. Here, in immediate givenness, one finds anything but colour data, tone data, and other “sense” data ... Instead, one finds, as even Descartes did (...), the *cogito*, *intentionality*, in those familiar forms which, like everything actual in the surrounding world, find their expression in language: “I see a tree which is green; I hear the rustling of its leaves... Here we find nothing other than “consciousness-of ...” –consciousness in the broadest sense, which is still to be investigated in its whole scopes and modes’.<sup>7</sup>

Phenomenology seeks to apprehend our conscious lives in the manner in which we experience them, but, for Husserl especially, we had to focus especially on the manner in which our conscious experiences (or *cogitationes* as Husserl, following Descartes, calls them) arise from some kind of central pole or ego. Husserl will never abandon Descartes’ discovery of the transcendental ego and this led many of his immediate students (including Heidegger) to want to lead phenomenology

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<sup>7</sup> E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern U. P., 1970), § 68, p. 233.

in a different less egocentric direction (Of course Husserl himself explored many different ways of approaching experience, including ways that emphasised collective, intersubjective shared experience, but undoubtedly the Cartesian way remains dominant especially in his published works Possibly in part because of the suspected Cartesian baggage of Husserlian phenomenology, Husserl's Freiburg colleague and former assistant, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), preferred to emphasise the *methodological* dimension of phenomenology at the beginning of *Being and Time* (1927):

The expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a *methodological conception*. This expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the *how* of that research.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger wants to develop phenomenology as a neutral approach, not expressly caught up with any particular metaphysical commitment. In fact, in that same section of *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines phenomenology as 'to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself'.<sup>9</sup> Note how close this formulation is to the one found in the passage from Husserl's *Crisis* that we quoted earlier: 'to take the conscious life, completely without prejudice, just as what it quite immediately gives itself, as itself, to be'. In both Husserl and Heidegger, there is an emphasis on something being made manifest, being revealed, being disclosed. At the same time, there is a strong injunction not to tamper with this disclosure or revelation but rather to allow it to manifest itself in its own peculiar way.

Heidegger emphasises that the making manifest of a phenomenon involves exhibiting it or demonstrating it directly. He goes on to comment that the phrase 'descriptive phenomenology' is really tautological:

Here 'description' does not signify such a description as we find, let us say, in botanical morphology; the term rather has the sense of a prohibition—the avoidance of characterizing anything with such demonstration.<sup>10</sup>

Phenomenology, then, is supposed to call attention or exhibit the manner in which something reveals itself. Of course, this making obvious of something implies

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<sup>8</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), § 7, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 7, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 7, p. 59.

that the manner whereby something reveals itself is usually not obvious at all, but lies hidden, covered over, and obscured in some way. In the practice of phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and others, it quickly becomes evident that what obscures and covers over is usually human practice and tradition itself.

According to Husserl, in our everyday practices and routines, we are in a certain attitude (he calls it ‘the natural attitude’) towards things and towards the world, and somehow this is a state of self-forgetfulness. The world presents itself as simply there, given, available to us. Disrupting the natural attitude and undermining its hold on us will be central to Husserl’s practice of the phenomenological method. Heidegger, too, focuses on the manner in which history and tradition tend to cover up meanings and events and bathe them in the light of the everyday, such that their original meaning is forgotten. Speaking of the meaning of Being, for instance, Heidegger writes:

If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved.<sup>11</sup>

The task of describing experience faithfully is thus extremely difficult and has to overcome lots of obstacles, including the natural tendency of human beings to somehow ‘normalise’ their experiences and bring them into some kind of ‘everydayness’. Perhaps the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has articulated most clearly, how the practice of phenomenological seeing is meant to disrupt the everyday. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he writes: ‘true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world’.<sup>12</sup> Philosophy will shed light on the ‘birth of being for us’ (*la genèse de l’être pour nous*).<sup>13</sup> Phenomenology aims at ‘disclosure of the world’ (*révélation du monde*); its task is ‘to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason’.<sup>14</sup>

Heidegger’s introduction of hermeneutics into phenomenology was a way of neutralising or at least exposing the operation of prejudice in our understanding. Prejudices for him cannot be eliminated, but at least they can be made transparent, acknowledged, and our corresponding insights put in correlation with these prejudgments so that our understanding progressed in a ‘circular’ manner (the hermeneutic circle),

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<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 6, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. xx.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. xx-xxi.

going backwards and forwards between what is understood and the manner in which it is understood. Brentano, as we have seen, was content to give a more or less straightforward description of phenomena and he seemed somewhat unaware that he was importing in assumptions from prevailing science and philosophy. Husserl, however, realised that our usual, practical stance towards our experiential life inevitably led to a kind of systematic distortion. To purify our descriptive access to the phenomenon, Husserl too recognised, required some kind of sustained additional effort. Husserl speaks of performing a ‘suspension’ or ‘bracketing’ (he borrows the technical term *epoché* from the Greek Sceptics) in order to exclude assumptions from philosophy and other disciplines. Among Husserl’s concerns was the baneful influence of naturalistic psychology on our description of psychic or more broadly conscious or ‘lived’ experiences. Thus, for instance, concerning the description of consciousness, it is important not to think we first and foremost have ‘visual sensations’ or that our nerves receive ‘stimuli’, and so on (standard ways of describing experience found in philosophy and psychology since Locke). These descriptions are actually not faithful descriptions of experience rather they involve reference to putative theoretical entities (‘sense data’, ‘qualia’ and so on). First and foremost, I see a *flowering apple tree* in the garden; I certainly don’t *see* sense data. Phenomenology, then, has to be loyal to the way our experiences are actually given to us (we shall come back to the problem of the right kind of language for describing them). Phenomenology aims to recuperate our responses to experience and in particular to resist reductionist efforts to displace the richness of experience with a narrower, usually more naturalistic account of experience. There is, for instance, much talk in popular science, and even in the hard sciences, about ‘the brain’ being ‘hardwired’ for belief in God or for believing in magic connections between things, and so on. Clearly, this kind of talk is hopelessly confused (saying that our brains are disposed to believe in a certain way is no different than earlier talk that belief in God is in our ‘hearts’). Of course, it does not require phenomenology to diagnose that confusion. But phenomenology can at least begin to operate the kind of *epoché* that is required in order to be able to locate the specific phenomenon that is at issue and to leave to one side the mish-mash of cultural and scientific ideas one has about it. But there is far more to the *epoché* and reduction than simply the matter of excluding judgements drawn from our prevailing scientific or cultural assumptions.

In his posthumously published *Idea of Phenomenology* (1907)<sup>15</sup> lectures Husserl introduces what he calls the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction to overcome

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<sup>15</sup> E. Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. Lee Hardy, Husserl Collected Works VIII (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999).

the prejudices of the natural attitude to obtain a new, strictly philosophical, attitude that disregards existence and focuses on cognition with a new sense of immanence and transcendence. The *epoché* suspends all commitment to what Husserl (not very helpfully) calls ‘transcendence’, that is: it suspends commitment to whatever belongs outside’ the mental process or conscious experience itself. Even more radically, the ‘transcendental *epoché*’, as Husserl came to refer to it more generally, suspends all judgements that assume the existence of the world, that are involved in the ‘general thesis’ of the existence of the world. Going far beyond Brentano, Husserl wants to suspend all assumptions concerning actuality, the world as it is there before us, and so on. This suspension or disengagement of our actuality assumptions is far more difficult to accomplish. In the natural attitude, we accept on face value that things are there for us, as simply given. Even in scientific practice, the researcher accepts the subject matter of science as given: the mathematician sees prime numbers as ‘simply there’ to be discovered. Now, however, a complete change of regard must take place.

Phenomenology is now focused on ‘immanence’, that is, whatever is discovered as belonging to the experience itself, with all external admixtures, suppositions, etc., excluded. For instance, to make a comparison that Husserl himself endorses, when addressing an art work, the phenomenologist brackets issues such as the economic value of the work, discussion of its provenance, and so on. What matters in phenomenological viewing is what the work *means*, how it presents itself to me as viewer. In that sense, one can speak of phenomenology as being interested in the experience of *meaning*. But of course, attending to the manner in which the art work comes to mean does not mean neglecting its material features (if such features are relevant to the meaning). In the case of a novel then its aesthetic significance probably is not altered by the fact that the copy of the book in question is new or second-hand, hardback or paperback and so on. But this is because the manner in which a novel communicates its meaning or significance is quite different from that of a painting. In the case of a painting, its mode of meaning does often involve the quality, length and thickness of the brush strokes, the roughness of the material, and so on. So, one must be careful when insisting that the phenomenologist attends to the meaning, not to assume that we know exactly what we mean by ‘meaning’ and in operating the exclusions of the phenomenological reduction we must be careful not to allow certain prejudices to operate (e.g. concerning the status of the physical in regard to meaning, and so on).

In his mature work, Husserl realised that the modern exact sciences which had been enormously powerful in giving us control over the world, in one sense acted as a way of occluding our experience as we have it from our own uniquely

human perspective. More recently, philosophers (e.g. Tom Nagel) have spoken of a contrast between the third-person objectivist approach of modern science and our first-person experience. According to Husserl, the study of first-person subjective experiences has not been taken seriously by modern science after Galileo. In fact, the realm of the subjective has been cut off and relegated to the realm of ‘secondary’ properties, whereas the genuinely objective sciences were supposed to study only ‘primary’ properties that could be measured and quantified. Physics could study the volume, density, velocity, or displacement of an object, but could not really determine objectively if it tasted sweet, or was a particular colour, or felt smooth. These latter properties were considered ‘secondary’, or, as Husserl terms them, ‘subjective-relative’. Of course, science has progressed precisely because of this exclusion of the subjective relative. Since Descartes and indeed Robert Boyle there has been an inculcated scientific suspicion of secondary qualities. They are unreliable indicators of the actual properties inherent in things. Even though the earth appears to be still and the sun moving, it is in fact the other way around, as Galileo demonstrated. The sun is not really the same size as the moon although it appears to be about the same size.

This distrust of what Husserl calls ‘subjective-relative’ properties has become so dominant that there is no place left for the subjective. Subjective experience is the *sine qua non* for having the sense of an objective world in the first place. Trained as a mathematician, Husserl’s central concern was to understand the nature of science, and especially the mathematical, physical sciences, and how it is that these mathematical sciences gives us insight into the nature of the objective world and how they have transformed our understanding of the ‘pre-scientific world’ we normally inhabit in our everyday lives. He was particularly disturbed by the crisis that he diagnosed in the mathematical sciences (including logic) at the end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there was rampant progress in the empirical, positive sciences, but, on the other hand, there were theoretical crises in the foundations of mathematics and, especially in physics. This pointed to a new phenomenon: a lack of inquiry into the basic sense of the scientific accomplishment, a lack of self-knowledge about the meaning of the breakthrough of modern science. In Husserl’s view, the quantitative sciences have not actually made the world more intelligible, rather they had simply rendered it more useful.<sup>16</sup> For Husserl, the concept of science

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<sup>16</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, *Collected Works III* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), p. 82.

as such stands in a certain indissociable relationship with objectivity (Hua VIII 321). Phenomenology in part aims to restore genuine science and to overcome the crisis of the sciences by overcoming the subjective-objective divide that has been endemic to the scientific attitude since the seventeenth century. As Husserl will write: ‘World, world-experience, world-science appear to stand in an inner, even inseparable connection’ (Hua VIII 322). The very notion of ‘world’ as the horizontal backdrop of all entities including humans is something that science itself has not explored but instead has presumed or taken for granted (along with the notions of ‘past’, ‘future’ and so on). Husserl then wants phenomenology to explore the sense of worldhood that is presupposed by the sciences.

Husserl’s point is one he often terms ‘transcendental’, namely, that there is no such thing as pure objectivity which somehow stands on its own, available to some kind of ‘God’s eye perspective’. There is not simply ‘reality’ out there. ‘Nature’ as talked about by the natural sciences is actually a very particular construction produced by a certain way of regarding the given. Phenomenology rejects traditional approaches to reality which might be conveniently categorized under the term ‘metaphysical realism’. *Metaphysical realism* is the view that there is an objective world out there, independent of us. Rather, Husserl wants us to think of whatever is objective as correlated with a set of subjective activities. Whatever is objective is related to a set of subjective processes or attitudes or perspectives. The true nature of experience is a product of the *subjective-objective correlation* or what Husserl often refers to as ‘the noetic-noematic correlation’. By ‘noetic’ he means everything on the subjective side of experience and by the ‘noematic’ he means whatever is construed as on the objective side of experience. Husserl believes, furthermore, that there is an *a priori* correlation between the noetic and the noematic. In other words, it is not simply an accidental fact that a certain approach gives rise to an object being presented in a certain way, rather there is an *a priori* set of rules governing the possibility of such appearance. This is what Husserl is striving to identify – the *a priori* structures governing the given as given.

It is for Husserl an obvious fact that a religious object of veneration (say a relic) can only be seen as such from the standpoint of the religious attitude of a believer within the outlook of that religion. The lesson the phenomenologist wants to draw is that the nature of the objective world and the categories of objects we encounter has to be understood not simply in a metaphysical realist manner as simply ‘there’, but rather as the outcome of certain complicated transactions with human attitudes, or broadly with what we might refer to as the subjective domain. Husserl and his fellow phenomenologists spoke of this new way of thinking about the noetic-noematic correlation as overcoming the subjective-objective divide. Overcoming metaphysical realism also involves overcoming the naturalistic approach which is dominant in the sciences (and also in much current

philosophy). Modern natural science developed by focusing in particular on the objective domain since it could be measured using quantitative methods. The domain of the subjective on the other hand could be accessed directly by our own consciousness but it was not available for objective analysis. In consequence, science focused on the objective domain to the exclusion of the 'merely subjective'. In his magisterial work *The Crisis of European Sciences* Husserl analyses the consequences of this sharp divide between the objective and the subjective. Husserl shows how the original spirit of modern science as exemplified by Galileo was driven to accept its own methodological orientation as *the* objective third-person neutral way of viewing the world. Husserl, on the other hand, wants to show that this so-called 'objectivist' approach of science is actually a one-sided abstraction from our usual, everyday engagement with the world. In our pre-scientific experience, the world is always available as on hand, given, inexhaustible and unsurpassable, as the context of all our actions. Husserl's name for this prescientific world is the 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*). In the *Crisis* Husserl seeks to explore the subjective conditions of this 'pre-given' world, which founds and gives rise to objective science.

For Husserl, modernity took an essentially new direction beyond the medieval and ancient world by conceiving of the fragments of the Greek sciences (e.g. Euclidian geometry) in a distinctly new way - grasping their essential universality and infinity. The dawn of modernity came with the discovery of infinity in mathematics. A new ideal of a rational, all-inclusive science emerged: the "completely new idea of *mathematical natural science* - Galilean science" (*Crisis*, § 8, pp. 22-23). While the ancient Greeks had already idealised numbers and, with Euclid, already had developed the notion of a complete, formalised, axiomatic deductive system, still Aristotelian syllogistic logic and Euclidian geometry was essentially finite: Euclidean geometry ... knows only finite tasks, a finitely closed a priori (*Crisis*, p. 21). On the other hand, ideal space has promise on infinite, self-enclosed, systematic theory. What is new is the idea of an infinite rational domain capable of being explored a priori by an infinite science.

Husserl goes on to contrast the kind of limited truth available in the pre-scientific world with the 'unconditioned truth' sought by the scientist (*Crisis*, p. 278; Hua VI 324). The truth of science is *ideal*; it represents a limit, a goal against which every particular scientific finding is merely relative. Furthermore, scientific truth is understood here as accessible to all ('for everyone', *für jedermann*), and, Husserl emphasises, 'this everyone is no longer everyone in the finite sense of prescientific life'.

In that sense, science lifts us above the life-world and brings us into contact with the ideal, the identical, the self-same. Art can at best bring us into a cycle of



repeated production of similar products. In other words, art cannot function as a liberating force in the way in which self-reflective science can. Notice how the language here is rather close to the description of the spheres of labour and work in Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*. However, where, for Arendt, it is action that lifts humans out of the cycle of nature whereby labourers are tied to their labour, and goes beyond the production of artefacts which take on an existence apart from the maker, the sphere of action is liberating. For Husserl, it is not political action that is liberating but the life of scientific communality in the carrying out of infinite tasks. Non-scientific cultures have not yet disclosed to themselves the possibility of this horizon of infinite tasks, rather everything of this non-scientific life unfolds within the horizon of a finite *Umwelt*.

Although the focus on the life-world is new and striking in the *Crisis*, at the same time, Husserl has by no means abandoned framework of transcendental phenomenology or the application of the *epoché* or even the 'Cartesian way' into transcendental phenomenology. Rather, Husserl is exploring the life-world and its relation to the world of science in order to show a new way into transcendental phenomenology. What is new is the special focus on tradition and history, whereas Husserl usually acted with an explicit renunciation of tradition. *Ideas I*, for instance, speaks of *epoché* as rigorous 'exclusion' (*Ausschaltung*) and an 'abstention' (*Enthaltung*) from employing the methods or propositions of the philosophical tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Husserl's research writings in phenomenology went in many directions at once. He was always carrying out and recording phenomenological observations (chiefly about out mental processes such as perception, memory, imagination, judgement, reasoning, our sense of time, our experience of embodied action, and so on) and at the same time he was trying to establish the theoretical credentials of phenomenology as a strict science. He had plans for his many pupils to carry on and develop his work in the manner in which scientific researchers collaborate together. But his plans were frustrated as his students developed their own research plans and research methodologies. Husserl pinned his hopes on his bright assistant Martin Heidegger but Heidegger had plans of his own.

There is no doubt by Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) is regarded as one of the most creative and original works of philosophy of the twentieth century. Central to Heidegger's achievement in this work is his radical way of approaching human existence, which both makes the nature of human existence unfamiliar

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<sup>17</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1983), § 31, pp. 59-60.

and startling (described in entirely novel terms) and at the same time recognizes human being's inescapable hunger for familiarity, its anchoring in the routines of the everyday, its self-recognition in terms of the quotidian. Part of Heidegger's originality lies in the way that he emphasises the 'historicality' of human existence. It is not just that all humans live in history and have a history but that their orientation to existence is such as to be intrinsically historical. Being historical is an a priori condition of being human. Human existence then has to be understood in terms of its overall temporal dimensions instead of being approached as a ready-made object. According to Heidegger, traditional philosophy since the Greeks has taken the nature of human existence more or less for granted. Human beings have been understood since the time of Plato and Aristotle as 'rational animals' and so have been treated naturalistically as just one more kind of animal that populates the planet. Alternatively, the religious traditions of the West, specifically Judaism and Christianity, have treated human beings as being somehow images of the divine nature and have sought to interpret human existence against the backdrop of the assumed eternal, unchanging existence of the divinity, in contrast with which human life is regarded as fleeting and inconsequential, a 'vale of tears'. Influenced by the idiosyncratic writings of the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, Heidegger wants to revisit human existence and examine it in its concreteness and its embeddedness in its everyday routines rather in terms of superimposed idealised images of what human nature should be like.

As Heidegger immediately acknowledges, describing human existence accurately and in an unprejudiced manner presents particular difficulties. First of all, the traditional metaphysical categories of western philosophy (from Aristotle to Kant) have been the categories that applied primarily to physical objects of a certain size and shape, to things that simply occurred in the world. Human existence, on the other hand, needs to be picked out uniquely, hence Heidegger wants to replace talk of human 'nature' or human 'life' with the simple term 'existence' (Dasein) and this Dasein has to be described according to its own peculiar existential structures, which Heidegger calls 'existentialia'. Human existence, for instance, does not simply endure through time but has a particularly intimate relation with temporality. The essence of human existence is, as Heidegger puts it, its 'to-be'.

Humans are engaged in projects that cast them forward into the future, while at the same time their sense of personal and social identity is bound up with their sense of what has been, a sense of the past. Human beings are essentially *historical*. Human existence also has a tendency to seek the familiar and the routine, what Heidegger calls the everyday. Indeed, in its everyday routines, humans tend to slide from their authentic ownness of personhood to a kind of anonymous functioning,

whereby we all tend to do as one does, one simply lets oneself go along with the flow as it were. In a crowd, commuting on a train or bus, joining a queue, and in most of our public activities, we are acting not uniquely and with genuine individuality but rather we are in the realm of the anonymous one, which Heidegger calls *das Man*. Of course, we are not always able to keep this anonymous public levelled-down subjectivity. There are times when we are forced to come to terms with our own unique selves. The recognition of the possibility of my own death is an anxiety-provoking existential experience that for Heidegger demands an individual personalised response. Anxiety, then, for Heidegger, has a very powerful meaning for human beings. Overall, Heidegger believes that traditional philosophy (including Husserl's own phenomenology) had not paid sufficient attention to the structures peculiar to human existence with its temporality, historicity and finitude. Indeed, Heidegger believes that Husserlian phenomenology had been too caught up in the philosophy of *consciousness* to really interrogate deeply the manner in which human beings live through their lives. Heidegger does not even refer to the concept of 'consciousness' in *Being and Time* and he is critical of the Cartesian legacy that did not interrogate the being of the 'sum' or 'I am' that is invoked in the Cartesian phrase *cogito ergo sum*. Heidegger's new approach to human existence has to recognise its temporal context and therefore cannot be a simply descriptive neutral approach. The very historicity and cultural embeddedness of human existence call for an approach that is sensitive to cultural and historical context. In order to make phenomenology more attuned to the historicity of Dasein, Heidegger proposes to draw on a discipline that was already well established in nineteenth-century German Protestant theology, namely, *hermeneutics* or the 'art of interpretation', which Heidegger had discovered already in his days as a theology student but which was brought to life for him in reading the works of Wilhelm Dilthey.

But it is not just that we need to be attuned to historical and cultural specificities in order to understand human existence, it is also that human existence is not something that simply 'occurs', is 'present-at-hand', is simply 'there'. Rather human existence is distinguished by the fact that individuals *care* about their lives; our existence *matters* to us. As John Hoagland once said about computers, 'the problem with artificial intelligence is that computers don't give a damn'.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, for Dasein, my existence literally is what matters to me. I am involved with my world in such an intimately entangled way, that my very existence involves what Heidegger calls 'being-in-the-world'. Moreover, going further than Husserl, Heidegger identifies

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<sup>18</sup> J. Hoagland, 'Understanding Natural Language,' *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp. 619-32.

mood as the way in which the world is disclosed to me. I am always in a mood and indeed I always simply find or discover myself in a mood. I might wake up in a certain mood and the whole world will appear to me in a certain light. Moods, for Heidegger, then have significance far beyond that of being interior emotions. They are world-disclosing. Indeed, even the everyday absence of an explicit mood (of anger, sadness, or whatever) is not really the absence of a mood, but rather the presence of a very subtle everyday, average kind of mood.

Heidegger is very astute in recognising that human beings are caught up in the world in a very deep and profound way. In part here, one can identify the influence of St. Augustine and the Christian religious tradition that identifies in humans a certain desire for the world that leads to a kind of 'falling-for' the world, or being seduced or sucked in by it. Augustine sees this as a kind of concupiscence and also a producing a kind of curiosity about the world rather than a genuine engagement with it. Heidegger, of course, does not want to engage in a moral evaluation of this kind of tendency in human beings. Viewed with the cool eye of the phenomenologist, Heidegger sees this 'falling' tendency as an inevitable and inescapable essential feature of human existence. Of course, there is also, a pull in the other direction, a desire to gain control over one's life, to be authentic and genuine and not be scattered into the anonymous realm of the public.

Heidegger greatly deepened the way phenomenology approached human experience. Furthermore, he saw Husserl as too intellectualist and cognitivist, interested primarily in the achievement of human rationality and cognition but not fully mapping the ordinary forms of engagement of everyday Dasein. Heidegger himself, however, and especially his analyses in *Being and Time* soon came in for criticism also. Although Heidegger talks in very great depth about human being-in-the-world, he rarely refers to central aspects of human existence that involve *embodiment*, for instance, human sexuality or even bodily needs, as well as issues connected with our personal relations with other (Heidegger says nothing about love, for instance, although he does talk of care). As Heidegger's student Levinas put it: 'Heidegger's Dasein is never hungry'. Post-Heideggerian phenomenology, particularly in the cases of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, begin from the mysteries of human embodiment (or even 'incarnation' as Merleau-Ponty calls it) and also our experience of others. Levinas identifies a kind of immeasurable, even infinite, *desire* that drives human existence and goes far beyond the satisfaction of needs. In a strong sense, humans have unquenchable and unsatisfiable desire, as the poet put it a man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what is a heaven for'. Levinas is also critical of the western philosophical tradition for its pursuit of knowledge as a kind of domination over being, a will-to-power. This approach has always undervalued

the experience of recognition and respect and indeed the duty we owe to others. Levinas uses the non-philosophical term ‘face’ to capture the uniqueness of our experience of the other. The face is something unique, irreplaceable, supremely individual and expressive, and yet also vulnerable and, in a way, naked: The face presents the other in a very special way: “The face resists possession, resists my powers”. My face-to-face relation with others is the centre of Levinas’ phenomenology. Levinas is trying to express phenomenologically the intimate, personally-engaged space which makes possible the intersubjective human encounter, leaving aside data from the positive sciences (including politics, sociology, etc.). For Levinas, seeking to rectify the western tradition, focusing on the experience of the other is the primary way of accessing our deepest experience as human beings. The face of the other awakens a responsibility in me and from that point of view there is a kind of asymmetry in my obligation to the other person. From *my* perspective, I am more responsible than the other person. I can personally experience my own responsibility. Nevertheless, despite his criticism of the western philosophical tradition, and despite his expressed wish to leave behind the ‘climate’, as he put it, of Heidegger’s philosophy, Levinas has always presented himself as a disciple of Husserl and following in his tradition of phenomenology.

One area where phenomenology has been very important in recent years has been in the emerging discipline of cognitive science and in the science of consciousness generally. After years of proposing Artificial Intelligence programmes, cognitive scientists have begun to recognize that they need accurate and careful descriptions of the precise manner in which human cognitive systems function and are related to one another. For instance, computers have been considered to have ‘memory’ and there are various programmes for rational calculation, and increasingly for performing perceptual and motor tasks. But the whole system of human consciousness (and by extension, animal consciousness and indeed any consciousness whatever) needs to be mapped in terms of its necessary structural interconnections. The relation between memory and fantasy, for instance, has been recognised by all philosophers since Aristotle, but the precise structures of their interconnection have not really been described in detail and are required for a proper cognitive science understanding of these functions, prior to attempts to artificially re-construct and model them.

Clearly, phenomenology has continued to develop and expand its conception of the human. There are many new insights into the human condition being developed by phenomenologists all the time. However, I do think, returning now to the purely philosophical perspective, that there has not been much progress in the articulation of the phenomenological method itself. Husserl spent enormous amounts of intellectual energy on the theory of phenomenology, and subsequently

Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty added to that theorising. The problem is now that phenomenology is seen to be a relatively rich and varied bag of insights but the nature of a methodology that would systematically examine them seems to be missing. It has become clearer, after the critique of Derrida and others, that phenomenology does have central theoretical difficulties. I think it is time to revision the discipline of phenomenology to secure its place within the human sciences. I am not sure it can maintain the status Husserl accorded to it to be 'first philosophy' but the valuable contribution of phenomenology in the recuperation of human experience must not be left behind as the human sciences advance.