

Phenomenology Notes

Nick Campion

(NB – my referencing style below is thoroughly inconsistent – and not a good example)

The essence of Phenomenological theory is quite simple:

- The researcher should examine phenomena on their own terms without any preconceptions, without even a theoretical model.

The goal is to allow the data to speak for itself and therefore permit the scholar to come to a better understanding of the real world. The rule that one should not approach any topic of scholarship or research with a preconceived model applies to all individuals in all disciplines. One cannot, therefore, assume at the beginning of a research project, that anything is 'true'.

There is one main requirement of the phenomenological researcher.

- The need to 'bracket' all one's assumptions, biases and prejudices, a procedure described by Edmund Husserl as *epoché*.

This is not easy. One has to be aware of one's entire system of preconceptions and bracket them off. For example, if you are talking to a born-again Christian and really want to understand how they think, but you do not like born-again Christianity, then you imagine placing your dislike in brackets – '(dislike of born-again Christianity)'. **Reflexivity** is the means of achieving such a state, and awareness of one's position in the **insider-outsider** continuum is essential. The hope is that, having elevated your own self-awareness, you are able to focus on the phenomenon, in this case the beliefs and attitudes of the individual born-again Christian.

We have to acknowledge that human beings may never be able to remove their prejudices and biases. It may be in the nature of being human to have preconceptions. In fact it may be necessary. However, the researcher should be able to metaphorically 'bracket' off their bias so that its impact on the research data is minimal.

Epoché is sceptical in the classical sense in that it rejects all preconceived knowledge.

There is then one result of *epoché*.

- Having achieved a suitable level of self-awareness, the researcher then hopefully achieves what Husserl called **eidetic vision**.

The root of eidetic is the Greek word εἶδος, or eidos, meaning idea. In modern English it means that one has an ability to recall memories, images and sounds with great clarity. However, that εἶδος also means form, takes us back to the Platonic concept of Forms, Ideas or Archetypes as the essential foundation of the world.

Husserl, influenced by Immanuel Kant, believed that, by examining the world more and more closely, free from prejudice and theoretical constraints, one would come close to the true underlying nature of reality. Such a theory is known as 'essentialist' (it believes that there is an essence, a single structure or mode of existence) which underlies all reality or 'substantialist' ('substance' instead of 'essence').

Husserl got to this point by a series of logical steps.

- Consciousness is always intentional – i.e., the mind has an intent to act before the individual acts.
- Consciousness exists in relation to external objects: all actions involve an object.
- All intent therefore relates to an object: conscious thoughts intend something towards material objects.
- Mental processes are fundamentally different to physical, which cannot be intentional, having no consciousness of material objects.
- There is a difference between the act of consciousness (thinking, believing etc.) which Husserl called *noesis*, and the object/phenomenon at which it is directed, the *noemata*.
- As the conscious intent is the origin of all action, the relation between consciousness and action is one between different aspects of consciousness.

Husserl believed that, by examining phenomena more and more closely, free from bias, one would begin to perceive Platonic reality.

Husserl's phenomenology therefore assumes the existence of an Absolute.

This is why Rudolf Otto's notion that the 'Holy' is real is considered Phenomenological.

Therefore, Husserl's phenomenology

1. Does not lead to an 'anything-goes' relativity in which one person's perception of truth is as valid as another's.
2. is liable to criticism on the grounds that, contrary to its claim, it does take a theoretical position in the primacy of consciousness and the existence of the absolute.

Phenomenological principles were first set out in 1913 by 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' (Husserl 1972: 7), the individual's subjective experience, rather than attempt to explain it away or reduce it to quantitative measurement. 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'.

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.

Knowledge based on subjective experience and intuition, based on inner evidence, is valued rather than theory which is externally imposed, or empirical, quantitative, data.

Husserl noted (1965: 90-1) 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.

Because of its Platonic nature, Husserl's phenomenology is known as **Transcendental**.

Husserl's critics, the **Existential Phenomenologists**, such as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Jean Paul Sartre (1906-1980) took the view that Husserl's transcendentalism predicated a conclusion (i.e., the realisation of the nature of the essence, or Absolute) which was bound to be reached when the phenomenological inquiry was complete, and so is, paradoxically, anti-phenomenological. Instead, all we have is what is in front of us, and our experiences, including the physical experience which Husserl implicitly regarded as secondary to consciousness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1907-1960) argued that existence should be understood as fundamentally 'embodied': the belief that we all live in our minds

ignores the fact that we constantly have physical experiences, and that intentional acts can arise out of physical experiences. (My example would be the relationship between being in love and experiencing physical desire: which comes first?)

The most accessible account of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is to be found in David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

As applied to history

From an embodied point of view, phenomenological research requires the researcher to take account of the material environment and their own physical experience. My own adaptation of this principle to historical research is based on the following question: if I feel a sense of elation and joy at the sight of a slender crescent moon shining with a brilliant Venus in a dusk sky, can I assume that an anatomically modern human, two, twenty or eighty-thousand years ago would have felt the same?

(see below my extract from Campion, Nicholas, 'The Possible Survival of Babylonian Astrology in the Fifth Century CE: a discussion of historical sources', in Oestmann, Günther, H. K. von Stuckrad, G. Oestmann and D. Rutkin (eds.), *Horoscopes and History*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2005, pp. 82-3.)

An example of the application of phenomenological method to historical study was given by Jeremy Naydler, writing about ancient Egypt:

Having trained my mind to think in abstract concepts, I found myself longing for the symbolic image. I found that I was in fact drawn to the pre-philosophical mentality that weaves together symbolic images to create myth, the language of the soul. It became increasingly apparent to me that some other content can come through the image that otherwise is driven away by the spotlight of pure thought. Images have a fluidity, a luminescence, an aliveness, that makes them permeable to transcendent content in a way that concepts are not. And so I found myself inwardly migrating to ancient Egypt, here was a culture that possessed a wisdom that was expressed in the language of living images and symbols. Here was deep wisdom, but hardly an abstract concept anywhere to be discovered. Even Truth was a goddess.¹

Such ideas have entered school education in history under the guide of the search for 'empathy' with people from the past, though is anathema to some historians.

This is from Mandelbraum:

History is differentiated from knowledge in the physical sciences in being a descriptive narrative of a particular series of events which has taken place; in consisting not in the formulation of laws of which the particular case is an instance, but in the description of the events in their actual determining relationships to each others; in seeing events as the producers and products of change.²

¹ Naydler, Jeremy, *Ancient Egypt and the Soul of the West*, Oxford: Abzu Press 1996, p. 3.

² Mandelbraum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, New York 1938, cited in Abrams, Philip, *Historical Sociology*, Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982, p. 171.

In terms of textual analysis, phenomenology requires a form of hermeneutic science, which involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood.³

Enchantment

Phenomenological principles tend to be favoured by those who see the enchanted state of existence as valuable: 'What gives rise to phenomenological analysis is an unsettling wonder in the presence of things'.⁴

Study of Religions

Husserl's phenomenological approach was incorporated into the new discipline of the study of religions, and in particular by Ninian Smart. It was Smart who largely defined the discipline's approach as one of 'methodological neutralism' or 'agnosticism' (Smart 1973b: 94, 108), as opposed to the personal religious commitment which, he argued, had once assumed to be a prerequisite of the study of theology (Smart 1973a: 12; 1973b: 4).

Husserl argued that the phenomenological process should begin with the investigator's reflection on their own 'I' (Husserl 1972: 7), 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 (Smart 1973b: 21).

'Their sustained contact with the people they study permits a penetrating account, which can explore incidents in great detail and can illuminate the full extent of their subjects' accounts of a variety of phenomena. Further, the predilection of ethnographers for conveying social life in the language and style of their subjects adds to the sense of richness.'⁵

As Smart (1973a: 11) 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.

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 (Davies 1999: 3).

Reflexivity, which Davies defines as 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' is, in her opinion, vital to intelligent research, but nevertheless carries potential pitfalls: it may

³ Moustakas, C., *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994) p.9

⁴ Welton, Don, *The Other Husserl*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 13.

⁵ Bryman, Alan, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (London: Routledge 2001) [hereafter Bryman, *Quantity and Quality*] p.103

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 1999: 4-5).

As applied to the Study of Religions, 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'.⁶ (Caird and Law 1982: 153).

The aim is the 'qualitative understanding of the forms of life of a religious tradition from that tradition's standpoint'.⁷

Quotes from Husserl:

Husserl, Edmund, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, London: Collier-MacMillan 1972 [1913, Eng. trns.1931].

p. 5: Transcendental Phenomenology is 'a science covering a new field of experience, exclusively its own, that of 'Transcendental Subjectivity', (which) with its transcendental experiences, capacities, doings, is an absolutely independent realm of direct experience...(It is) an a priori science ("eidetic", directed upon the universal in its original intuitability), which appropriates, though as pure possibility only, the empirical field of fact of transcendental subjectivity with its factual experiences, equating these with pure intuitable possibilities.

P 6. 'Eidetic phenomenology is restricted in this book to the realm of pure eidetic "description", that is to the realm of essential structures of transcendental subjectivity immediately transparent to the mind.

p. 6: Here we have one difference (though not the only one) between the whole manner of this new a priori science and that of the mathematical disciplines. These are 'deductive' sciences, and that means that in their scientifically theoretical mode of development mediate deductive knowledge plays an incomparably greater part than the immediate axiomatic knowledge upon which all the deductions are based. An infinitude of axioms rests on a very few axioms.

But in the transcendental sphere we have an infinitude of knowledge previous to all deduction, knowledge whose mediated connexions (those of intentional implication) have nothing to do with deduction, and being entirely intuitive prove refractory to every methodologically devised scheme of constructive symbolism.

p. 7. The change of standpoint which in this work bears the name phenomenological reduction (transcendental reduction (transcendental-phenomenological we now say, to be more definite) is effected by me as the actually philosophizing subject, from the natural standpoint as a basis, and I experience myself here in the first instance as "I" in the ordinary sense of the term, as this human person living among others in the world...Turning inwards in pure reflexion, following exclusively inner experience and "empathy" to be more precise, and setting aside all the psychophysical questions which relate to man as a corporeal being, I obtain an original and pure descriptive

⁶ Caird, Dale and Henry G. Law, 'Non-Conventional Beliefs: Their Structure and Measurement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1992, Vol. 21 no 2, pp. 152-163 (p. 153).

⁷ Twiss, Sumner B, and Walter H. Conser (1992), *Experience of the Sacred*, Hanover: University Press of New England, p. 27.

knowledge of the psychical life as it is in itself, the most original information being obtained from myself, because here alone is perception the medium.

p. 11. I possess in myself an essential individuality self-contained, and holding well together in itself, to which all real and objectively possible experience and knowledge belongs, through whose agency the objective world is there for me with all its empirically confirmed facts, in and through which it has for me at any rate trustworthy (even if never scientifically authorised) essential validity...Continuing this self-reflexion, I now also become aware that my own phenomenologically self-contained essence can be posited in an *absolute* sense, as I am the Ego who invests the being of the world which I so constantly speak about with existential validity, as an essence which wins for me from my own life's pure essence meaning and substantiated validity

p. 39. We shall start from the standpoint of everyday life, from the world as it confronts us, from consciousness as it presents itself in psychological experience...

p. 203. Only through acts of experiencing as reflected on do we know anything of the stream of experience and of its necessary relationship to the pure Ego.

Phenomenological method

I would argue that the obscure details of phenomenological theory have a limited relevance to the method, which may be understood in general terms:

Requires patience, sensitivity, empathy, objectivity, luck, self-awareness, good communication skills, ability to listen, humility, businesslike, professional, organised, analytic, flexible, open-minded, observant, trustworthy, pragmatic.

Appropriate behaviour - judge the best way forward by the person and the environment.

Reflexivity

Methodological agnosticism - no preconceptions.

Empathetic understanding - imaginative experiencing - to try to experience what the practitioner/believer is experiencing.

Challenge one's comfort zone - i.e., relate sympathetically and empathetically to people with whom one might have deep disagreements.

Cresswell: 'For a phenomenologist, an a priori decision is made that he or she will examine the *meaning of experiences* for individuals. Thus an individual starts into the field with a strong orienting framework, albeit more of a philosophical perspective than a distinct social science theory, although both provide explanations for the real world. [...] ..these core ideas...are based on the premise that human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all interpretations and theorizing.'⁸

Criticism

(see Flood for detailed criticisms)

⁸ Cresswell, John W., *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p.86

- Critics of phenomenology say that:
- Reflexivity just a good part of ethnography
- One can never truly experience another person's experience.
- It can lead to self-absorption
- Bracketing is impossible. All one can do is be aware of one's bias. As David Silverman said: '...as most scientists and philosophers are agreed, the facts we find in 'the field' never speak for themselves but are impregnated by our assumptions.'⁹
- Methodological agnosticism is nonsense - all humans have preconceptions.
- As Kim Etherington said: it is important to ensure that reflexivity does not become 'just another dominant discourse that disallows the possibility of any other way.'¹⁰

Campion, Nicholas, 'The Possible Survival of Babylonian Astrology in the Fifth Century CE: a discussion of historical sources', in Oestmann, Günther, H. K. von Stuckrad, G. Oestmann and D. Rutkin (eds.), *Horoscopes and History*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2005, pp. 82-3.

As Husserl, who first set out the principles of phenomenology in the early twentieth century, argued, it is essential to understand the 'I', the individual's subjective, inner, often transcendent, experience,¹¹ the aim being, according to Twiss and Conser, the 'qualitative understanding of the forms of life of a religious tradition from that tradition's standpoint'.¹² This model is finding its way into archaeological thought, and from there into contemporary archaeoastronomy. For example Tim Robinson claimed, in his account of a Bronze age site in the west of Ireland, that he was able to understand its purpose and function better by experiencing a particularly brilliant setting sun in the same landscape.¹³ This approach has recently been championed by Clive Ruggles in relation to the study of archaeoastronomy, citing Ed Krupp, Director of the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles on the experience of the solstice at Stonehenge. 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

⁹ Silverman, David, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction* (London: Sage Publications, 2002) p.1.

¹⁰ Etherington, Kim, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004) p.33.

¹¹ Husserl, Edmund *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, London: Collier-MacMillan 1972 [1913, Eng. trns.1931], p. 7.

¹² Twiss, Sumner B, and Walter H. Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, Hanover: University Press of New England 1992, p. 27.

¹³ Robinson, Tim, *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara and other Writings*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press 1996. p. 201.

horizon, difficulties in practical observation, and many more subjective aspects of a site can only be appreciated in person.¹⁴

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'.¹⁵ He 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'.¹⁶ It is that serious consideration which the horoscopes for Basiliscus' and Leontius' rebellions require.

Alfred Schutz, witting on the phenomenology of sociology, 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'.¹⁷ Helmut Wagner added that 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'.¹⁸ Following Schutz and Wagner, then, it may be argued that the testimony of the night sky and an especially bright rising Venus might reveal more about the intentions of fifth century astrologers than the abstract interpretative structures of Hellenistic astrology. To paraphrase Ninian Smart, the goal should be to achieve a 'value-rich' appreciation of the world view of the fifth century astrologer.¹⁹ The astrologer working for Basiliscus or Leontius would have lived in a culture in which the planets might still be regarded as divine and their helical rising as heralds of the sun, Sol Invictus, Proclus' golden Titan', and might still send messages which were far more immediate and powerful than the complex readings contained in the astrological texts. It may therefore have been the astrologers' lived experience in their fifth-century world, and their numinous awe when faced with a brilliant pre-dawn sky, rather than their use of the rules of Hellenistic horoscopic astrology, which informed their work. Whatever the astrological texts claimed, the astrologers' primary perception, their 'real beginning', or 'starting point', was their experience of night giving way to dawn.

14 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.

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

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

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

18 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

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

Other References

Davies, C. *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Our Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999).

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

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

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

Smart, Ninian (1973a), *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London: MacMillan.

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

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.