

Praise for the book

'This fully revised and updated edition of Spinelli's classic introduction to phenomenology should be essential reading on all person-centred, existential and humanistic trainings, and any other counselling or psychotherapy course which aims to help students develop an in-depth understanding of human lived experience. With a new chapter on phenomenological research, discussion of contemporary developments in the field, and an integration of Spinelli's own contributions to existential-phenomenological theory and practice, this book is sure to remain a key text for many years to come.'

Mick Cooper, Senior Lecturer in Counselling,
University of Strathclyde; author of *Existential Therapies* (Sage, 2003).

'As the foundational world-view of "modernity" lapses into philosophical and practical incoherence, existential-phenomenological thinking will surely play a key role in informing the new meta-paradigm that will eventually replace it. From its masterly descriptions of R.D. Laing's view of the schizoid split and Rogers' humanism to its carefully respectful but incisively critical interrogations of psychoanalytic, cognitive behavioural and humanistic theory, this book's rich insight into the lacunae of modern psychological thinking illustrates the contribution that existential phenomenology can make to founding a coherently mature Psychology that is both fully human(e) and responsibly "scientific" in the best sense of that term. More specifically, in his welcome and careful clarification of the distinctions between humanistic and existential-phenomenological approaches, Spinelli opens up the potential for a truly formidable "third force" in psychology that takes us beyond the limitations of cognitive behaviourism and psychoanalysis. At last there is the real prospect of a constructive dialogue between the major schools of psychology, in which, to quote Spinelli, phenomenological psychology can make a "pivotal contribution to increased communication and substantial rapprochement between all the contemporary systems in psychology". For this reason alone, this book could fittingly be compulsory set reading on all undergraduate-level psychology and post-graduate counselling/psychotherapy courses.

In sum, *The Interpreted World* is a comprehensive, intelligent and highly readable introduction to this vitally prescient field of thought; and in opening up existential phenomenology so ably and engagingly, it makes an important contribution to the momentous evolutionary developments in human consciousness that the transcendence of "modernity" will most surely entail. For as Spinelli himself writes, what is under fundamental challenge here is "the stance of an isolationist self-centred, self-focused way of being and relating that runs rampant throughout our culture" – and to the transformation of which existential-phenomenological thinking can make a possibly decisive contribution.'

Richard House, PhD, Magdalen Medical
Practice, Norwich and Steiner Waldorf teacher;
author of *Therapy beyond Modernity* (Karnac, 2003).

'This is by far the most monumental, erudite, comprehensive, authoritative case that existentialism and phenomenology (a) have a rightful place in the academy; (b) are tough-minded bodies of thought; (c) have rigorous scientific foundations; (d) bequeath a distinctive school of psychotherapy and counselling; and (e) are just as good as the more established systems of psychology.'

Alvin R. Mahrer, PhD, University of Ottawa, Canada;
author of *The Complete Guide to Experiential Psychotherapy* (Bull Publishing, 2003).

the interpreted world

an introduction to phenomenological psychology

second edition
ernesto spinelli

hope is that this text might open the way for a greater number of courses, or course-sections, whose focus is upon phenomenological psychology.

Though I began this Introduction by referring to the role of 'consciousness' in psychology, I do not wish to mislead the reader into thinking that the sole, or even principal, concern of this text, as was the case with early, now virtually forgotten, introspectionist theories in psychology, lies in the exploration of the components and structures of subjective experience.

Even if the question of consciousness remains the starting point of all phenomenological investigations, the central focus of phenomenological psychology rests, more properly, with the analysis of how all of us arrive at *unique interpretations* of our experience by means of both innate, or species, invariants, imposed by our biology and experientially derived social constructs and frameworks. Perhaps paradoxically, but central to phenomenological inquiry, such an approach has increased substantially the adequacy of our understanding of the *shared* qualities and features of our species.

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An Introduction to Phenomenological Theory

Pure logical thinking cannot yield us any knowledge of the empirical world; all knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it.

A. Einstein, P. Podolsky, N. Rosen

As human beings, we attempt to make sense of all our experiences. We strive to impose meaning upon the world. In our awareness and acceptance of this immense capacity, we are led, ineluctably, to an underlying issue that poses perhaps the most basic of all philosophical questions: What is real? At first, the answer to such a question might seem to be absurdly simple to provide, and indicative of the unnecessarily pedantic obscurity of much that passes as philosophical enquiry.

A typical reply to such a question might proceed in the following manner: if I look around my room, I see (among other objects) books, a desk, a chair, a pen. Similarly, I can look out of my window and observe people walking down the street, other houses, flowers, shrubs, trees and so forth. All these things are real to me in that I believe them to be independent of my consciousness. If I were to die suddenly at this moment, I assume that these objects would continue to exist since I view them as having an existence that is separate to my own. Their physical properties and their independent existence lead me to declare them as being real.

This theory of reality, which the vast majority of us in the West take to be so patently obvious that we imagine it to be not theory but fact, has led us to posit the existence of an *objective reality*. The notion of an objective reality adopts the view that there are real objects in the world that exist independently of our conscious knowledge or awareness of them. In addition, it argues that we have direct access to them through our brain and senses. Whether organic or man-made, they exist as separate entities, separate structures. What we perceive as being 'out there' is actually there; it is objectively real.

Like much of modern philosophy, the system known as *phenomenology* questions this viewpoint in an attempt to clarify it. It asks us first to consider the possible assumptions and biases that have led us to our conclusion so that we may be more certain of its accuracy. As a result of such probing, representatives of scientific fields as diverse as cognitive science, neurophysiology, sociology, theoretical physics and psychology have arrived at an intriguing, not to say disturbing, conclusion (Farber, 1962).

Stated simply, this conclusion argues that true reality is, and will forever remain, both unknown and unknowable to us. Instead, that which we term reality, that is, that which is experienced by us as being real, is inextricably linked to our mental processes in general, and, in particular, to our in-built, innate human species capacity to construct meaning.

This view is the starting point to phenomenological enquiry.

The Origins of Phenomenology

The term 'phenomenology' is partly derived from the Greek word *phainomenon* (plural: *phainomena*). *Phainomenon* literally means 'appearance', that is, 'that which shows itself'. Philosophers generally define 'phenomena' to mean 'the appearances of things, as contrasted with the things themselves as they really are'. The world, as we experience it, is a phenomenal world.

Immanuel Kant, who remains among the most influential of the post-Classical Western philosophers, took as the cornerstone of his philosophical speculations precisely this contrast and argued from it that our mind cannot ever know the thing itself ('the noumenon', to employ Kant's terminology), but can only know it as it appears to us – the phenomenon. As such, the true nature of reality, for Kant, was not only far from being obvious, it was beyond our ability to understand and to experience directly.

Although the term 'phenomenology' was coined in the mid-eighteenth century, and several noteworthy philosophers (such as Kant, Hegel and Marx) employed it at various times in the course of their writings, the philosophical school known to us as phenomenology only originated in the early years of the twentieth century.

When Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), its founder, adopted the term, he supplied it with new meaning and significance. Husserl wanted nothing less than to develop a science of phenomena that would clarify how objects are experienced and present themselves to our consciousness. Husserl's hope and stated aim was 'to reform philosophy, and... to establish a rigorously scientific philosophy, which could provide a firm basis for all other sciences' (Misiak and Sexton, 1973: 6).

In an attempt to fulfill this aim, Husserl developed an approach to investigation that is generally known as the *phenomenological method*. Husserl was not its inventor, nor can it be said that he was the first philosopher to employ it, but he refined and specified its conditions and purpose, and raised the method to the status of a fundamental philosophical procedure that would become the cornerstone of his approach.

As we will see in the following chapter, the phenomenological method focuses on the data (or phenomena) of consciousness in order to clarify their role in the process of meaning-construction, and, as well, attempts to set them aside – or 'bracket' them – in order to arrive at a more adequate (if still necessarily incomplete) knowledge of reality.

Transcendental and Existential Phenomenology

Husserl's attempts form the basis of one strand of phenomenology – *transcendental phenomenology* – of which he remains the most prominent exponent. However, it would be wrong to identify all of phenomenology as being solely, or even principally, Husserlian. Of equal, if not greater, philosophical and psychological significance is the second major branch known as *existential phenomenology* (or, more commonly, *existentialism*), that was principally influenced by the writings of Husserl's university assistant, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976).

As such, it is more helpful and accurate to consider phenomenology not strictly as a school of thought possessing a set body of agreed-upon tenets, but, rather, as an investigative approach that encompasses a variety of similarly focused perspectives whose shared concerns are directed towards a methodologically structured investigation of our experience of the world.

I will consider the main ideas that impact upon psychology from both of these major strands of phenomenology in this text. For the moment, however, let us remain with the Husserlian transcendental strand since, as well as historically preceding existential phenomenology, it supplies us with the central arguments presented by phenomenologists on the issue of reality.

The Phenomenological View of Reality

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the objects that we perceive (including, of course, the people, or others in general with whom we interact, as well as ourselves) exist, in the way that they exist, through the meanings that each of us gives them.

For example, the book that you are currently reading appears to you to be real, you see it as being separate, inhabiting a different space to that which you inhabit; it is a concrete entity. In your meaning system, it is 'a book'. But what is it *really*? If, for some inexplicable reason, your vocabulary, your language, your meaning system, were suddenly to be deprived of the meaningful term 'book', what would it be that you held in your hands? What is it that you would perceive? It would certainly be 'something', but the definition or meaning given to that 'something' would have as much to do with you, and the meaning system that you employ, as it would have with the thing itself.

Phenomenologists argue that this interpretational process must be acknowledged in our statements about reality. Indeed, phenomenologists suggest that, in our everyday experience of reality, this process is to all intents and purposes indivisible from the reality being perceived. Reality, as far as each of us experiences it, *is* this process.

That our interpretations of reality turn out to be seemingly more or less correct is dependent upon any number of factors. For instance, they may be correct or incorrect only insofar as one culture has provided a different meaning system to that imposed by another culture for the object being perceived.

So, for example, were I a representative from a Stone Age society, who is confronted, suddenly, with an object which you, as a representative of your society, have labelled as being 'a book', it would be highly unlikely that I, too, would label it in the same way. I would certainly perceive 'something', but my interpretation might be that the object was some type of weapon, or a rather unusual stone, or perhaps even a previously unseen food product.

Whose interpretation is the correct one? Whose reality is truly real? For each of us, the object would have a reality that was dependent upon our meaning-derived interpretation of it. As such, to argue the case for a non-interpretatively-derived 'correct' or 'incorrect' statement of reality is highly misleading. Our conclusions are relative – based as they are upon a number of variables, including those of socio-cultural diversity. Ours is a phenomenal reality, and, as such, it remains open to a multiplicity of interpretations.

Nevertheless, though phenomenologists avoid terms like 'correct' and 'incorrect' when considering interpretations of reality, they still recognize that, at times, the meanings construed by individuals will be at great variance with those which (to some degree at least) are shared by others – perhaps even the majority of others.

For example, an individual suffering from what could be termed 'paranoid delusions' might imagine, indeed might be convinced, that the nurse who was coming to provide him with medication is actually about to make an attempt upon his life. Not surprisingly, he might take steps to avoid the danger. This interpretation might be judged as being wrong, or even 'crazy', by the nurse, or by most other people. Would not phenomenologists be shown to be unnecessarily pedantic if they were to argue otherwise?

The Problem of 'Correct' Interpretations of Reality

Phenomenologists deny the possibility of any final or completely 'correct' interpretations since such would presuppose that we had direct knowledge of an ultimate reality. But we do not; our interpretations, far from being certain, remain open to alternatives in meaning. What most of us term a 'correct' interpretation is not based upon external, objective laws or 'truths' that have been universally ascertained. Rather, our judgement is influenced, to a great degree, by consensus viewpoints agreed upon by a group of individuals, or by a whole culture.

If we return to my example of the person suffering from paranoid delusions and deliberate upon the issue phenomenologically, we would note that, like that person, we have also carried out an act of interpretation that led to an imposed meaning upon our experience. We are likely to have assumed, for instance, that our experience is in some way normal, that our perceptive faculties are in some way superior, more in touch with what we have labelled 'reality', than those of the person suffering from paranoid delusions. Our studies, our background, our teachings and lessons as counselling or clinical psychologists and psychotherapists, have given us the knowledge to interpret behaviour as being normal or abnormal; it is this knowledge that now makes meaningful for us the extraordinary behaviour of this person. Our stance assumes that our conclusions are not based upon interpretations of reality but are accurate reflections of objective reality.

Phenomenologists would argue that such a stance is likely to prevent useful, constructive communication and interaction with our 'paranoid' patient. Indeed, initially at least, our dismissal of his interpretation would almost certainly lead him to be further convinced of the 'correctness' of his stance. This is not to say that phenomenologically-oriented psychotherapists would not initiate some form of 'intervention'. However, as I will seek to show in Chapter 8, any such interventions would not be based upon mistaken assumptions concerning 'correct' interpretations of reality.

A phenomenological view does not deny that, to some degree, many of us do, indeed, partially share similar interpretations of reality. Important research demonstrating just how much we do share in our mental frameworks and models of experience is available in abundance and is not being discounted nor disputed. Indeed, phenomenologists place equal importance upon structured investigations that seek to clarify our understanding of the interpretative *invariant structures* shared by all members of our species. From a phenomenological perspective, it is these invariant structures that provide the foundational bases upon, or set of conditions through which, our unique interpretations of reality are formed.

All that is being argued for now is that, regardless of how singular or generally shared our interpretations of the world may seem to be, they remain *interpretations*.

Meaningless Experience

Any behaviour that at first appears to us as being inexplicable, or meaningless, is disturbing to us; it is a basic aversive stimulus. Its meaning *must* be uncovered so that, in our ability to explain, we can relax mentally. So long as the meaning or explanation we provide for our experience is suitable or acceptable to us as an explanation, it will be able to remove or, at least, reduce the disturbance we experience.

Let me provide an example in order to make this point as clear as I can. Imagine that you are looking at a surrealist painting. Let us say it is that famous painting *Time Transfixed* by Magritte which, among other things, depicts a train emerging from a fireplace. Looking at it, the first question that springs to mind might be: 'what is this painting about? What does it mean?'

In an attempt to answer this question, you might construct any number of hypotheses and theories that focus on the symbolic significance of the objects in the painting. You might conclude for example, that the train represented Magritte's penis, that the fireplace in some way evoked memories in Magritte of his mother, and of his relationship with her, and that, therefore, the painting was an expression of a universal Oedipal complex.

Alternatively, you might approach the problem from another angle. You might argue that the painting was, in fact, about the role of perspective in Western art, and that this was Magritte's attempt to explain its rules in the most original of ways.

Whatever the explanation would be (and there have been many forthcoming!), in the end, your conclusions as to the meaning of the painting would be dependent on which interpretations were satisfactory enough to reduce the tension you experienced as a result of your confrontation with meaninglessness.

Let me take things a step further. What would happen if you were unable to provide a satisfactory or acceptable meaning to your experience? Imagine now that, instead of looking at a painting by Magritte, you are standing in front of an abstract painting, and that, like many people, you dislike abstract art. When asked why, you explain that it's because you don't understand it, or because you don't know what it's supposed to mean, or because you can't see why abstract painters don't employ figurative elements with which to make their statements. All you see are colours and vague shapes that have no meaning.

Due to the growing anxiety and irritation that this meaningless experience evokes, you might declare that abstract art is, in some way, less acceptable, or less worthy, than figurative art. Indeed, you might go so far as to declare that it might not be 'art' at all and, hence, that your inability to find its meaning is because there is no meaning to it to begin with. This conclusion would itself be a meaningful explanation – and, if accepted, would remove or reduce the tension being experienced.

Alternatively, you might conclude that there was, indeed, a meaning to the painting but that you were incapable, at this point in time, of discerning it. The assumption of a currently hidden meaning open to future revelation would be enough to reduce tension, at least temporarily.

Meaning, then, is implicit in our experience of reality. We cannot tolerate meaninglessness. Through a variety of in-built species invariants and experientially derived mental frameworks, we attempt to stamp our experiences with meaning. Once again, however, it is important to remember that, whatever the meaning arrived at, it cannot be concluded that it is a final true or 'correct' reflection of reality.

Subjective versus Objective Reality

At this point, readers might well be concerned that the phenomenological argument is leading to the conclusion that reality is a purely *subjective* process. That is, that nothing other than mental constructs exists. Is this what phenomenologists conclude?

The recurring controversy concerning the separation between external reality and subjective consciousness, and how the two might interact within each of us, has plagued Western philosophy and psychology for centuries. For some, objects exist independent of the mind; for others, nothing exists other than the mind. Psychologists and philosophers have tended to side with one viewpoint or the other. To rephrase this issue phenomenologically, we can say that we are concerned with the difference, if any, between the appearance of things and what those things actually are (that is, 'the things themselves').

Initially, it was the stated aim of transcendental phenomenology to examine, expose and separate any such differences. If phenomenologists could find the true things themselves, that is, the ultimate reality that was separate and independent from our mind, then they could tell us what objective reality truly was. The rallying cry of early transcendental phenomenologists was: 'To the things themselves!' By this, they made it absolutely clear (at least to other philosophers) that their aim was to set out the means by which the ultimate, true nature of reality would be disclosed.

It should come as no surprise that they were unable to fulfil this aim. Modern phenomenology admits that it cannot tell us what the true nature of reality is, nor will it ever be able to do so. Indeed, it argues that no human-created system – be it scientific or philosophical – will ever be able to do so. Still, though phenomenologists cannot provide us with an answer to this question, their attempts to clarify and examine experienced, or phenomenal, reality provide a resolution to the continuing debate concerning objective and subjective reality that is, I believe, both simple and elegant.

Phenomenology's Stance on the Problem of Reality

As an example of phenomenology's proposal regarding the problem of reality, let me pose yet another art-related hypothetical situation. Imagine that you are in an art gallery walking past a series of paintings that hang from one of its walls. Imagine that you are attracted to one particular painting and stop in front of it in order to pay it closer attention. Perhaps you focus upon a certain element that intrigues you, or note the title of the painting, the name of its painter, and so on. You might even say something like: 'this is the painting that I've always wanted to see'.

only in textbooks, and now I can see the real thing'. Eventually, having satisfied yourself, you move away and walk on to the next painting.

What happens to the painting? Does it continue to exist as it did when you perceived it? Or is that particular perceived painting no longer in existence?

Phenomenologists would begin to answer the question by pointing out that the painting has physical substance. There is clearly some kind of 'raw matter' which acts as stimulus to our sensory-based perceptions of the painting. At a macroscopic level, we could argue that the painting was made up, to some extent, of the wood that forms its frame, of the canvas, of the oils, the pigment and so forth. This is its raw material. Although what that material might actually be in any ultimate atomic, or sub-atomic, sense remains unknown, whatever reality that painting has lies in this raw stimulus matter.

However, phenomenologists would also argue that the painting that you perceived, indeed the painting that anyone perceives and from which then walks away, can never be perceived again in exactly the same way as it was initially perceived. Even though the painting in its raw state continues to exist, insofar as the basic materials that make it up continue to exist, the perceived painting exists in the way it does only at that moment of perception.

What phenomenologists propose, then, is that our experience of reality is always made up of an interaction between the raw matter of the world, whatever that may be, and what might be broadly called 'our mental faculties'. We never perceive only raw matter; just as, similarly, we never perceive pure or 'raw' mental phenomena. We always experience the interpreted reality that emerges from the *interaction* or *inter-relatedness* between the two.

Each of us, as a representative of our species, develops, both through maturational processes and through social experience, increasingly complex mental frameworks (or 'schemata', as some developmental and cognitive psychologists might label them) through which we interpret and respond to the raw stimuli that bombard our senses.

As members of the human species, we share the same psycho-biological processes and mechanisms – the invariant structures mentioned before – that serve as the common underlying 'givens' through which life experiences are interpreted. At the same time, each of us is subject to any number of specific and individual events and circumstances that make up our own distinctive and particular life experiences. Through the combination of the two, each of us constructs a unique interpretation of the world.

To return to my example of the painting you perceived in the art gallery, the viewpoint just outlined would argue that your experience of the painting was shaped both by species shared interpretational structures and by those specific and unique interpretative tendencies or biases that reflect and express to your particular life experiences. Indeed, should you

would not (and could not) be the same as it was in the first instance, since in returning to it you would now be adding to your previous 'schema' for that painting and, through this fresh experience, you would be altering its previous context and relations.

While as a species we share those mechanisms that provide the means by which we can interpret reality, our actual interpretations of reality can be seen to be not only unique, but also can be shown to be 'plastic' or open to re-interpretation in their meaning.

The 'Raw Matter' of Reality

Our contemporary scientific hypotheses as to the ultimate make-up, or reality, of the 'raw matter' of the world are principally dependent upon our current theories of physics. As advanced as they may be, these theories remain incomplete and undergo continual – and major – revision.

Much to their credit, a substantial number of physicists have pointed out that physics, like all other sciences, is subject to the mental faculties of the individuals who have provided its theories. As such, whatever physics has to say today, or will ever state, about 'the raw matter' of the universe cannot be final or categorical since physics is itself 'tainted' with the experiential biases and limitations of all-too-human theoreticians. This conclusion can be seen to be in keeping with the phenomenological view of reality.

There is a physical reality which remains separate from our consciousness, and which, in this sense, can be labelled *objective reality*. Equally, however, we do not have direct access to that reality, nor can we, in any sense, ever know it as it actually is. All we can do is acknowledge its existence and construct theories that might provide approximations of its nature and mechanics. In the end, however, we are forced to concede its mystery.

Edmund Husserl and the Development of Phenomenology

The acknowledged founder of the philosophical school known to us as phenomenology was the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Smith and Woodruff Smith, 1995). Husserl was born in 1859, in Moravia (now the Czech Republic), which was, at the time, an annexed state of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Husserl's initial academic interests lay in mathematics and the natural sciences, including psychology. Indeed, while a student at Leipzig, he attended a series of lectures given by Wilhelm Wundt, a leading proponent of experimental psychology, but found them to be distinctly unimpressive. If anything, Husserl emerged from these lectures even more convinced that mathematics was far more fundamental

his attention and interest. He continued studying mathematics in both Berlin and Vienna where his dissertation on mathematical problems led to a PhD in 1883.

Although he returned briefly to Berlin, by 1884 he was back in Vienna where, under the growing influence of the philosopher Franz Brentano, he began to engage in studies that would interest him for the remainder of his life. Brentano's lectures (which, incidentally, were also attended by the young Sigmund Freud and played an intriguing role in the eventual development of psychoanalysis (McGrath, 1986)) revolutionized Husserl's thought. Central to Brentano's philosophy was a key idea that would eventually become known as *intentionality*. As I will discuss later, this term remains the central assumption of phenomenology.

So influential was Brentano's philosophy upon Husserl, that it is generally acknowledged to be the principal forerunner of the phenomenological movement. Indeed, Husserl (1965) specifically declared his indebtedness to Brentano by referring to him as his one and only teacher of philosophy. On a more personal level, Husserl's strong missionary zeal in promoting the ideas of phenomenology was a direct outcome of Brentano's influence (possibly because the latter, who had initially trained to enter the priesthood, was by all accounts a charismatic lecturer). Though they would eventually part company intellectually (Brentano could not accept – or, perhaps, appreciate – a number of Husserl's ideas), the two men remained friends for life.

Husserl was appointed Full Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg in 1916; he would remain there until his enforced eviction by the Nazis. During these years, and for the remainder of his academic career, he wrote extensively on phenomenology and gave lectures on it in London, Prague, Vienna and Paris. His principal assistant at Freiburg was Martin Heidegger, who later succeeded him in the post and who would himself provide pivotal contributions to phenomenological theory. Husserl died in Freiburg in 1938.

Phenomenology's Fundamental Issues

In his attempt to explore and examine how we construct our reality, Husserl provided phenomenological psychology with two fundamental principles: the notion of *intentionality* as the basis to all mental experience, and the *noematic and noetic foci of intentionality* as 'shapers' of our experience.

Intentionality

For Husserl (1931a; 1931b) the basis to all our meaning-based constructs of the world lay in the fundamental inter-relationship between consciousness and reality (or 'the world') which he labelled 'intentionality'.

The term 'intentionality' is taken from the Latin *intendere*, which translates as 'to stretch forth'. Franz Brentano (1995) first alluded to the idea of intentionality in order to clarify his assertion that a real physical world exists outside our consciousness and that, as such, all consciousness is always directed towards the real world in order to interpret it in a meaningful manner.

Husserl adapted Brentano's idea by arguing that, for human beings, consciousness is always consciousness of *some thing* in that the most basic interpretative act of human consciousness is to experience the world in terms of objects, or things (Gurwitsch, 1966; 1982). For instance, if I am conscious that I am worried, then I am worried about some thing; if I am confused, I am confused about some thing; if I react, I react to some thing; and so forth. Even if I did not know what the specific 'thing' was, or even if the 'thing' to which I reacted was imaginary, my attention would focus upon the eventual identification of 'some thing'.

We have no idea whether 'things in themselves' truly exist. All we can say is that, as human beings, we are biased toward interpretations that are centred upon an object-based or 'thing-based' world. Whatever sense we make of the world is intentionally derived. Our earliest, most primitive relations and interpretative interactions rely upon the object distinctions we establish and build up over time.

The process of intentionality points out that, as humans, we never have direct access to, or knowledge of, the real world as it is. Since ours is an object world, it can be stated that, even at the most basic level of consciousness, an interpretative act has occurred. Through intentionality, the sensory data at our disposal, which respond to the unknown stimuli emanating from the physical world, undergo a basic, unavoidable 'translation' or interpretation that leads us to respond to the stimuli as if they were objects.

When phenomenologists speak of intentionality as 'the mind stretching forth into the world' and translating its stimuli into phenomenal objects, they are presenting (in spite of the scientific awkwardness of their language) an argument which is both profound and, unfortunately, not always easy to grasp. Perhaps a simple example will clarify their point.

Imagine that you are directing your attention to an object, say, a television set. As we have already seen, the meaning you have given to that object, the functions you ascribe to it, the interest in or pleasure you desire from it and so forth are dependent upon various experiential socio-cultural variables through which you have 'set' your mental framework, or schema, for 'a television set'. As such, your 'knowledge' that what you see before you is 'a television set' is not the straightforward result of your direct access to external reality but rather, has come about through a complex of interpretations linked to your experience of, and dealings with, the world. The object 'a television set' is a phenomenal object.

As such, you might now rightly ask: well, what is this object (which I have labelled 'a television set') really? If I were capable of setting aside

or *bracketing*, all the additional meanings and functions that I've invested upon it, what would be left? Unfortunately, your question cannot be answered in any complete or final sense. Phenomenologists argue that it will never be possible for us to know the 'ultimate reality' of any object, be it 'a television set' or whatever else, precisely because we are limited by the intentional relationship through which we experience an object world. The very question '*What* would be left?', in its reference to 'some thing', makes clear the intentional boundaries in our experience.

Through the term 'intentionality', then, phenomenologists point out a basic *invariant* relationship that exists between the real world and our conscious experience of it. Unable to bracket this relationship, we are forced to acknowledge, through it, the undeniable role of interpretation that lies at the heart of all our mental experience.

At its most basic level of understanding, intentionality is simply the referential or directed nature of consciousness. All consciousness, Husserl writes over and over, is consciousness of *some thing*. At this level of understanding, intentionality is a descriptive term for that most basic of our world-interpreting processes. In this sense, intentionality refers to the first, most basic interpretative mental act – that of 'translating' the unknown raw stimuli of the real world, to which our senses have responded, into an object-based (or 'thing'-based) reality.

At a deeper, and more significant level however, intentionality has been described as the *foundational correlational rule of phenomenology* (Ihde, 1998). In this sense it can be seen that intentionality takes account of the inter-relatedness and interdependence of what in a modern empiricist tradition has been called 'subject' and 'object'. From the standpoint of Husserlian intentionality, neither term makes sense in and of itself, and neither term can, in fact, emerge as meaningful if isolated from the other. Intentionality argues that subject and object co-constitute, or bring meaning to, one another (Ihde, 1998).

Noema and Noesis

The phenomenological notion of intentionality points out that we carry out a basic (and invariant) interpretational step of translating the unknown stimuli of the world into things, or objects. Intentionality, then, can be seen to focus consciousness initially on some *thing* in the world (regardless of what that 'thing' may actually be in its real state).

Husserl suggested that every act of intentionality was made up of two experiential foci, or 'correlational poles' (Ihde, 1986a and b: 43), which he labelled *noema* and *noesis* (Husserl, 1929; 1931a; 1931b; 1948/1973). 'For what is experienced, as experienced, he used the term *noema* or noematic correlate, and for the mode of experiencing... he used the term *noesis* or noetic correlate' (Ihde, 1986a and b: 43). Noema, then, refers to the *directional* element of experience; it is the object (the *what*) towards which we direct our attention

and upon which we focus. Noesis, on the other hand, is the *referential* element of experience; it is the mode (the *how*) through which we define an object. As the American philosopher Don Ihde (1986a: 43) points out: 'this internal correlation within experience may seem trivial and obvious – if I experience at all, I experience something and in some way'.

As a simple example of the different emphases given by the noematic and noetic constituents, consider the following situation. Two individuals are attending a political rally. They both hear a speaker presenting a speech dealing with nuclear disarmament and taking the stance that unilateral disarmament would be a serious and dangerous error. The first individual agrees with the speaker's sentiments and claps loudly and enthusiastically at the conclusion of the talk. The second individual, sympathetic to unilateral disarmament, becomes increasingly irritated by the arguments being presented and boos the speaker at the end of the speech.

The noematic focus, that is, the 'what' of the experience, is made up from the content, or argument, of the speech heard by each individual. The noetic focus, on the other hand, contains those referential elements dealing with 'how' each individual's various cognitive and affective biases add further elements of meaning to the experience. Together, the noematic and noetic foci lead each individual to interpret the experience of the political rally in a different and unique manner, and, as a consequence, to respond to it in their disparate ways.

There is a tendency within psychology to obscure or minimize the significance of this correlation either by focusing exclusively upon the noematic focus or by minimizing the unique experiential variables that add to any individual's noetic focus. This may be due to the fact that although we can, in theory, distinguish between the noetic and noematic foci, in practice the two are not fully distinct from one another. None of us can approach any experience in our life, past or present, without instantaneously evoking both foci. For instance, were I to ask you to remember any experience from your past, whatever it was that you remembered would not be merely the events contained in that experience, that is, its items (the noema), but, in addition, the way you today claim to have experienced them (the noesis).

As a result of clarifying the noematic and noetic foci in all intentional acts, the phenomenological assertion that all experiences are, at best, only partially shareable should become clearer. Human species-shared invariant interpretational 'givens' may well provide a partial similarity in separate individuals' experiences. Nevertheless, the foci (particularly the noetic focus) retain individually-determined variables that limit the extent to which any experience can be said to be shared between individuals.

It may appear initially to readers that phenomenological psychologists are interested only in the unique and unshareable differences in each individual's experience of the world. This would be a mistaken conclusion and should not be seen to be either explicitly or implicitly minimizing or invalidating the great number of important studies dealing with the shared

and invariant structural features of human experience. Nevertheless, phenomenologists are at pains to point out that, although there may well be a substantial degree of 'shareability' in our experiences, there remain a variety of factors which, ultimately, point to the uniqueness in each individual's experience. To employ an analogy from nature, although the structure of all snowflakes is determined by the same six rules, each emergent snowflake retains a unique design. It is simply because experimental research in science (and in psychology in particular) has tended to focus upon the study of shared features and has either dismissed or diminished the importance of the unshared variables in experience that phenomenologists emphasize the latter in their studies. It is not because unique factors in themselves hold greater significance; phenomenologists are simply redressing the balance and, in so doing, are increasing the adequacy of our theories.

All mental acts, then, can be seen to be intentional. Our consciousness is always object-directed or of 'some thing'. This most basic of interpretative acts always contains two foci – the noematic focus which directs our experience towards 'some thing', and the referential, or noetic, focus which provides the broadly attitudinal mode through which we experience 'some thing'.

Consider, as an example, this very book which you are currently reading. Through intentionality, the (primarily) visual and tactile sensory responses to the unknown 'raw matter' are experienced in terms of 'some thing' or object. Through the noematic and noetic foci, that object is not only further interpreted as 'a book', but is also referentially defined in any number of ways (for example, the book is easy/difficult, interesting/boring, important/insignificant and so on). As a phenomenal object, the book each of us experiences is a product of both shared and unshared variables; via the noematic and noetic constituents of our intentional inter-relationship with the book each of us experiences a unique approximation of what it may really be. Further, the impact of subsequent lived experience will affect the relative 'openness' or plasticity of either or both of these constituents such that, over time, each of us may experience alternative unique approximations of what the book may be. Finally, as will be discussed in later chapters, this same inter-relation serves to provide each of us with a unique approximation of who the 'I' who experiences the book may be.

The concept of intentionality, and its noematic and noetic foci, led Husserl to the development of a specific approach designed to clarify the interpretational factors contained within every experience. This approach has since become usually referred to as the *phenomenological method*. Just what the phenomenological method consists of and what its implications may be for psychologically related issues is the principal concern of the following chapter.

2

The Phenomenological Method

The idea had occurred to me that maybe what we see is not real. That it is somehow – I don't know what the alternative to 'real' is... There's a state of things being semi-real.

Philip K. Dick

Husserl's initial analyses led him to conclude that our experience of the world is a unique intentional construct containing both directional (noematic) and referential (noetic) foci. On this basis, he argued, it was to be the principal task of phenomenology to find the means to strip away, as far as possible, the plethora of interpretational layers added to the unknown stimuli to our experience in order to arrive at a more adequate, if still approximate and incomplete, knowledge of 'the things themselves'. In order to achieve this aim, Husserl proposed a *phenomenological method* of investigation which could be applied to all analyses of experience. This method became the primary basis for all conclusions arrived at by transcendental phenomenologists.

Though clearly of central importance to phenomenology in general, its primary value to phenomenological psychology differs slightly from the original function ascribed to it by Husserl, who sought to employ the method in order to strip away the variants of experience and so to arrive at a clearer understanding of its invariants. Phenomenologically oriented psychologists (among others who seek to apply a phenomenological orientation to their respective fields), on the other hand, apply the phenomenological method for the principal purpose of identifying and clarifying the variables, or variants, of experience so that they may be more adequately controlled as far as may be possible in the variety of studies undertaken by the different systems in psychology, and, also, so that their role in influencing (and limiting) the interpretations and conclusions arrived at by psychologists may be made more explicit.

Because this text deals with the phenomenological orientation within psychology, my account of the phenomenological method will limit its focus on this latter concern. Whatever its primary goal, however, the phenomenological method is carried out in much the same way. As a way of discussing its principal implications, it can be considered as being composed of three distinguishable, though interrelated, steps (Grossmann, 1984; Ihde, 1986a, 1986b).