

MAX VAN MANEN

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PRACTICE



Meaning-Giving Methods in
Phenomenological Research and Writing



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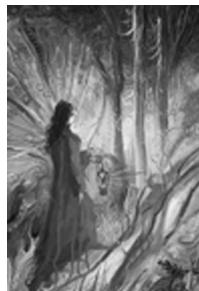
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CHAPTER ONE

Phenomenology of Practice

This text is an invitation to openness, and an invitation of openness to phenomenologies of lived meaning, the meaning of meaning, and the originary sources of meaning. The phrase “phenomenology of practice” refers to the kinds of inquiries that address and serve the practices of professional practitioners as well as the quotidian practices of everyday life. For example, a thoughtful understanding of the meaningful aspects of “having a conversation” may be of value to professional practitioners as well as to anyone involved in the conversational relations of everyday living. My personal inspiration for the name “phenomenology of practice” lies in the work of scholars such as Martinus Langeveld, Jan Hendrik van den Berg, Frederik Buytendijk, Henricus Rümke, and Hans Linchoten who were academics as well as clinicians and practitioners in fields of pedagogy, education, psychology, psychiatry, and health science. However, they did not use the phrase “phenomenology of practice” in describing their work.

This phenomenology of practice is also operative with respect to the everyday practice of living. In other words, phenomenology of practice is *for* practice and *of* practice. Jan Patočka, an early student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, already spoke of the essential primacy of practice that lies at the proto-foundation of thought, of consciousness, of the being of human being. When we understand something, we understand practically. For Patočka this means that phenomenology needs to “bring out the originary personal experience. The experience of the way we live situationally, the way we are personal beings in space” (Patočka, 1998, p. 97).

More specifically, this phenomenology of practice is meant to refer to the practice of phenomenological research and writing that reflects *on* and *in* practice, and prepares for practice. A phenomenology of practice does not aim for technicalities and instrumentalities—rather, it serves to foster and strengthen an embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology of thoughtful and tactful action. In this text, I explore the works of a variety of philosophers and human science scholars in a broad and practical manner: to serve a phenomenology of practice that does not get trapped in dogma and over-simplifying schemas, schedules, and

interpretations of what is supposed to count as “true” phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology is usually described as a method. This text aims to describe a variety of phenomenologies that may be regarded, in a broad philosophical sense, as meaning-giving methods for doing inquiry. These phenomenologies are derived from the works and texts of leading phenomenological thinkers and authors.

My aim is to encourage readers to receive their insights and inspiration from original phenomenological sources. For that reason I constantly try to turn to primary texts. Some beginners to phenomenology may be a bit overwhelmed by the multiplicity and variety of themes and notions discussed in the following pages. For a more initiatory guide, I refer to my earlier *Researching Lived Experience* (1997), which contains a workable outline of human science pointers, principles, and practices to conduct a phenomenological research project.

Reality of the Real

Some fifty years ago, the mathematical physicist Sir Arthur Eddington (who provided observational proof of Einstein’s theory of relativity) wrote, “The motions of the electrons are as harmonious as those of the stars but in a different scale of space and time, and the music of the spheres is being played on a keyboard 50 octaves higher” (1988, p. 20). More recently, astronomers have discovered that there is indeed resonant sound inside stars, and so the music of spheres is not just a prescientific idea. And at the subatomic level, the new physicist model of deep matter is one of field vibrations. It seems that the further and deeper science penetrates the nature of physical matter, the less there seems to remain of physical reality in the way we would have pictured it as primal objects. In earlier days, one still thought of the fundamentals of nature in terms of molecules, atoms, protons, electrons, and quarks. But this is less the case now. Particles and waves seem to dissolve into one another. The new language of quantum physics is abstract, but also metaphoric and mythic. Contemporary physics and astrophysics describe deep physical reality in terms of strings, forces, chaos, antimatter, dark energy, and field vibrations. New theory aims to explain how the cosmic macroscopic reality emerges from the strange behavior of the microscopic quantum reality. And physicists attempt to trace the origin of matter back to pure energy or the elusive Higgs boson particle, which is really thought to be a vibration in a field, as are all particles.

Ultimately what contemporary science seems to leave us with are mathematical spheres. But it should be said that for some physicists these mathematical realities are beautiful, elegant, and strangely harmonious. And so, if you engage in scientific research, and you seem to penetrate the final matrix of matter, it is as if you are listening to a beautiful flute-play. But what you hear is the cosmic sound of a flute without a player. The music is melodious, magnificent, and mysterious. But you never discover the musician. This scientific view of physical reality is formidable and even frightful. As we gaze seriously at nature, its

substantiality seems to dissolve into giantism and nothingness, dark matter and antimatter—what remains is an eerie absence, a visibility that constantly withdraws into invisibility, an audible presence without an origin, a dark reality on the other side as we think it must be.

There is something provocative in this image of physicists who appear so utterly serene with an understanding of inquiry into the “real” that would be intolerable for metaphysically insecure minds. Even in the domain of qualitative human science, it is disappointing how it often seems to result in reality constructions that become more real than real. It is true, inquiries—such as deconstruction, social constructivism, gender analysis, postmodernism, and chaos theory—have been formulated to break the shackles of foundationalism, positivism, and modernism. But even the supposed relativism of, for example, social constructivism or the absolutism of new speculative materialism seem to lead to imperatives that are hard to shake. Like Pygmalion, we fall in love with our own fabrications even if we know these are also edifices and only “real” in a certain metaphysical sense. Thus, our languages and practices turn addictively polemical. We think we know why other people are philosophically, psychologically, or ideologically trapped in a circle of a pity perspectives, since we ironically believe that we have a larger view that can reduce everyone else’s view to a mere “perspective.”

Enigma of Meaning

The image of matter as field vibrations and dark or antimatter should not be strange. The new compelling images of physical reality, that reverse visibility into invisibility, resembles the *primal impressionality* of consciousness with Edmund Husserl, the *originary inceptuality* of Martin Heidegger, the murmur of the *il-y-a* in Emmanuel Levinas; it echoes the idea of *wild being* in the phenomenology of prereflectivity in Maurice Merleau-Ponty; and it resonates with the originary materiality of the *affective flesh of life* in Michel Henry, the obsession with *singularity* and the *absolute secret* in Jacques Derrida, the ancient ontology of *technics* in Bernard Stiegler, and the *invisibility of irreducible saturated phenomena*, in the work of Jean-Luc Marion.

Just like the physicist is driven by a certain pathos to penetrate the cosmic-quantum secrets of the physical world, so the phenomenologist is driven by a pathos to discern the primordial secrets of the living meanings of the human world. While discussing the depthful thoughts of Teilhard de Jardin’s phenomenism, Merleau-Ponty talks about a pathos for the mystery of life that always transcends our normal sensibilities—a mystery of the sensible that “entirely grounds our *Einfühlung* with the world and the animals, and gives depth to *Being*” (2003, p. 312). Both natural science and human science are driven by a pathos for the enigma of the real meaning and the sources of meaning, but the basic heuristic differs: While natural science inclines to mathematics, phenomenology gravitates to meaning and reflectivity. The latter is caught up in a

self-reflective pathos of reflecting, discerning meaning in sensing the world of things, others, and self.

Meaning is not something that can just be scooped up from the spoils and layers of debris of daily living. Meaning is already implicated in the mystery of prereflective reflection of seeing, hearing, touching, being touched, and being-in-touch with the world, and the enigma of reflecting on the phenomenality of all this. New experiences may grant us unsuspected encounters with significances that we did not know before. Thoughtful reflections may bring ancient and novel sights and insights into perspectival view. The phenomenological pathos is the loving project of bringing all the living of life to meaningful expression through the imageries and languages of phenomenological writing, composing, and expressing.

Doing Phenomenology

In 1975 Herbert Spiegelberg seized a title for a text on phenomenology that still speaks to the pragmatic sensibilities of many of my colleagues and graduate students. A visitor glances at my bookshelves and notices Spiegelberg's title *Doing Phenomenology*; the book is pulled and perused. Some of the section headings make attractive promises: "A new way into phenomenology: the workshop approach," "Existential uses of phenomenology," "Toward a phenomenology of experience," and so on. But after a bit more browsing, the book is returned to the shelf, without comment. Never has anyone asked to borrow it. And yet, *Doing Phenomenology* seems to be a text with commendable ambitions. In it, Spiegelberg decries "the relative sterility in phenomenological philosophy ... especially in comparison with what happened in such countries as France and The Netherlands" (1975, p. 25). In his essays, both *on* and *in* phenomenology, he suggests that what is needed is "a revival of the spirit of doing phenomenology directly on the phenomena." And he asks: "What can be done to reawaken [this spirit] in a very different setting?" (1975, p. 25). Spiegelberg sketches an example of the workshop approach consisting of "a small number of graduate students who would select limited, 'bitesize' topics for phenomenological exploration" (1975, p. 26). It is difficult not to feel the hope that speaks in the pages of this book.

In spite of its promising title, Spiegelberg's *Doing Phenomenology* did not turn into a helpful phenomenological tutor. His philosophical essays *on* and *in* phenomenology failed to exemplify doing it, if "doing phenomenology," as Spiegelberg suggests, means engaging students to explore "bitesize topics" from the lifeworld. So Spiegelberg's book still signals a rarely mentioned issue in phenomenological circles: how to make phenomenological philosophy accessible and do-able by researchers who are not themselves professional philosophers or who do not possess an extensive and in-depth background in the relevant phenomenological philosophical literature.

In the fifties and sixties, there were several developments that may not have been exactly what Spiegelberg had in mind but that might have pleased him

nevertheless. Interest in phenomenology had indeed awakened in a very different setting—the domain of public policy and professional practice. These domains are characterized by priorities that arise from everyday practical concerns and experiences, not necessarily from abstract scholarly questions that are inherent in the traditions of phenomenological philosophy. In the professional fields, context sensitive research seems to have become especially relevant. It requires approaches and methodologies that are adaptive of changing social contexts and human predicaments. And that is perhaps how we may explain emerging nonphilosophical trends in phenomenological developments.

Other philosophers also have urged that philosophy should find a way of making phenomenology more accessible to professional practitioners and researchers who would be interested in phenomenology but who do not possess a strong and deep professional philosophical background. Some of the various “introduction to phenomenology” texts available in the literature are helpful for developing preliminary understandings. To “introduce” means to bring into a circle of knowledge. But introductions are often regarded as simplifications or popularizations of the ideas of great thinkers. When introductions are simply palatable versions of the real thing, then they may slide into seductions. Seducing, *sēdūcēre*, is to lead away: to tempt, entice, and also to beguile to do something wrong or unintended. So, sometimes introductions may not be adequate for the tasks of entering a phenomenology of practice.

Perhaps, a new direction needs to be sought: an agogical approach to phenomenology, as Spiegelberg urged. The term *agogic* derives from Greek, *ἀγωγός*, meaning leading or guiding. It is the root word of pedagogy and andragogy—agogy means pointing out directions, providing support. Agogical phenomenology aims to provide access to phenomenological thinking and research in a manner that shows, in a reflexive mode, what the phenomenological attitude looks like. The OED shows a relation between agogics and paradigm: to show through example is to be paradigmatic. An agogical approach tries to be an example of what it is showing—a writing practice for those who are interested in doing phenomenological research and writing. An agogical approach to phenomenology aims to guide the person to the project and pathos of phenomenological inquiry and to help stimulate personal insights, sensibilities, and sensitivities for a phenomenology of practice.

Writing the Phenomenality of Human Life

The more human science becomes qualitative and expressive, the more it needs to ask what is required of writing and of language. What are the possibilities of writing and what are its limits? Qualitative writing that addresses itself to the phenomenality of phenomena of everyday life is surprisingly difficult. The more reflective the process becomes, the more it seems to falter and fail. Sometimes the difficulty of writing tends to be explained psychologically as a lack of creative

thought, low motivation, poor insight, or insufficient language ability. Solutions to the difficulty of writing have been explicated pragmatically in terms of linguistic rules, inquiry procedures, reflective methods, scholarly preparation, and so on. But perhaps it is neither primarily the psychology nor the technology of writing that lies at the root of the challenge.

The difficulty of writing has especially to do with two things: First, writing itself is a reflective component of phenomenological method. Phenomenological writing is not just a process of writing up or writing down the results of a research project. To write is to reflect; to write is to research. And in writing we may deepen and change ourselves in ways we cannot predict. Michel Foucault expressed this well:

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end. (Foucault, 1988, p. 9)

Second, the pathic phenomenality of phenomena and the vocative expressivity of writing involve not only our head and hand, but our whole sensual and sentient embodied being. So, writing a phenomenological text is a reflective process of attempting to recover and express the ways we experience our life as we live it—and ultimately to be able to act practically in our lives with greater thoughtfulness and tact.

Meanwhile, writing as a cultural practice seems to be increasingly displaced by other forms of media. Are new technologies and media altering the nature of writing or displacing the process of writing altogether? These are questions that are pursued in the works of media scholars such as Vilém Flusser (2011a, 2011b) and Michael Heim (1987). They may have import for phenomenology as a writing practice and as the composing of phenomenological meaning through devices and gestures that extend the reach of traditional philosophical or rational discourse. Even though the medium of writing seems to be increasingly displaced by popular media of visual images, blogs, podcasts, and self-made movies (such as on YouTube), Flusser argues that the gesture of writing possesses culturally habituated and historically embodied structures that are so unique that they cannot really be substituted without a certain loss of reflectivity, expressibility, and the meaning associated with literacy (Flusser, 2012).

Just as we take for granted the material reality of the things of our physical world, so we take for granted the reality of the “things” of our mundane, symbolic, and spiritual world. It would be correct and yet silly to say that this table or this plate from which I eat my food is, at the subatomic level, largely composed of empty space and particles, and thus does not really exist in the way I know it in my daily life. Just as it would be silly to say that the look, the touch, the love, or

the responsibility that I experience in my relation with others does not really exist. They are just the elusive and illusory constructions of an ineffable mind. And yet, the various qualitative inquiry models largely take the reality, the existence, and the meaning of these phenomena for granted—it is precisely the sensibility or meaning of this experiential reality that is at stake in phenomenological inquiry. In daily life, when I speak or write the names of my children, my spouse, or friends, I call their presence into being as it were. And this is true also of language in general. When I call someone a “friend” or “loved one,” then I call into being a certain relational quality of friendship or love that pertains between this person and me. However, when I reflectively write this word “friend” or this word “lover,” then a strange thing happens. The word now gazes back at me, reminding me that it is only a word. As soon as I wrote or pronounced this word, the meaning that I aimed to bring into presence has already fallen away, absented itself.

Hegel wrote that the biblical Adam, in naming the things and creatures of his world, actually annihilated them (Hegel, 1979). In the act of naming and gaining knowledge, we cannot help but rob the things that we name of their existential richness. And so, while trying to become sensitive to the subtleties, nuances, and complexities of our lived life, writers of human science texts may turn themselves unwittingly into annihilators—killers of life: a sobering realization and an unusual beginning perhaps for thinking about phenomenology, reflection, research, and writing.

In this book, I attempt to offer an account of a *phenomenology of practice* that is consistent with its various philosophical and human science antecedents: a phenomenology of professional practice, a phenomenological practice of doing phenomenology, and a phenomenology of the practice of living. As Jan Patočka pointed out, it is within the practical horizons of our personal everyday lives that phenomenological meaning is most clearly needed and seen. Contemporary phenomenology is based on many intellectual strands and traditions that are developed in response to current and earlier thoughts. In this text, it will appear to the reader that formulations of phenomenology are provided that in other places in the text may be presented somewhat differently, or made more complicated, or questioned. And in a different context, the notion of “method” has to be understood variously and sometimes ambiguously. This is unavoidable and even desirable. It is consistent with the inconsistencies in the notion of, for example, the “given” in the phenomenologies of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Giorgio Agamben. And we need to appreciate, for example, the power of Husserl’s method of phenomenological explication and analysis while being aware of Heidegger’s divergent approach, and both, in turn, confronted by the famously differing philosophical explications of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Blanchot, or by the critical and divergent developments provided by scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Alphonso Lingis, or, recently, by the stimulating writings of Bernard Stiegler,



Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Günter Figal, Jennifer Gosetti-Fereince, and Claude Romano.

What is fascinating about phenomenology is that the influential thinkers who have presented diverse versions of phenomenological inquiry do not just offer variations in philosophies or method. They inevitably also offer alternative and radical ways of understanding how and where meaning originates and occurs in the first place. And yet, it is the search for the source and mystery of meaning that we live in everyday life that lies at the basis of these various inceptual phenomenological philosophies. In looking back at the landscape of phenomenological thought, we discern a series of mountains and mountain ranges from which certain views are afforded to those who are willing to make the effort scaling the sometimes challenging and treacherous ascents and descents. Phenomenology does not let itself be seductively reduced to a methodical schema or an interpretive set of procedures. Indeed, relying on procedural schemas, simplified inquiry models, or a series of descriptive-interpretive steps will unwittingly undermine the inclination for the practitioner of phenomenology to deepen himself or herself in the relevant literature that true research scholarship requires, and thus acquire a more authentic grasp of the project of phenomenological thinking and inquiry.

A Phenomenology of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is originally and essentially a philosophical discipline. Even the adjunct disciplines of phenomenological psychology, sociology, and anthropology are indisputably rooted in philosophy and what in continental scholarship has been termed *Geisteswissenschaften*, human sciences. However, unlike in British and North American academies, philosophers in Germany, France, and other continental countries who occupied a chair in philosophy also were often appointed to academic responsibilities for psychology, history, pedagogy, and so on. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's writings include major concerns with psychology, human science, and pedagogy as reflected in his Sorbonne Lectures: *Child Psychology and Pedagogy* (2010a). And, vice versa, psychiatrists and other academic professionals such as Ludwig Binswanger (1963) and Karl Jaspers were heavily invested in philosophy. In continental academia, the boundaries separating the academic disciplines were much less strictly drawn, and so we see how the works of scholars such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, Nancy, and Agamben extend across a broad range of disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts.

Meanwhile, phenomenology has become a core component of developments in the professional human sciences, in many countries on most continents. Phenomenological research in psychology, education, nursing, medicine, geriatric care, preventative health care, counseling, pedagogy, and human ecology is increasingly pursued by a breed of scholars who have strong backgrounds in their own disciplines, but who possess perhaps less grounding in philosophical

thought. Yet, they are interested in and aiming to “do” phenomenology. In these contexts, the disciplinary domains provide a fertile substrate for the emergence of agogical approaches that diverge from conventional curricula and introductions to phenomenological philosophy.

This book is dedicated to the agogical project of doing phenomenology. Thus, we have to make a distinction between philosophizing *about* phenomenology and “doing phenomenology.” Philosophizing *about* phenomenology tends to be done by philosophers who perform exegetical academic studies of the great scholars or about the numerous critical and technical issues in the literature of phenomenology. In other words, philosophers tend to write for other philosophers. But we need to ask, “Is it possible to be a phenomenologist without being a philosopher?” I think so. And yet, in the spirit of *philos* one needs to love the thinking of the great phenomenological minds even more than the work of their interpreters. Doing phenomenology means developing a pathos for the great texts, and, simultaneously, reflecting in a phenomenological manner on the living meanings of everyday experiences, phenomena, and events. Writing phenomenology, in this sense, is not done primarily for philosophers, but for professional practitioners and others who are interested in approaching their professional tasks, personal activities, and everyday experiences in a phenomenological style. In this sense we are all philosophers.

Some years ago, Cornelius Verhoeven (1972) made a troubling observation. He suggested that philosophical knowledge of phenomenology does not make a person a phenomenologist, any more than scholarly knowledge of poetry makes a person a poet. By way of analogy with poetry, Verhoeven made a distinction between those who study and criticize poetry and those who actually do poetry: there are those who are connoisseurs or critics and “write *about* poetry,” and then there are those who “write poetry.” Of course, some critics may also be poets, but the poems of critics may lack compulsion and inspiration. Verhoeven’s warning gives pause to reflection. Verhoeven even went a step further and suggested that some philosophers who only talk about philosophy are nothing but a nuisance. The philosopher critic just talks about philosophy but fails to “do” it. Verhoeven originally made these comments in his phenomenological study, *The Philosophy of Wonder*. But he might still insist that his assertions are relevant today for the practice of phenomenology.

If Verhoeven is right, then we have to admit that someone may be a great philosopher, a learned scholar who writes about phenomenology, but perhaps is unwilling or unable to actually write phenomenologies of life. “They who have no talent for life do philosophy,” says Serres (2008, p. 133). They do philosophical exegesis but fail to bring things to life—evoking ordinary life as we live it in our everyday existence. So, we need to see that there is a difference between philosophers who practice phenomenological exegetical studies and philosophers who practice phenomenological lifeworld studies. Perhaps, only the latter should really be considered genuine phenomenologists. But, of course, it should be seen as

well that philosophers who actually practice phenomenology and nonphilosophers who practice phenomenology may be interested in different things.

Furthermore, we need to ask whether the pleasure and the ability to read practical phenomenological studies is something that can be expected of all readers or whether some people simply are not inclined or prepared to read phenomenological material—just as not every person who has learned to read is inclined or prepared to read poetry. It is also true that one does not have to be a scholar of poetry to be able to understand poetry. Just so with phenomenology. One may not be a professional philosopher and yet understand and enjoy the meaningful experience of reading and writing insightful phenomenological studies.

These reflections about being a phenomenologist and doing phenomenology rather than talking about phenomenology are somewhat sobering and should instill a sense of modesty and caution in our confidence of writing insightful lifeworld studies. But they also grant hope and optimism: one may not be a professional philosopher and yet have studied phenomenological philosophy sufficiently to possess the tactful ability of pursuing fascinating projects and writing insightful texts. From my experience, the joy of phenomenology includes becoming familiar with some of the great philosophical phenomenological texts. It is here that we may become infected by the pathos that drives phenomenological thought and that makes “thinking” such a compelling engagement into the exploration of lived meaning of human life and existence.

In this text, I have tried to identify phenomenologies and phenomenologists that are originary in their thinking. Günther Figal makes the strong claim that every true philosophy is originary: “A philosophical discussion that is not originary is not a philosophy, but, rather, only makes a contribution to a philosophy” (2010, p. 30). This is especially true for phenomenology that, as a philosophical tradition, aims to be constantly renewing. Originary means that there is something about a certain phenomenological text that is not derived from a prior phenomenology. Indeed, there are many scholars who have written learned and difficult exegetical studies about the works of phenomenologists, and yet they have not written phenomenologically in an originary manner.

When it comes to the great “minds” in the tradition of phenomenology, what sets them apart from many other philosophers is that they write in an originary manner of phenomenology while actually doing it. A classic example is the “Preface” by Merleau-Ponty from his *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this Preface he asks, “What is phenomenology?” and then sets out to provide an insightful portrayal written with a powerful phenomenological pathic prose that is still originary in its inception and compelling in its style. Indeed, the scholarly writings of thinkers such as Heidegger, Stein, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Levinas, Derrida, Lingis, Marion, Nancy, Chrétien, Serres, and Agamben are so compelling in that they practice phenomenology with phenomenological sensitivity, logical consistency, poetic precision, and passionate pathos, and they do so from an originary position.