Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the name for the major philosophical orientation in continental Europe in the 20th and 21st century. Phenomenology is not a substantive discipline such as psychology, biology, or sociology; rather it is the study or inquiry into how things appear, are given, or present themselves to us in prereflective or lived experience. In this sense phenomenology is primarily a method. It is often called a hermeneutic phenomenological method of reflecting on experience while abstaining from theoretical, polemical, suppositional, and emotional intoxications. “Hermeneutic” means that reflecting on experience must aim for interpretive language and sensitive linguistic devices that make phenomenological analysis, explication, and description of lived meaning possible.

In the last hundred years scores of philosophers and human science scholars (to name a few: Edith Stein, Jan Patočka, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei) have been inspired to take up the phenomenological challenge of exploring where and how meaning originates, what it means to understand something, and how self and other are implicated in the ethics of presence and otherness, being and alterity (otherness of the other). In the context of the long and complex philosophical tradition of phenomenology, it should be obvious that there are various intricate descriptive and interpretative elements at work in phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology is, in some sense, always descriptive and interpretive, linguistic and hermeneutic.

Although there are certain precursors to philosophical phenomenology such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Hegel, it is generally agreed that the founding figure of
phenomenology is Edmund Husserl. His aim was to find a method for arriving at indubitable knowledge that could serve to establish a firm epistemological basis for the sciences. Husserl believed that it is possible to grasp and describe the essential meanings of intended objects as they appear in consciousness; the proper focus of phenomenology is on the way objects appear or give themselves—their transcendence. The second major figure in the development of phenomenology was Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger, who argued that the attempt to formulate indubitable knowledge was too presumptuous since the meaning of objects as experienced is ultimately as elusive as the temporality of experience as lived. The “I” of the living present always dissolves under the objectifying and subjugating gaze of the “I” of the reflective self. Heidegger radicalized Husserl’s phenomenology by pointing out that the proper focus of phenomenology is not epistemological but ontological. To ask how a phenomenon appears in consciousness is already to assume an abstraction, namely the idea of consciousness itself. Heidegger argued that phenomenology must aim for the more fundamental concrete or existential question of how meaning comes to be. The reflective understanding of experience becomes an ontological project: exploring the Being (ontological meaning) of the being of things. Ontology is concerned with phenomena as modes of being in the world.

Every mode of being in the world is a way of understanding that world. Phenomenology gradually grew into a living tradition that soon sprouted into a variety of distinguishable orientations. A living tradition is a tradition that constantly reinvents itself. So, perhaps it is even more appropriate to regard phenomenology as a tradition of traditions.
Phenomenological reflection

There are various ways that phenomenological reflection may be understood, depending on its presuppositions and its practice. Here follow some distinctions:

(1) Husserlian phenomenology tends to be understood as the epistemological process of eidetic analysis: exploring the eidos or essence of what appears in consciousness and how it appears or “gives” itself. Husserl contrasted two modes of givenness of an object in experience. The object as experienced in external perception such as my house as seen from where I stand, and the object as experienced in internal perception such as my house as I nostalgically remember it while travelling. The house as perceived from external perception is always seen only by a certain vantage point. It is impossible to see the house in its totality from all possible points of view. And yet, the house as object given in internal perception transcends the house that I perceive while standing in front of it. In other words, the house as object of lived experience is given in its essence. When I think of my house, I don’t just think of it as perceived from the front, the side, the back, or some other vantage point. Rather, I “see” the house as intuitively given as house, in all its many exterior and interior aspects, meanings, and significations. Phenomenology as transcendental reflection goes beyond the object as naively seen through empirical perception. Husserl is especially concerned with how we come to know what appears in consciousness as living experience. This reflective understanding of experience is an epistemological project: determining how to gain clarity with respect to the phenomena of our world.
(2) With Heidegger the notion of reflection problematizes the ultimate irreducibility and fundamental concealment of the meaning of experience and the “I” or the self. Experience is meaningful in the sense that it is so full with meaning that it cannot be completely fathomed. The living meaning of something cannot just be grasped in its essence. The understanding of experience becomes an ontological project: exploring the Being (ontology) of the being of things. Phenomenology as ontology is concerned with phenomenological understanding as modes of being in the world. All modes of being in the world are ways of understanding the world. These two epistemological (Husserlian) and ontological (Heideggerian) impulses can be traced throughout the many writings of phenomenological scholars.

(3) Husserl’s consciousness epistemology and Heidegger’s formal ontology both have been challenged from more down-to-earth reflective perspectives emerging from the corporeal, quotidian, and existential reflections as, for example, with Patočka, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. The latter argued that Husserl and Heidegger remained too aloof and cut off from the mundane everyday realities of life.

(4) In addition, the transcendental, ontological, and existential phenomenologies of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and others have been recalibrated to focus away from eidos and essence toward what is “other” as exemplified in Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Bernhard Waldenfels. Phenomenological reflection guided by alterity is concerned with ethics and the realization that the other cannot be reduced to the self.

(5) For still others such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jean-Luc Marion, the reflective meaning of phenomena and the sense of the world coincide with the enigma of singularity, self-givenness, and the originary. They point out that phenomenological
reflection paradoxically deflects clarity about the world as we see it, touch it, and are touched by it. For example, Marion suggests that some phenomena such as the event, sacrifice, and love are so saturated with meaning that it is impossible to come to an eidetic understanding of them. So a third kind of reflection is required that purely orients to the self-givenness of what gives itself.

(6) Still other ways that phenomenological reflection may be understood are evident in the material phenomenology, and technogenetic perspectives, of thinkers as different as Hubert Dreyfus and Bernard Stiegler.

**Lived Experience**

Broadly speaking, the above varieties of phenomenological reflection have in common that it is reflection on prereflective experience or the lived “now”. Lived experience may be considered the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. It may be argued that many other qualitative research approaches also take human experience as the main epistemological source. This is true. But for phenomenology the concept of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) possesses special philosophical and methodological significance. The notion of “lived experience,” announces the intent to explore *directly* the originary or prereflective dimensions of human existence. Husserl used the term “prepredicative experience” to refer to experience before it has been thematized and named. It is important to dwell on the question of the meaning of lived experience since an understanding of the sometimes-enigmatic nature of the notion of lived experience allows adoption of a proper phenomenological perspectival attitude, necessary for doing phenomenological inquiry.
The focus on “lived experience” means that phenomenology is interested in recovering somehow the living moment of the “now” or existence—even before we put language to it or describe it in words. But what is this “now”? As a phenomenological research method, the researcher is directed towards exploring a recognizable human experience (phenomenon) as it is lived through rather than how we conceptualize, theorize, or reflect on it.

We may wonder what happens in the fleeting moment of casting a glance at someone or how we experience being seen by someone. Or we may wonder how human beings experience a digitally mediated world now; as compared to the way humans experienced their world in the industrial age or in ancient times. And what “is” it when we study the glance or technology?

Phenomenology tries to show how our words, concepts, and theories inevitably shape and give structure to our experiences as we live them. For example, it is one thing to get lost in a novel but it is another to retrospectively capture what happened to us, just now, as we slipped into the textual space and began to dwell in the story. Similarly, health science professionals identify, categorize, and rate with empirical descriptors, the nature and intensity of various forms of pain. But the actual moment of suddenly being struck by pain or the condition of suffering a chronic pain somehow seems to be beyond words. On the one hand, medical science is able to draw a diagnostic profile of clinical conditions such as OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder). On the other hand, it is difficult to capture in language what an actual moment of obsessive compulsive thought or behavior consists in: this strange moment of compulsively and simultaneously wanting-and-not-wanting to think or do something. Similarly, as teachers or as parents we talk
about our children learning, and yet do we really know what happens experientially, in that living moment of learning something?

**Phenomenology in Education**

In the history of education, phenomenology has made appearances as a philosophy of education, as an approach to professional practice, as taken up by curriculum scholars, as philosophical reflections on education, and as a human science research method. These five appearances of phenomenology in education will be briefly characterized below, followed by some further reflections of the nature of phenomenology as a human science method.

1. Phenomenology as a philosophy of education became prominent with authors such as David Denton, Donald Vandenberg, Leroy Troutner, and Maxine Greene during the 1960s and 70s. David Denton was inspired by Martin Heidegger’s ontological phenomenology. His essay, “That Mode of Being Called Teaching” is an example of his meditative reflecting on teaching as a way of being in the world. Denton attempted to clarify the reality of education by means of existential analysis of such themes as temporality and embodied-being-in-situation. Denton criticized functional explanations of educational phenomena and argued that understanding requires hermeneutical interpretation and attention to mythology. He responded to the call to teach as a mode of being that is indeed a calling, a vocation.

   Donald Vandenberg who was similarly influenced by his readings of Heidegger also departed from a philosophy of existential phenomenology. He was especially inspired by the more conceptual and dialogical approach of the Husserlian philosopher Stephen Strasser. Vandenberg attempted to find common ground with conceptual
analysis and ordinary language philosophy that has been dominant in philosophy of education. But he did not reflect on the meaning and use of language in phenomenological descriptions. Denton criticized Vandenberg’s theoretical work for being insensitive to the poetic dimension of language. Phenomenology should not be seen as theory development.

Troutner attempted to work out a relation between John Dewey’s empirical method and phenomenology. One of his best-known essays is entitled “Time and Education” in which Troutner contrasts the usual conception of school time as clock times and objective time with a more Heideggerian sense of temporality. The phenomenology of school time must reflect on the ways that children experience and sense time as the ground of personal becoming, and as the primordially of openness to the future. According to Troutner, a phenomenology of school time should be sensitive to the formation of self-identity and the development of personal authenticity.

Perhaps Maxine Greene presents the most celebrated example of a phenomenological philosophy of education in seven books and numerous articles. She declared that she has been very influenced by existentialism and especially the work of Heidegger’s student Hannah Arendt. More than any of her colleagues, Greene interlaced her educational reflections with rich references and quotes from novels and other forms of literature and the fine arts. Like Arendt the writings of Maxine Greene frequently are inspirted with political activism. She is constantly moved and motivated by the desire to address the injustices inflicted on youth and the needs of children here and abroad. She is extremely well read and engages deeply and actively with voices such as Adrienne Rich,

So it appears that the writings of educational philosophers such as Denton, Vandenberg, Troutner, and Greene are inspired by the phenomenologies of thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Minkowski, Camus, and they are often inspiring for thinking about teaching. However, in spite of their intent to be relevant to the practice of living, their writings have tended to stay more meditative, abstract, and theoretic than down-to-earth, concrete, and practical.

(2) Phenomenology as an approach to professional practice is exemplified in the work of the proponents of the Dutch and German phenomenological approach to pedagogy. A more life-world sensitive approach to the phenomenology education may be found in the writings of scholars who are not first of all philosophers of education but rather professional practitioners whose writing and thinking aims to understand how children, teachers, and parents actually experience their lived world. For example, Martin Langeveld, Jan Hendrik van den Berg, Nicolas Beets, Otto Bollnow, and Ton Beekman engaged in phenomenological situation analysis of specific and relevant experiential phenomena such as how children experience a secret place, the mood of going to school in the morning, the experience of the first smile in a young child, playing hide ‘n seek, and so forth. These scholars were less interested in the formal philosophical discourse of philosophical phenomenology so much as exploring everyday meaningful experience from a phenomenological attitude. For example, the psychiatrist van den Berg wrote amongst other things about the changing nature of childhood; the pedagogue-philosopher
Bollnow wrote on the pedagogical atmosphere, the pedagogy of trust, confidence, celebration, etc.

(3) Phenomenology as taken up by curriculum scholars includes the work of, for example, Dwayne Huebner, William Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, Ted Aoki, and Philip Jackson. While philosophy of education and curriculum thinking tend to be regarded as separate disciplines, some of their proponents may be seen to belong to both domains. Curriculum scholars tend to be preoccupied with questions of what is taught, to whom, why, how, and to what end—in schools and classrooms. In his essay, “Curriculum as Concern for Man's Temporality” Dwayne Huebner questions the meaning and centrality of the concept of learning and he uses Heidegger’s *Being and Time* to rethink teaching as being, and to reflect on curriculum as environmental design. William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet used the method of biography and narrative as a way to interpret curriculum as the journey of one’s personal life curriculum. Pinar employed Sartre’s notion of method as imaginary, extended reflection, meditation, and as a resource for rethinking and reconceptualizing the meaning of curriculum, teaching, and learning processes. Curriculum is commonly regarded as a program of studies, but Ted Aoki drew distinctions between curriculum as planned and curriculum as lived, thus bringing to the fore the contingent, situated, personal, and dynamic aspects of curriculum as lived and enacted in the classroom and in the relation between student and teacher, student and the instrumental content of teaching. Interestingly, while Philip Jackson does not explicitly identify with phenomenology, his work is perhaps more sensitive to the phenomenological project in his attention to the ways that life in classrooms is actually experienced by teachers and students.
(4) Phenomenology as philosophical reflection on education by philosophers outside the field of education is exemplified in the work of Iain Thomson. The phenomenological philosopher Thomson uses the ontotheology of Heidegger’s writings on technology to criticize administrative and policy developments in education. He points out how our technological understanding of being produces a calculative mentality that tends to quantify all qualitative relations, reducing entities to bivalent, programmable information. There is a certain irony in the fact that even the increasing popularity of qualitative inquiry in education has not prevented educational practice in cementing ever more firmly into preoccupations with calculative policies and technological solutions regarding the productivity of learning outcomes, the accountability of standards of practice, the measurement of educational effectiveness in terms of school ranking, the codification of ethics governing programs of research and teaching, and so forth.

(5) Phenomenology as educational research method is worthy as a separate topic since none of the above educational philosophers, professional practitioners, curriculum scholars who have associated themselves with the existential phenomenological tradition address the topic of how phenomenological reflection is done, how phenomenology can be approached as a research method. This problematic is presented by authors such as Amedeo Giorgi whose Husserlian psychological phenomenological method has been adopted by many researchers in education, and by Max van Manen who offers a method that is less procedurally driven but grounded in the rich philosophical phenomenological tradition.

Phenomenology as research method includes the following methodical features: (a) Phenomenological research begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something
gives itself. (b) A phenomenological question explores what is given in moments of prereflective, prepredicative, or lived experience. (c) Phenomenology aims to describe the exclusively singular aspects (identity / essence / otherness) of a phenomenon or event. (d) The epoché (bracketing) and the reduction proper are the two most critical components of the various forms of the reduction—though both are understood differently by different leading phenomenologists. The reduction is not a technical procedure, rule, tactic, strategy, or a sequential set of steps that we should apply to the phenomenon that is being researched. Rather, the reduction is an attentive turning to the world when in an open state of mind, effectuated by the epoché. It is because of this openness that a phenomenological insight may occur.

**Phenomenology and human science methods**

As the phenomenological approach was imported into professional disciplines such as psychology, education, pedagogy, nursing, and medicine, its methodological resources started to include research methods and tools that belong to the social sciences. First, it adapted data gathering methods, and second, it adapted reflective methods and techniques.

Empirical and reflective methods and procedures can assist the practice of doing phenomenology in professional contexts. Empirical methods describe the various kinds of research activities that provide the researcher with experiential material. They include personal descriptions of experiences, gathering written experiences from others, interviewing for experiential accounts, observing experiences, investigating fictional experiences, and exploring imaginal experiences from other aesthetic sources. Reflective
methods describe certain forms of analysis or phenomenological reflection. We may distinguish thematic reflection, guided existential reflection (corporeal, temporal, spatial, material, and relational reflection), collaborative reflection, linguistic reflection, etymological reflection, conceptual reflection, exegetical reflection, and hermeneutic interview reflection. In any research project the selection and usage of empirical and reflective methods and procedures depend upon the context and the nature of the study. The important point is that these methods and procedures differ from those in other forms of qualitative research.

Systematic “data” gathering through interviews, observations, descriptive accounts, etc. is rarely used in philosophy proper. But in professional fields such as education, experiential accounts or lived experience descriptions may provide the researcher with rich material. Written accounts that people provide of their experience may be highly recognizable. And some of the narrative accounts may be integrated in the phenomenological research text.

The main purpose of the empirical (and exegetical) methods is to explore examples and varieties of lived experiences, especially in the form of anecdotes, narratives, stories and other lived experience accounts. The lifeworld, the world of lived experience, is both the source and the object of phenomenological research. And so one needs to search everywhere in the lifeworld for lived-experience material: through interview, observation, language analysis, fictional accounts, etc. One needs to realize, of course, that experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions are never identical to lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed
conversations about experiences are already transformations of those experiences. Even life captured directly on magnetic or light-sensitive tape is already transformed at the moment it is captured. Without this dramatic elusive element of lived meaning to our reflective attention phenomenology might not be necessary. So, the upshot is that the researcher needs to find access to life's living dimensions while hoping that the meanings brought to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have not entirely lost some the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence, as Merleau-Ponty might say.

As soon as we nod to the inevitable predicament that we can never grasp the present as present, we may also become aware that the matter is even more complex: the moment from the prereflective to the moment of the reflective exposes a gap. The past is always too late to capture the present as present. Therefore, some phenomenologists say that the past has never been present. The past is always already there. The living moment of the instant is prereflective in the sense that the living and the lived dimensions of “lived experience” are the same, and yet, paradoxically, they do not coincide. Therefore, Levinas spoke enigmatically of a past more ancient than every representable origin. The present is already the past. But the past is a present that never was. Never quite like this. Rather than shrug our shoulders and say that phenomenology is simply “impossible,” we should actually acknowledge and embrace this “impossibility” as the condition for all true inquiry in the human sciences. This “impossibility” makes phenomenology so compellingly fascinating and ultimately possible. Without the realization that human experience is related to an absent present that can only be accessed through an unrecoverable past, phenomenology would not be what it is: the most radically reflective and most demanding approach to the study of life and education as we experience it.
See also: Arendt, Hannah; Buber, Martin; de Beauvoir, Simone; Deconstruction; Dewey, John; Embodiment; Foucault, Michel; Gadamer, Hans Georg; Greene, Maxine; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Heidegger; Hermeneutics; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Phenomenological Pedagogy; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Wittgenstein, Ludwig; Young, Iris Marion

**Further readings**


