

# Philosophy of Phenomenology

2

This chapter provides an introduction to the philosophy of phenomenology in order to provide the underpinnings for descriptive and interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological research methodologies. A discussion of the following prominent philosophers is included in this chapter: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

.....

---

## EDMUND HUSSERL

---

Edmund Husserl is referred to as the father of the philosophy of phenomenology. He explained that his phenomenology was a descriptive philosophy of the essence of pure experiences. In *Cartesian Meditations* (1973a), Husserl declared that only knowledge that comes from immediate experiential evidence can be accepted. The crisis of science for Husserl (1970) was the loss of its meaning for life. “Scientific, objective truth is exclusively a matter of establishing what the world, the physical as well as the spiritual world, is in fact. But can the world, and human existence in it, truthfully have a meaning if the sciences recognize as true only what is objectively established in this fashion?” (pp. 6–7)

Husserl called for scientists to interrupt their natural attitude for a phenomenological attitude where the lifeworld is still present, but now we do not take it for granted; instead we question it. Natural attitude involves our taken-for-granted experiences as we live through them without reflective awareness. A new attitude was needed that was entirely different from the natural attitude in experiencing and thinking. Husserl (1983) called for a pure or transcendental phenomenology, which would not be a science of facts but instead, a science of essences, an eidetic science. Essence is what makes a phenomenon what it is, and without it, it would not be that phenomenon. Husserl called on the use of free imaginative variation to develop the discovery of the essence of an

experience. In free imaginative variation, a person mentally removes an aspect of the phenomenon to determine if that removal transformed the phenomenon in an essential way. If it does, that aspect is considered essential, but if the phenomenon is still recognizable, it is not considered an essential part. One seeks the possible meanings of an experience through viewing it from divergent perspectives and different positions. The push here is to move away from just facts and let imagination help uncover meanings and essences. Husserl (1931) called this the play of fancy: “The pure essence can be exemplified intuitively in the data of experience, data of perception, memory, and so forth, but just as readily also in the mere data of fancy . . . intuitions rather of a merely imaginative order” (pp. 50–51).

To achieve this, one must go “back to the things themselves, to consult them in their self-giveness and to set aside all prejudices alien to them” (Husserl, 1983, p. 35). In the natural attitude, the world is continually there for us; it is “on hand.” It is a naïve approach to viewing the world where persons take for granted the world as they perceive it. Here one views the world from a mainly uncritical position and does not consciously analyze what is experienced. In the natural attitude, persons evaluate their present experience in terms of their past experiences. Husserl claimed that instead of remaining in this natural attitude, we need to radically modify it. We need to put it out of action, put parentheses around the natural world that is on hand and continually there for us. Husserl termed this “the method of parenthesizing” or phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1983, p. 60). Husserl admitted this requires a different turn. He claimed phenomenology was the first philosophy to require freedom from presuppositions and to call for a phenomenological attitude. One interrupts their natural attitude. The experiences of the world are still there, but now one critically reflects on his or her experiences and no longer takes them for granted.

The epoché and reduction are key elements in Husserl’s philosophy of phenomenology. Epoché is the Greek word that means abstention. Husserl used this term to capture the actions required to suspend the natural attitude of taken-for-granted beliefs and the attitude of science. As a mathematician, Husserl borrowed the familiar word, bracketing, to more concretely provide the image of putting parentheses around our various presuppositions and assumptions that can hinder our being open to the meaning of phenomena. Bracketing is the means to achieving reduction, which comes from the word *re-ducere*, which means to lead back. The epoché opens up a different new kind of experience that Husserl (1973a) called a transcendental experience. Bracketing helps keep a tension between a researcher’s past and present. It helps prevent researchers from being distracted by their presuppositions.

Phenomenological reduction for Husserl (1981) reveals a sweeping, unsuspected field of research. He went on to explain that if reduction is missing, lost is the opportunity to enter into a new realm. Husserl claimed that when one suspends the naïve exploration of the world, it doesn't mean you turn your back on the world to "retreat into an unworldly, and, therefore, uninteresting special field of theoretical study. On the contrary, this alone enables you to explore the world radically and even to undertake a radically scientific exploration of what exists absolutely and in an ultimate sense." (p. 322)

Husserl's (1970) transcendental epoché was meant to be a habitual attitude and not a temporary one. He emphasized that we must constantly deny ourselves our natural attitude. It is only through the epoché that the gaze of the philosopher is fully free.

Another main theme of Husserl's phenomenology was intentionality, which refers to the relationship between an individual and the object of his/her experience. It is a person's directed awareness of an object or event. For Husserl, intentionality means that our consciousness is oriented externally to the things of the world. Consciousness is not anything by itself, but instead consciousness is always being conscious of something. In intentionality, we direct our awareness to an object or event, to the experience of the world. Intentionality includes experiential horizons that Husserl (1973b) explained were characteristics of an object that are not presented directly but even so are there and add to the experience of the thing. He called this aspect of experience "apperceptions": When we grasp an object, we integrate apperceptions with what is actually presented before us. What we do not immediately and concretely experience are ap-perceived.

---

## MARTIN HEIDEGGER

---

Heidegger was a student of Husserl, but Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology did not focus on epistemological questions as his professor's did. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge. Heidegger's central concern was the ontological priority of the question of Being. Ontology is the branch of philosophy focusing on the nature of being. The question to be asked is about the meaning of Being. He used the term being-in-the-world to highlight the intertwined relationship between human existence and the world. What makes human beings different from other beings is their ability to be concerned about their very own being, which Heidegger termed "Dasein." He went on to say that being-in-the-world belongs essentially to Da-sein. Da-sein understands its own being in its close relationship with the world. Temporality is a fundamental aspect of Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology. He argued that time is how Da-sein understands and interprets anything. Da-sein finds its meaning in temporality.

For Husserl, description was critical, while for Heidegger (1992), interpretation was critical, as he professed that it was the basic form for knowing. Interpretation (hermeneutics) was seen as critical for understanding because it helped disclose what is hidden or concealed. The primary work of phenomenology is to lay open a phenomenon and let it be seen (Heidegger, 1992). Phenomena can be covered up in various ways. One way is that it is undiscovered. We have no knowledge of it and do not know it exists. Being buried is another way of being covered up. Here the phenomenon was earlier discovered but has gotten covered up. Disguise according to Heidegger (1992) is the most common and dangerous concealment. Here “the originally seen phenomena are uprooted, torn from their ground, and are no longer understood in their origins, in their ‘extraction’ from their roots in a particular subject matter” (p. 87). “Phenomenology means to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself. That is the formal meaning of the type of research that calls itself phenomenology. But this expresses nothing other than the maxim formulated above: ‘To the Things Themselves!’” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 30).

---

## MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

---

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of phenomenology is more an existential phenomenology where “the world is always already there before reflection begins” (1996, p. vii) as opposed to Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1996), Merleau-Ponty posited that “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (p. x–xi). Merleau-Ponty attempted to bring the world of perception back to life. He declared that the world is hidden from us underneath all knowledge and social living. He also called for the need to return to things themselves prior to our knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty (1996) asserted that Fink, the assistant of Husserl, provided the best view of reduction when Fink described that we must be astonished before the world. For Merleau-Ponty (1996), when practicing reflection, we do not withdraw from the world. Reflection “steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world as these bring them to our notice” (p. xiii). As Merleau-Ponty (1956) explained, complete reduction is not possible.

Merleau-Ponty’s (1996) philosophy of phenomenology focused on putting back essences into experiences by not viewing them from theories or causal explanations. Merleau-Ponty (1956) warned that phenomenology is a laborious work due to the necessary attention, wonder, and demands of consciousness. For the philosopher, our bodies and the world are intertwined.

We live in both space and time. We have a temporal and spacial relationship with the world. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) emphasized the flesh of the world. The importance of language permeates Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. In the *Prose of the World* (1973), he explained that "rather than imprisoning it, language is like a magic machine for transporting the 'I' into the other person's perspective" (p. 19).

---

## HANS-GEORG GADAMER

---

Hans-Georg Gadamer studied under Heidegger. Gadamer's philosophy of phenomenology is essentially interpretive. It focuses on the explication of texts and not directly on the lived experience. His philosophy is based on human understanding. He emphasized that interpretation depends on a horizon of interpretation where understanding of a text occurs by a fusion of horizons: The horizon of the text and that of the person interpreting the text. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (2004) explained: "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion" (p. 304).

Gadamer stressed that the lifeworld is "the whole in which we live as historical creatures" (2004, p. 239). Openness is necessary to see the "otherness" of something. Tradition and historicity are part of the lifeworld. For Gadamer, meaning comes from both the past and also the present and even the future. Interpretation includes the historical context, both past and present. To achieve understanding, the interpreter moves between past and present and moves back and forth between parts of the text and the whole. For Gadamer, understanding takes place where tradition, the past, and the present intersect. Understanding includes prejudices that Gadamer explained are the results of the history of effect. Both prejudices and traditions occur in our understanding and hinder complete openness. We can increase our horizons of meaning when we overcome prejudices. Art is another component in Gadamer's (1998) hermeneutics. He explained that art can provide us with experiences that lead to new understanding of the world. When we place art in our historical and cultural lifeworld, it can provide us with understanding and an experience of truth.

In summary Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer's philosophies of phenomenology were briefly described to provide the foundation for the different descriptive and interpretive phenomenological methodologies that are covered in the remaining chapters of this book. Next in Chapter 3 Paul Colaizzi's methodology takes center stage and is the first of five descriptive phenomenological approaches that are addressed in Part II.

---

## REFERENCES

- Gadamer, H. G. (1998). *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays* (N. Walker, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd Revision). (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). London: Continuum.
- Heidegger, M. (1992). *History of the concept of time* (T. Kisiel, Trans.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). New York, NY: Collier Books.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology* (D. Carr, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1973a). *Cartesian meditations. An introduction to phenomenology* (D. Cairns, Trans.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- Husserl, E. (1973b). *Experience and judgment* (J. S. Churchill & K. Ameriks, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1981). Phenomenology and anthropology. In P. McCormick & F. Elliston (Eds.), *Husserl: Shorter works* (pp. 315–323) (R. G. Schmitt, Trans.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame.
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* (D. Carr, Trans.). First Book: The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher. (F. Kersten, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1956). What is phenomenology? *Cross-Currents*, 34, 59–70.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The prose of the world* (J. O'Neill, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.