WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?
MOMENTS by Will Hoffman
Inspired by David Eagleman’s book SUM

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPaINZD_I
What is phenomenology?

• Phenomenology is the philosophical name for the method of investigating or inquiring into the meanings of our experiences as we live them. The method is phenomenological reflecting on pre-reflective or lived experience

• Any experience whatsoever can be studied phenomenologically

• The approach is called “phenomenological” reflection because it uses the method of the epoché and the reduction

• Lived experience is prereflective in that it is experience as we are in it, live through it—while not, or not yet, reflecting on it, or making sense of it, or theorizing about it.
What is phenomenology?

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence. The term method refers to the way or attitude of approaching a phenomenon.

**Abstemious** means that reflecting on experience aims to abstain from theoretical, polemical, suppositional, and emotional intoxications.

**Hermeneutic** means that reflecting on experience must aim for discursive language and sensitive interpretive devices that make phenomenological analysis, explication, and description possible and intelligible.

**Lived experience** means that phenomenology reflects on the prereflective or prepredicative life of human existence as living through it.
The Sickbed
Lived Experience Description (LED)

“Sick in Bed at Home”

Spend a moment recalling a particular time that you had to stay at home sick in bed with a cold or the flu or maybe some other physical ailment or illness.

Describe what it was like to be sick in bed at home.
HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL HINTS:

• try to think of a particular sickbed experience on a specific day (not how you usually, typically, or generally feel when you feel ill)

• try to focus on a single occasion: the last time or the time that still stands out for its vividness or as it happened

• if appropriate, start with a bodily experience, how the body felt, how things smelled, felt, sounded, etc.

• you may also want to attend to the way that the space (the house, the room, the bed), time, and other people around you were experienced by you

• describe from the inside, almost like a state of mind, perceptions, sensations, the mood, feelings, emotions

• you do not have to divulge embarrassing private matters, this is not a private but a personal lived experience description

• we are less concerned whether you remember how exactly the experience really happened, but more with the plausibility of it—whether it is “true” (plausible) to our living sense of it

• do not attempt to beautify your description with poetic phrases or belle mots (this is not an English assignment), but rather aim to render a simple description of the sickbed as you lived through it…
Sick in Bed

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After a restless and disturbed sleep, I wake up in the morning, not feeling too well. I get out of bed, however, intending to start the day in the usual manner. But soon I notice that I cannot. I have a headache; I feel sick. I notice an uncontrollable urge to vomit and I deem myself so incapable of facing the day that I convince myself that I am ill. I return to the bed I just left with every intention of staying there for a while. The thermometer shows that my decision was not unreasonable. My wife's cautious inquiry whether I would like something for breakfast makes the reason much clearer. I am really ill. I give up my coffee and toast, as I give up everything the day was to bring, all the plans and duties. And to prove that I am abandoning these completely I turn to the wall, nestle myself in my bed, which guarantees a comparative wellbeing by its warm invitation to passivity, and close my eyes. But I find that I cannot sleep.
HERE FOLLOW SOME THEMES
Sick in Bed

We can use the existentials of lived time, space, body, and relation as interpretive means to explicate some themes of the experience of being sick in bed.
space

- the bed is ambiguously experienced as safe haven but also as prison
- the world and others are experienced from the vantage point of proneness and a fixed point in space
- the bed is never fresh
- the uncomfortable bed, sheets, stickiness, heat, etc.
- the world may seem to shout or cry out
- the sense of “outside” changes
- there is a changed reality of sounds in the house, and from the outside
- new knowledge of the rise of sunshine, the fly on the window
- the things in the room speak, become trusted
• the ill person is not allowed to forget his or her body

• the own body is experienced as object, unfaithful, encumbered by trouble, pain, dis-ease

• the disease is experienced as invader of the body

• illness smells

• the body may be experienced as unwilling, heavy, painful
time

• there is a sense of disturbed routines, duties, expectations, etc.

• sleep is no longer a systole, a contraction of existence

• on the one hand, to be ill is only possible when the world has acquired a “patient” waiting aspect

• on the other hand, the bed is no longer a promise, not a waiting, but a confinement

• the clock slows down--experience of presence, not future

• the murmur and noises of the day acquires new meaning

• special knowledge of “the night”

• one may become sensitive to little things

• trivial things acquire significance--flowering of a plant, bee on the window, etc.
others

- aloneness can be a relief from others
- feeling loved, attention--or the lack of it
- the patient in bed feels more vulnerable in social interaction
- the bed is no longer a place to retreat and share
- illness may give deepened understanding of life and of others
- the patient lives in another world--but who is “really” sick?
- reflecting on the sickbed asks the meaning of health and illness
Appraisive criteria

Here are some tentative criteria for appraising a phenomenological text, and for locating places where it can be improved.
Questioning Wonder
Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder and questioning attentiveness: *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all) and *ti estin* (the wonder what this is) (The text should not be overly dull)

Experiential Richness
Does the text contain rich, concrete, descriptive experiential (narrative) lifeworld material? (The text should not be overly abstract)

Interpretive Depth
Does the text show reflective allusions and surprising insights?
(The text should not be shallow)

Strongly Incarnated
Does the text contain strongly embedded meaning. Does it “speak” to us and address our sense of embodied, situated or communal self? (The text should not just present “information” as in a report)

Reflective Rigor
Does the text remain disciplined and constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning—phenomenality? (The text should not be digressive of other unrelated phenomena)

Evocative Awakening
Does the text awaken prereflective experience through vocative and presentative language? (The text should not limit itself to conceptual analysis and propositional argumentation)

Situated Epiphany
Does the study offer us the possibility of an intuitive or inspired grasp of the ethos of life commitments and practices? (The text should not be polemical)
WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?
What is the Epoché and the Reduction?

Epoché means that we must try to enter a space of openness to the experience or phenomenon we are trying to understand in its prereflective sense.

Reduction means that, once we have opened ourselves, we try to close in on the meaning of the phenomenon as it appears in our experience or in our consciousness.

So, the aim of a phenomenological research project is to arrive at phenomenal insights that contribute to our thoughtfulness and practical tact, by using the methods of the epoché and the reduction.
What is a phenomenon? The instant of the Now?

It may be helpful to explain that a phenomenon can also be seen as a moment of the experiential Now—these are the normal moments of everyday living.

We are always in the Now—even when we recall a memory, anticipate an event, daydream, or do something routine or creative: we cannot be but in the Now (though without really “knowing” it). And yet when we try to grasp this experience in the instant of the Now, we are always too late. The present of the Now is always absent already—when we try to reflect on it.

This is really odd, and yet true. Prereflectively, we are always in the Now, and yet, when we try to capture it (objectify it), we are never in that Now—the Now is at best always Just Now—an absent presence, and in some enigmatic sense a presence that never was.
What is the purpose of phenomenological reflection?

And yet, this is exactly what phenomenology tries to do: reflect on or uncover the primal meanings of this absent present moment of the now.

For example, reading a story, having a talk with someone, sending an email or a message, listening to a piece of music, and so forth.

In the questioning we gain the meaningful understandings. There are no ultimate determinations for the meanings of human existence.

What is so wonderful about phenomenological insights is that they can be surprising, deep, unexpected, and yet somehow recognizable—but an insight is never final, life is always more complicated and ambiguous that we can express and therein lies the wonder, promise and fascination of phenomenological inquiry.
What kinds of questions does phenomenology ask?

Phenomenology asks originary meaning questions.

Any experience whatsoever can be a phenomenological topic: phenomenology studies the unique lived meaning aspects of a “possible human experience”
What kinds of questions does phenomenology ask?

Phenomenology asks originary meaning questions

In focusing on a particular phenomenon, it asks:

• What is this phenomenon like? And how do we need to describe it so that its phenomenological meaning becomes understandable and resonates with our lived experience?

• How does this phenomenon give or show itself in consciousness?

• What existential structures of meaning lie at the core of this phenomenon?

• What makes this phenomenon or lived experience unique and singularly different from other phenomena?
What is phenomenology?

continue
What is the philosophical framework of phenomenology?

The framework underpinning this research is rooted in continental philosophy.

“Philosophy today has become, essentially, phenomenology … it has undertaken the task of seeing what gives itself—what gives.:”

(Jean-Luc Marion, 2004, p. ix)

And as I explained, seeing what gives itself involves reflecting on prereflective life, on lived or primal experience.
The framework underpinning this research is rooted in continental philosophy.

Phenomenology is commonly associated with the thinking and the voluminous writings by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. But, really we should now recognize that phenomenology has been and is presented or practiced by dozens of fascinating scholars.

*Phenomenology of Practice* contains discussions of a few dozen scholar who can give us new ways of understanding the meaning of meaning and the originary sources of meaning.
Beginnings:
Transcendental phenomenology • Husserl
Personalistic and Value phenomenology • Scheler
Empathic and Faith phenomenology • Stein
Ontological phenomenology • Heidegger
Personal Practice phenomenology • Patočka

Strands and traditions:
Ethical phenomenology • Levinas
Existential phenomenology • Sartre
gender phenomenology • de Beauvoir
Embodiment phenomenology • Merleau-Ponty
Hermeneutic phenomenology • Gadamer
Critical phenomenology • Ricoeur
Literary phenomenology • Blanchot
Oneiric-Poetic phenomenology • Bachelard
Sociological phenomenology • Schutz
Political phenomenology • Arendt
Material phenomenology • Henry
Deconstruction phenomenology • Derrida

New thoughts and unthoughts:
Technoscience Post-phenomenology • Ihde
Learning phenomenology • Dreyfus
Sense phenomenology • Serres
Ecological phenomenology • Lingis
Fragmentary phenomenology • Nancy
Religious phenomenology • Chrétien
Philological phenomenology • Agamben
Radical phenomenology • Marion
Techno-genetic phenomenology • Stiegler
Ecstatic-poetic phenomenology • Gosetti-Fereince
Objectivity phenomenology • Figal
Eventiel phenomenology • Romano
What does the methodological frame of phenomenology look like?

Of course, there is much more to the epistemological frame of phenomenological research. There are philosophical, philological and human science methods that need to be understood and practiced by someone opting for this kind of inquiry.

See for example these methodological or methodical outlines that would take too long to discuss here but that help with phenomenological research and writing.
Reflection

Phenomenological Question

Lived Experience
Reflection: Phenomenological Research & Writing

Phenomenological Question

moment
Lived Experience
Reflection: Phenomenological Research & Writing

Phenomenological Question

philosophical methods
The Reduction

human science methods
Empirical Activities

philological methods
The Vocative

moment
Lived Experience
Reflection: Phenomenological Research & Writing
“meaning-giving methods of meaning”

Phenomenological Question

philosophical methods
The Reduction
heuristic: wonder
hermeneutic: openness
experiential: concreteness
eidetic: essence / eidos
methodological: approach
ontological: modes of being
originary: inception

philological methods
The Vocative
the vocative: voice
the revocative: livingness
the evocative: nearness
the invocative: intensification
the convocative: appeal
the provocative: epiphany

Human science methods
Empirical Activities

Gathering:
describing
gathering
interviewing
observing

Reflecting:
themetic
existential
Linguistic
insight-cultivating

corporeal
spatial
temporal
relational
material

moment
Lived Experience
What kind of data does phenomenological research collect?

Phenomenology gathers lived experience descriptions...not opinions, views, beliefs, interpretations, but direct descriptions (depictions, renderings, portrayals) of an experience as lived through in a particular moment of time.

Lived experience descriptions are always and inevitably retrospective recollections—never pure introspective accounts.
How are the data analyzed?

How analyzed?

The analysis is by way of the method of the epoché and the reduction, but this is more an attitudinal and intuitive practice than the application of some techniques, or codes, or methods in an instrumental sense.

Also, phenomenology tries to describe and interpret experiences that may require special expressive linguistic and rhetorical sensitivities. We call this the vocative dimension of phenomenology.
By way of an example, how this kind of research is conducted?

For example:  
What is it like to experience keeping or sharing a secret?

Free download of “Childhood’s Secrets” here:

http://archive.org/details/childhoodssecret00vanm
For a student new to this kind of research, what might you recommend they do?

In addition to reading the critical and supportive literature it is vital that one engages in relevant course work and workshops.

As well, for dissertation research one need to seek the support of supervisor and a supervisory committee who are familiar with this kind of human science inquiry.