

Phenomenology: Lecture Notes

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Phenomenology is a systematic way of exploring and understanding the world through experience through attempting to study phenomena (which may be external events in the world, or internal feelings and thoughts) on their own terms.

It is applied academically particularly in the

1. anthropological study of religion (the Phenomenology of Religion) – the study of individual religious attitudes and practices, which has widely influenced qualitative research in general and
2. landscape (Phenomenology of Landscape). Key scholars in religious studies include Ninian Smart and Marion Bowman and, in landscape studies, Chris Tilley and Tim Ingold.

A useful online introduction is 'Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>

Smith defines Phenomenology 'the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience.'¹

Etymology

Literally phenomenology is the 'logic' or 'ology' (indicating study) of phenomena.

Phenomenology and Philosophy

As a method of academic inquiry phenomenology originates in philosophy.

Alfred Schutz argued that phenomenology is the source of all philosophical thinking: 'phenomenology, searching for a real beginning of all philosophical thinking, hopes when fully developed, to end where all the traditional philosophies start'.²

According to Helmut Wagner, phenomenology's

starting point is given in the experiences of the conscious human being who lives and acts in a "world" which he apperceives and interprets, and which makes sense to him. He deals with this world in the intellectually spontaneous yet active mode of intentionality: There is no phase or aspect of human consciousness which appears in and by itself; consciousness is always consciousness of something. The forms of consciousness are tied to the context of experiences.³

¹ Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>

² Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed Helmut R. Wagner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, p. 54.

³ Wagner, Helmut R., 'Introduction' in Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed Helmut R. Wagner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, pp. 1-50., p. 5

Definitions

The Oxford English Dictionary: “Phenomenology. a. The science of phenomena as distinct from being (ontology). b. That division of any science which describes and classifies its phenomena.

The phenomenological approach may be simply defined as one 'in which differing belief systems are examined as perceived in their own terms, rather than by adopting a reductionist stance'.⁴

In other words, the phenomenon - such as belief in astrology, voodoo, or voodoo economics - may be understood on its own terms rather, say, than as a variety of some other category, such as a form of religion or science.

The aim is the 'qualitative understanding of the forms of life of a religious tradition from that tradition's standpoint'.⁵

Phenomenology is defined by Mathew Johnson as ‘the study of the structures of human experience and consciousness . . . which claims also to have moved beyond dualisms of the mind and body with its emphasis on the sense and on everyday activity’.⁶

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sees Phenomenology as the essential contact point between consciousness and environment.⁷ He talks about phenomenology as a ‘philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins . . . and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world’ . . . ‘that does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity’.⁸

Chris Tilley: Phenomenology is therefore a field that sacrifices absolute truth for the allowance that “. . . ‘object’ and ‘subject’, ‘nature’ and consciousness’ are dialectically related moments of a totality which is constituted through the Being of the body in the world.”⁹

⁴ Caird, D. & Law H., 1982, ‘Non-Conventional Beliefs: Their structure and Measurement’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 21. No.2, pp.152-163 (p. 153).

⁵ Twiss, Sumner B, and Walter H. Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992, p. 27.

⁶ Matthew Johnson, ‘Phenomenological Approaches in Landscape Archaeology’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (2012) pp. 272–73.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. By Routledge and Kegan Paul (London: Routledge, 2005 [1945]), p. 73.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962) p. vii.

⁹ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 13.

Origins

The Latin term “Phenomenologia” was introduced by Christoph Friedrich Oetinger in 1736. The origins of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline are usually traced to Emanuel Kant’s concern with the nature of mind and knowledge and were developed by other thinkers such as G.W.F Hegel (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* and the concept of *dasein*, often translated into English as ‘being’, ‘being there’, presence or ‘existence’.

Theory: Edmund Husserl 1859-1938

However, in terms of their relevance to current research phenomenological principles were first set out in 1900-1 in the *Logical Investigations* of Edmund Husserl, who argued that it was essential that all inquiries into any area of human endeavour touching on consciousness paid due respect to the 'I', the individual's subjective experience, rather than attempt to explain it away or reduce it to quantitative measurement.¹⁰ Husserl argued that the task of the phenomenologist was not to judge the phenomena under investigation, but rather the "description" [of]...the realm of essential structures of transcendental subjectivity immediately transparent to the mind'.

Husserl noted that the phenomenological study of consciousness is emphatically not the same as the psychological study of consciousness, for the researcher is seeking to observe and describe, not explain in terms of preordained categories.¹¹

Crucially Husserl followed the Platonic belief in real, underlying or transcendent psychic realities. He believed that, by studying phenomena closely we could discover these realities.

Theory: Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1908-1961

Maurice Merleau-Ponty adapted his teacher Husserl's approach to lived experience by doing away with the ‘transcendental ego’, considering it to be an unjustifiable abstraction from lived, embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty insists that all lived experience must be subject to the primacy of our bodily perception and coined the term, "body-subject", on the grounds that one cannot separate one’s consciousness from one’s own embodied experience of the world.

Theory: Ninian Smart 1927-2001

Husserl's phenomenological approach was incorporated into the new discipline of the study of religions, in particular by Ninian Smart. It was Smart who largely defined the discipline's approach as one of 'methodological neutralism' or 'agnosticism'.¹² This

¹⁰ Husserl, Edmund (1972), *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, London: Collier-MacMillan [1913, Eng. trans.1931], p. 7.

¹¹ Husserl, Edmund (1965), *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper and Row, pp. 90-1..

¹² Smart, Ninian (1973b), *The Science Of Religion And The Sociology Of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 94, 108.

was as opposed to the personal religious commitment which, he argued, had once assumed to be a prerequisite of the study of theology.¹³

Husserl argued that the phenomenological process should begin with the investigator's reflection on their own 'I', the set of assumptions and biases which they bring to the investigation or in this case, as Smart would say, the researcher's own 'I-picture'. At the heart of this process is reflexivity, the ability to reflect on one's own motives and biases which is necessary if one is to avoid the possibility that these will unduly shape one's conclusions.

The paradox Smart noted in relation to phenomenological studies is of importance here: they must be value-free in the sense that the phenomenon is not subject to *a priori* judgements and the researcher's own subjective experience must be 'bracketed out', yet such an approach may actually evoke a 'value-rich' appreciation of the meaning of the religion being observed.¹⁴

Moreover, as Smart argued, reflexivity implies the existence of a dialectical relationship between the student of religion and the object of study, with the beliefs of both the student and the individuals studied liable to change.¹⁵

The existence of such a relationship necessarily challenges what Charlotte Davies has defined as social science's 'implicit assumption that we are investigating something "outside ourselves"', an aspiration which she doubts is possible even in 'hard' sciences such as astronomy and physics, which still, like the arts and humanities, require the researcher to evaluate evidence and reach conclusions which can never be entirely separated from questions of personal conditioning or bias.¹⁶

Experience: Subjectivity and Objectivity

Phenomenology contests the notion of objective versus subjective knowledge. For example, in common terms, a car might be considered objective (it really exists) but the thrill of driving a fast car is subjective (it doesn't really exist). However phenomenology argues that the thrill is experienced and therefore exists and can therefore be studied.

The nature of experience

Experience may be passive (such as seeing or hearing), or active (such as walking or talking), inner (feeling, hoping etc) or embodied (sweating, shivering etc).

Phenomenological method

¹³ Smart, Ninian (1973a), *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London: MacMillan, p. 12; Smart, Ninian (1973b), *The Science Of Religion And The Sociology Of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 4.

¹⁴ Smart, Ninian (1973b), *The Science Of Religion And The Sociology Of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 21,

¹⁵ Smart, Ninian (1973b), *The Science Of Religion And The Sociology Of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 11,

¹⁶ Davies, Charlotte Aull (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Ourselves and Others*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 3.

In extreme forms phenomenology has no 'method'. However, academics require method if they are to conduct research. Many academics have attempted to codify phenomenological method. For example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):

'IPA is a qualitative approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms. The philosopher Edmund Husserl famously urged phenomenologists to go 'back to the things themselves', and IPA research follows his lead in this regard rather than attempting to fix experience in predefined or overly abstract categories'.¹⁷

Van Manen wrote that 'an appropriate topic for phenomenological inquiry is determined by the questioning of the essential nature of a lived experience: a certain way of being in the world'.¹⁸ He adds, 'A phenomenological concern always has this twofold character: a preoccupation with the concreteness...as well as the essential nature...of a lived experience'.¹⁹ Van Manen describes the essence not as an underlying or transcendent reality, but 'a description of a phenomenon'.²⁰

According to Smith 'phenomenology develops a complex account of

- temporal awareness (within the stream of consciousness),
- spatial awareness (notably in perception),
- attention (distinguishing focal and marginal or "horizontal" awareness),
- awareness of one's own experience (self-consciousness, in one sense),
- self-awareness (awareness-of-oneself),
- the self in different roles (as thinking, acting, etc.),
- embodied action (including kinesthetic awareness of one's movement),
- purpose or intention in action (more or less explicit),
- awareness of other persons (in empathy, intersubjectivity, collectivity),
- linguistic activity (involving meaning, communication, understanding others),
- social interaction (including collective action), and
- everyday activity in our surrounding life-world (in a particular culture).²¹

The researcher then, needs to be completely aware of their entire environment inner and outer.

¹⁷ Smith, Jonathan A., Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 1.

¹⁸ Manen, Max Van, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). P. 39.

¹⁹ Manen, Max Van, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 40.

²⁰ Manen, Max Van, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). P. 39.

²¹ Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>

Research should follow a clear three stage process²²:

1. Description
- 2 Interpretation
3. Analysis

In practice phenomenological method includes a number of key features.

Reflexivity: the need to reflect on one's own preconceptions throughout the whole research process, from formulating questions to interpreting research.
(The criticism of reflexivity is that it can lead to self-absorption)

Reflexivity, which Davies defines as 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' is, in her opinion, vital to intelligent research,²³

Epoché - the 'bracketing' of one's bias - intended to generate understanding of questions of truth, value and explanatory systems. It can be a useful mental exercise to imagine bracketing one's biases. The criticism is that we can never transcend our biases, to which the answer is that we should try, otherwise we can never interpret data without judging it.

Insider-Outsider debate

To able to reflect on one's self one needs to know whether one is an 'insider' in any belief system, community or activity, or an 'outsider'

Empathetic understanding - imaginative experiencing - to try to experience what the practitioner/believer is experiencing. This is an aspiration and it is right to be non-judgmental. On the other hand, most people would find it difficult to be non-judgmental: imagine researching murders for example – this may be an extreme case but is one that some researchers face.

In practice then, these are the sort of situations where reflexivity is important:

- the researcher is a fan of astrology interviewing someone who thinks astrology is complete rubbish
- the researcher thinks astrology is complete rubbish and is interviewing astrologers
- the researcher is an environmental campaigner interviewing climate deniers
- the researcher is a born-again Christian interviewing pagans
- the researcher is a Trump supporter interviewing Black Lives Matter activists

²² Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>

²³ Davies, Charlotte Aull (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Ourselves and Others*, London and New York: Routledge, pp 4-5. Also see Etherington, Kim, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Ourselves in Research*. London, Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2004.

In each of these cases the researcher is likely to be fundamentally hostile to the interviewee and needs to understand this in order to (a) formulate reasonable questions (b) listen to the answers and (c) understand the phenomena – i.e. the interviewee's experience and perspective.

The same problem occurs if the researcher is supportive of the interviewee's position.

Other issues may occur in other situations. For example, you are interviewing a high-status individual. When you interpret their words, do you want to please them, or cut them down to size?

The reflexive process must take place at every stage in the research process.

Reporting an experience

Smith writes that 'To begin an elementary exercise in phenomenology, consider some typical experiences one might have in everyday life, characterized in the first person:

- I see that fishing boat off the coast as dusk descends over the Pacific.
- I hear that helicopter whirring overhead as it approaches the hospital.
- I am thinking that phenomenology differs from psychology.
- I wish that warm rain from Mexico were falling like last week.
- I imagine a fearsome creature like that in my nightmare.
- I intend to finish my writing by noon.
- I walk carefully around the broken glass on the sidewalk'.²⁴

Phenomenology of landscape

Merleau-Ponty's work is relevant to sacred geography because he insists that we honour whatever is right there in front of us in our own perceived landscapes, and treat them as participatory and emergent 'realities', necessarily particularised to the experience of that moment when we interact with it.

Christopher Tilley, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty: 'the human body provides the fundamental mediation point between thought and the world. The world and the subject reflect and flow into each other through the body that provides the living bond with the world'.²⁵

Tim Ingold: the dualities such as object versus subject do not truly describing lived human experience of landscape. Ingold rejects landscape as a 'way of seeing' and

²⁴ Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>

²⁵ Tilley, Christopher, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, Oxford: Berg 1994, p. 14.

states it is 'a way of being': landscape is not land nor space but a part of us just as we are part of it'.²⁶

All theoretical perspectives may have a role, but can be critiqued. The issue you raise is whether phenomenology requires an observation of personal experience, or of the external environment? Is it necessary to visit a site in order to have an inner experience, or to observe landscape relationships which will not be visible on a map.

On the experience of the solstice at Stonehenge, Ed Krupp wrote

One should make a point of being there. Celestial events take place in context. When you see what actually happens in the landscape, you learn a great deal more about it. It is, of course, possible to determine the alignment of a building with instruments, but nuances of light and shadow details of the horizon, difficulties in practical observation, and many more subjective aspects of a site can only be appreciated in person.²⁷

Ruggles himself added, 'Similarly, by walking in the modern landscape we can try to appreciate patterns of relationship between monuments and the topographic elements of the landscape as experienced by people living in that landscape in prehistoric times'.²⁸ Ruggles, concedes that we can never exactly know that we experience the same feelings when watching an especially bright full moon as did a prehistoric observer, but he does argue that 'the idea deserves serious consideration in contextual interpretations'.²⁹

'[u]ndoubtedly great personal satisfaction may be derived in exploring a stone monument, investigating the potential alignments, identifying horizon features, taking measurements, calculating declinations, and formulating an astronomical explanation for the site's construction and layout. In doing so, one may feel somehow 'in tune' with the mysterious people who erected the stones.'³⁰

See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, esp. pp.44-72.

²⁶ Ingold, Tim, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 191.

²⁷ Ed Krupp, HASTRO History of Astronomy e mail list 8 August 1995, cited in Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

²⁸ Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

²⁹ Ruggles, Clive, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999, p. 151.

³⁰ Ruggles, p. 41.

Criticism of phenomenology

Gavin Flood has critiqued phenomenology.³¹ For example:

- Reflexivity just a good part of ethnography
- One can never truly experience another person's experience.
- Can lead to self-absorption
- Bracketing is impossible. All one can do is be aware of one's bias.

Reflexivity carries potential pitfalls: it may lead to a 'form of self-absorption...in which boundaries between subject and object disappear [and] the one becomes the other, a process that effectively denies the possibility of social research'.

Davies, Charlotte Aull (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Ourselves and Others*, London and New York: Routledge, pp 4-5

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³¹ Flood, Gavin, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999.

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