

# Introduction

## Doing Phenomenology

Many disciplines are better learned by entering into the doing than by mere abstract study. This is often the case with the most abstract as well as the seemingly more practical disciplines. For example, within the philosophical disciplines, logic must be learned through the use of examples and actual problem solving. Only after some time and struggle does the student begin to develop the insights and intuitions that enable him to see the centrality and relevance of this mode of thinking. This learning by doing is essential in many of the sciences. The laboratory provides the context within which one learns to see according to a scientific modality. Gradually the messy blob of frog's innards begins to take the recognizable shape of well-defined organs, blood vessels, and the like. Similarly, only after a good deal of observation do the sparks in the bubble chamber become recognizable as the specific movements of identifiable particles.

In philosophy also, this learning by example and experience is an important element—but learning by doing is more important in some types of philosophy than in other types. For example, in the two dominant contemporary styles of philosophy, analytic and phenomenological, doing either an analysis or a description calls for putting into practice a certain method of inquiry. But in the case of phenomenology, I would make an even stronger claim: *Without doing phenomenology, it may be practically impossible to understand phenomenology*. This is not to say that one may not learn *about* phenomenology by other means. Certainly, much can be learned about the history, the structure of the inquiry, the methodological presuppositions of phenomenology (or any type of philosophy) by a careful reading of major thinkers, secondary writers, and criticism. In fact, learning the background and establishing the context is not

only usual for learning a philosophical style, it is an essential element of a comprehensive grasp of the discipline. Nevertheless, without entering into the *doing*, the basic thrust and import of phenomenology is likely to be misunderstood at the least or missed at most. Phenomenology, in the first instance, is like an investigative science, an essential component of which is experiment. Phenomenology is *experimental* and its experiments are conducted according to a carefully worked out set of controls and methods. It is this dimension of phenomenology that this book addresses. The thought-experiments—or better, experience-experiments—that are worked out here are attempts to show the way in which phenomenological inquiry proceeds.

Most academic settings have ample resources for supplementary reading in the form of primary texts, anthologies, and interpretations.<sup>1</sup> I would recommend particularly readings in the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty with these texts is that they present the beginner with accomplished results, often in a language that is, at first, quite difficult to penetrate. Such books are not self-explanatory. They often presuppose a good deal of philosophical sophistication in general and some minimal familiarity with at least one particular tradition within philosophy (the transcendental tradition). Moreover, even with this background, the originators of the phenomenological style of philosophy themselves had a difficulty in moving from purely textual acquaintance with phenomenology to its import as a means of investigation. Martin Heidegger (clearly, one of the giants of the phenomenological movement) confessed that although he had thoroughly read the main works of Edmund Husserl (the primary “inventor” of phenomenology), he was not able to understand the full sense of phenomenology until he learned to “see phenomenologically.”

My repeated beginning also remained unsatisfactory, because I couldn't get over a main difficulty. It concerned the simple question how thinking's manner of procedure which called itself “phenomenology” was to be carried out. . . . My perplexity decreased slowly, my confusion dissolved laboriously, only after I met Husserl personally in his workshop. . . . Husserl's teaching took place in a step-by-step training in phenomenological “seeing” which at the same time demanded that one relinquish the untested use of philosophical knowledge. . . . I myself practiced phenomenological seeing, teaching and learning in Husserl's proximity after 1919.<sup>3</sup>

This has been a common experience of those who have learned to do and appreciate phenomenology.

This book aims to overcome some of the difficulties attendant on first learning phenomenology by stressing from the outset the doing, the actual practice of a phenomenological descriptive analysis. The methods of phenomenology will be shown by way of undertaking a special set of inquiries. Phenomenology is to be taught here by way of experiment. But at the same time, it is my hope that the reader will grasp some of the excitement and implication of phenomenology for philosophy and other disciplines.

Of course, no inquiry begins in a vacuum. Even a relatively unfamiliar method or type of thought must make at least minimal contact with previous or extant thought. This is no less the case with phenomenology than it is with every other type of philosophy. To establish the context, this chapter first addresses the present state of affairs. Phenomenology as a term is currently in the air. One hears it, not only in philosophy, but also with respect to other disciplines. There is (or was) a “phenomenological physics,” which has as one of its elements a return to a close look at certain phenomena specifically considered in isolation from current or dominant theories of explanation. There is talk about a “phenomenological psychology” or at least about phenomenological elements in psychology. In this so-called phenomenology, the “subjective experiences” of a subject are made thematic. In the social sciences, current ethnomethodology and the notion of “participant observation” have links to the phenomenological tradition. There is also a “phenomenology of religion,” the beginnings of a “phenomenological” literary criticism, a revival of interest in the phenomenological dimensions of logic, and a host of other new, but as yet undeveloped incursions of phenomenology into other disciplines.

Initially, the current spread of the term *phenomenology*, and the jargon or tribal language that accompanies it, is not necessarily helpful. Mere familiarity with terms often leads to a false sense of security gained from a superficial understanding of their meaning; this superficial understanding floats on the surface of a mind cluttered with the debris of misunderstandings and criticisms arising from these misunderstandings. On the other hand, it is now clearly the case that within philosophy, phenomenology is recognized as a major style of philosophical inquiry. This stands in marked contrast to the philosophical scene only a decade ago. Today most major departments have at least one philosopher who specializes in some version of scholarship directed toward phenomenology, whether as an active proponent, a critic, or a highly interested onlooker. As time goes on, more and more departments are developing subspecialties in phenomenology.

Precisely because phenomenology is still a minority voice of current American philosophy (though it is no longer totally unknown or merely a

target of severe criticism), it cannot claim “self-evidence” or have common assumptions regarding even its own knowledge of itself.

A few preliminary glances both at claims made by phenomenologists and at familiar criticisms facing phenomenology, may clarify the context in which an introduction to the subject may properly begin. In what follows, I shall pair claims made by phenomenologists with familiar and widespread criticisms of phenomenology, trying to show, both why certain preliminary criticisms are all but unavoidable and why much of this criticism is not necessarily well-founded. Finally, however, each reader must see for himself or herself, but I hope that judgment will be informed by direct knowledge.

First, phenomenology as a relatively new philosophical method claims to be a *radical* way of thought. Its founder, Edmund Husserl, claimed, “There is only one *radical* self investigation, and it is phenomenological.”<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, following Husserl, claimed, “Phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. *Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible.*”<sup>5</sup> Clearly these are strong claims and ultimately their fulfillment must come only through what may actually be delivered via phenomenology.

But as a radical philosophy, phenomenology necessarily departs from familiar ways of doing things and accepted ways of thinking. It overturns many presuppositions ordinarily taken for granted and seeks to establish a new perspective from which to view things. Whether or not it succeeds in this task remains to be seen, but note what must necessarily be the case if phenomenology is a radical philosophy, quite apart from its success or failure.

If a method is genuinely radical and new, then its new concepts and methods will in some degree be unfamiliar and strange—at least at first. The very displacement of the familiar is such that an initial obscurity will result. A new language will flow from the new concepts, or at the very least, new meanings will be given to older terms. In any case, mastery of a particular language will be called for if the philosophy is to be understood. I shall call this “essential obscurity” and shall try to show that such “essential obscurity” is temporary. It belongs to a certain stage of learning.

In a negative form, this characterization of phenomenology is a familiar criticism. It is widely held that phenomenology is obscure and difficult, if not impossible to understand. Here, the reasons for possible obscurity must be clarified. If, at base, phenomenology should turn out to be contradictory within itself; if its fundamental concepts are confused *after* being scrutinized; or if its claims, not on an initial look but after critical examination, are ill-founded; then the criticism is well-founded. But if the criticisms are superficial, the result of insufficient insight or understanding, then the issue is quite differ-

ent. It is with this possibility in mind that I would like to examine several distinct forms of confusion.

I have already noted that there is an initial “essential obscurity” that necessarily belongs to the first stage of phenomenology. But this type of obscurity may be temporary as well as not unique to phenomenology. It is, rather, the type of obscurity that comes with any genuinely new mode of inquiry. Historically, one may point to many such examples in relation to the history of science. Revolutions in science have been characterized by Thomas Kuhn as “paradigm shifts.”<sup>6</sup> These occurrences are shifts in the way things are viewed. Until the view is resettled, until the basis for the new perspective is solidified, there remains an area of possible misunderstanding between those holding to the former paradigm and those holding to the new paradigm; frequently, there may be problems for those within the new paradigm until its lines of sight are sufficiently freed from the past paradigm. It is this genesis of shift and clarification that belongs to what I have called “essential obscurity.”

For instance, when Copernicus began to develop his theory of a heliocentric universe in which the sun was the center of the planetary system, most scholars of his time thought such a notion odd, obscure, and even unthinkable. It was a counterintuitive idea in the sense that, what one saw with one’s own eyes and what one knew by established theory was the centrality of the earth. The sun rose and set in an observed movement from a fixed earth, which one could experience. These facts were grounded in long-held theories. What was lacking, for our purposes here, was a requisite question: “From what perspective and in what framework can such a departure from common sense become possible?” Copernicus had already projected a new, as yet only imaginary, stance, different from man’s ordinary position on the earth. He became as a distant deity watching the earth move around the sun from a position that he, as an earthbound man, had never inhabited nor could have inhabited at that time. To see the glory of the earth from afar has become possible only in our own time—but its abstract possibility was already latent in the revolution of standpoint contained in Copernicus’s theory.

Given this shift, what counted as fact was seen differently by those who took the earthbound stance as primary and those who joined the Copernican revolution with its heavenly stance. Thus argument could no longer presume the same grounds.

This new stance opened the way for even further extrapolation, which Copernicus, himself, found difficult to accept. Giordano Bruno, for example, soon made the extrapolation that if a displacement of the earth from its center made a new view possible, it was also possible to displace the sun as well. To leap outward was but a first step; if our solar system could be so viewed,

why could not the other stars also be so viewed, and so on infinitely. Thus, the postulation of other planetary systems, multiple suns, and even multiple inhabited worlds in an infinite universe could be posited. The first revolution, which destroyed the earthbound stance, now could be extrapolated to a possible infinity of positions, all equally possible.

Historically, we know that, in spite of resistance, argument, and even persecution, what was previously taken as odd, obscure, and unthinkable became accepted, even taken for granted or obvious as we might say now. It was this struggle for the requisite insight that would make things clear from a wholly new standpoint that created the first “essential obscurity.” This obscurity in turn became “intuitive” and could later be seen as a temporary obscurity.

The implicit claim here is that, if phenomenology is indeed a new modality of thought, the source of its obscurity is only a temporary or “essential obscurity,” which necessarily belongs to the new. Once the point of view that makes its view of things possible is made clear, its language and meaning yield their own clarity.

But there is a second and somewhat more superficial obscurity which can accompany the first. This obscurity is the initial obscurity that accompanies all theoretical and technical disciplines. When one first learns a discipline, one also must learn a “tribal language.” In philosophy, those who read Kant for the first time, or Leibniz, or even Nietzsche, may find words being used in a different and often technical way. Philosophy rarely reads like fiction, and at first, many people have to read texts phrase by phrase in order to comprehend them. One first approximates the internal meaning or, as Merleau-Ponty points out, one “sings” the language before one clearly understands it.<sup>7</sup> This type of obscurity is also temporary; it calls only for a serious attempt at entering the new language. Phenomenology’s tribal language contains a whole vocabulary of technical terms: “intentionality,” “*epoché*,” “the phenomenological reductions,” “being-in-the-world,” and the like, while quite familiar to the tribe of phenomenologists, remain opaque to the other tribes of the world. But if a discipline is to be mastered, the technical language simply must be learned. That is as true of sciences, logic, alternate styles of philosophy as it is of phenomenology.

A third kind of obscurity sometimes occurs that is to be deplored. Essentially, this consists of the language some phenomenologists, particularly commentators and imitators, introduce by inserting unnecessary obscurity and even cuteness into their language. Whatever the motive, any attempt to cover confusion or pretend profundity by means of excess verbiage is naturally distasteful.

Finally, there is the possibility of a *fundamental* obscurity. Such an obscurity reveals fundamental inconsistency, confusion, or a final lack of plausibility. This obscurity can be discovered *only* by careful analysis and rarely appears

on the surface. In philosophical history, such deep obscurity has nearly always been discovered only after great effort and time, usually by surpassing the philosophy being criticized. But surpassing a philosophy entails learning its lessons, and so, no revolution in thought is total.

Thus, the claim here is not that phenomenology will be shown to be without possible flaw or limitation. The claim is, rather, that most presumed obscurity will be shown to be of the temporary variety; once its stance is properly appreciated, its own clarity can and will emerge.

The second claim made by phenomenologists is that at its first stage, phenomenology has developed a genuine “science of experience,” which Husserl earlier called a rigorous “descriptive psychology.” This *phenomenological* psychology is quite different from most extant psychologies, as I shall attempt to show in the body of this book, although the examples are limited primarily to perceptual examples.

Paired with this second claim is a widespread objection to phenomenology which takes the form of accusing phenomenology of being “subjectivistic” and, at its extreme, accuses it of being a reversion to nineteenth-century introspective psychology. Critics of this persuasion intimate that this subjectivity is bad and unworthy both of philosophy, which must be distinct from psychology, and of psychology, which in much of its current phase avoids the question of so-called subjective states. Everyone, of course, would not consider the examination of experience or introspection to be bad. But the question is not really whether phenomenology examines experience, but *how* it does, and with what method and result.

That phenomenology claims to have developed a genuine “science of experience” despite the objections of those who are suspicious of subjectivity calls for a prolonged examination of what phenomenology studies and how phenomenology interprets experience. In terms of its earlier development, phenomenology claims to examine human experience and to be a rigorous science of experience. This inextricably involves psychological questions.

However, confused with the issue concerning psychology is an issue of strictly philosophical import concerning theories of evidence. At stake is a radically different framework within which the question of what shall count as evidence takes its place. As a preliminary, it can be stated that phenomenology demands that its evidence must be “intuitable,” which means, in its proper context, that what is given or accepted as evidence must be actually experienceable within the limits of and related to the human experienter. But, as will be shown later, this notion is a highly complex one and must be qualified to such an extent that what is ordinarily taken as experience itself undergoes significant change.

Precisely because phenomenology directs its first glance upon experience, it necessarily employs some form of reflection, and in part this reflection must include what has heretofore been known as introspective data. However, there are serious misunderstandings of what has been meant by introspection, particularly as it is transformed in a phenomenological account. Yet, insofar as so-called introspective data are relevant to a comprehensive account of experience, they must be included. What cannot be admitted is that introspection is *the* method of phenomenology.

The confusion between what shall count as psychology and what shall count as philosophy arose at the beginning of phenomenology, and in part must be attributed to the language employed by Edmund Husserl. Husserl's use of language made such objections all but inevitable. The terms *ego*, *consciousness*, *subjective states*, and *transcendental subjectivity* cannot help but lead the casual reader to the conclusion that phenomenology is a type of psychology. What the casual reader misses is the transformation of meaning that occurs in terms within phenomenology from Husserl on.

This linguistic confusion belongs to the general problem of introducing a new mode of thought within an already known language, in this case, the language of modern philosophy with its notion of "subject" and "object." For a new thought to be expressed, it must either introduce a radically new language—at the risk of not being understood at all—or stretch the meanings of previous terms to cover new uses. In its history phenomenology has done both, but for the most part Husserl took already well-used terms and gave them special meanings. The result, however, is that one must read carefully and critically to detect the new meanings he sought to establish, meanings often contrary to the traditional ones. Compounding this situation, Husserl's published works lack carefully worked-out concrete examples that would have clarified this heuristic use of language.

To counter the accusation of subjectivism, phenomenologists have tried to draw a sharp line between what has ordinarily been known as introspection and what is developed phenomenologically as "reflexivity." Although the distinction will be developed more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, it is important initially to note that introspection is, roughly speaking, the straightforward taking of subjective data, usually interpreted as "directly present to the mind." This notion of direct presence belongs to both the rationalist and empiricist traditions in philosophy and finds its theoretical context in what phenomenologists call Cartesianism. These traditions locate subjective phenomena "within" a subject and contrast these phenomena with objective phenomena located "outside" the subject. Furthermore, it was Modern Philosophy that brought into fullest and sharpest usage the terms *subject*, *ego*, *material bodies*, etc.—the very language that Husserl at first adopted.

Initially, phenomenology transforms the Modern tradition by taking two steps. First, what was previously regarded as “present to the mind” is taken within phenomenology as a genuine field of possible data: phenomena. This field, however, needs to be fully discriminated and clarified; that task constitutes one part of phenomenological inquiry. This being so, all phenomena as “present to a subject” may be regarded as worthy of investigation. Images, percepts, moods, arithmetical phenomena, or whatever may be a valid region for inquiry. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that so-called introspective data may be considered. But it should also be pointed out that *extrospective* data are equally to be considered. What is investigated, is the field of phenomena.

But within phenomenology, phenomena are never taken as self-evident nor are they inevitably interpreted as “within the mind.” Both introspective and extrospective phenomena must be located more precisely within the phenomenological analysis, and it is at this point that the distinction between “introspection” and “reflexivity” comes into play. For phenomenology, the central feature of experience is a *structure* called “intentionality,” which correlates all things experienced with the mode of experience to which the experience is referred. The full meaning of this notion will be explained at length in the next chapter. Here, it is only important to note that, far from being self-evident or initially transparent, the “subject” is enigmatic for phenomenology. It is known only *reflexively* from which phenomena and how these phenomena are made present to it. “Introspection,” in its Cartesian sense, is taken by phenomenologists to be a naive notion open to the same degree of suspicion in which subjectivism is held. But at the same time, phenomenology does not simply revert to a reductionistic strategy which discards phenomena together with the problems concerning access to phenomena.

In order to set the context, I have taken two initial claims of phenomenologists and paired them with two widespread objections to phenomenology. It should now be apparent that another preliminary task is to introduce at least a minimal vocabulary and set of concepts so that the experiments can get underway. This book will proceed by establishing certain elementary phenomenological distinctions and terms, putting these in as clear a fashion as possible by means of concrete demonstrated examples.

What an elementary—though not to say easy—introduction to phenomenology must accomplish, if it is to be successful, is a restatement of the main themes, ideas, and directions of a style of thought in a language that has been given a clear and illustrated rationale. Simplicity, here, will mean a step-by-step procedure with particular regard to the main terms and concepts of phenomenology. I will introduce the basic vocabulary of the tribal language, but will often put explanations in my own language in order to show the basic sense of the phenomenological method.

Simplicity will require following a process of investigation, since this book is intended as an introduction to phenomenology through experiments. Through the examination of concrete problems as opposed to merely programmatic texts, experimental phenomenology attempts to show *how* phenomenology works. Because this method makes an extra demand upon the reader, it is essential that the reading of this text be accompanied by following actual experiential examples. While the language of the text will be as clear and simple as possible, the demand upon the reader will be more complex. He must *see* what is going on, and by that I mean *see* in its most concrete and literal sense.

The method I will use arises out of an actual set of phenomenological investigations that have been conducted over the last few years in relation to certain problems and puzzles concerning visual perception. Although I shall employ examples involving the other senses, the core examples are taken from a set of familiar, traditional, and already much-interpreted visual illusions, reversible figures, and so-called multistable visual objects.

The choice of this set of examples, which will be reinterpreted in phenomenological terms, itself exemplifies one tactic of phenomenological investigation. The use of simple, familiar examples deliberately opens the way to the sense of phenomenology through an “experiential given” (given in the sense of intuitively familiar). For what could be more familiar than these psychological illustrations? They even appear on restaurant placemats as puzzles in which lines that “appear” curved are in “reality” straight, and as two-dimensional cubes that spontaneously reverse themselves before one’s eyes. Moreover, visual as opposed to other sensory examples are implicitly taken to be paradigm examples for all perception and knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Seeing is clear and distinct and is the external counterpart to the internal sense of reason that is *insight*. Finally, these puzzles and illustrations have already been well interpreted by the standard psychologies and the results, for a “naive” observer, are well known and predictable.

My task will be to take a new look at these examples and try to see and to show them in a phenomenological framework. While doing this, I shall attempt to show how and why phenomenology works the way it does. I hope that in this process, some of the radicalism of phenomenology works the way it does. I hope that in this process, some of the radicalism of phenomenology will begin to show itself, so that the beginner not only will be interested in what is going on, but will also probe into further relations and implications for his own discipline. Secondly, I hope that some of the prejudices and misunderstandings about phenomenology will either be eliminated or compensated for in a more lucid manner. It is my contention that in its essence, phenomenology is neither obscure nor esoteric and that it holds important implications for a whole range of disciplines.

For the serious student of philosophy, I hope that an introduction by way of phenomenological experimentation will kindle a small sense of excitement for a style of philosophy that does not leave things the way they are, but seeks to make discoveries of its own. A phenomenological analysis (or description, as it is technically called) is more than mere analysis. It is a probing for what is genuinely discoverable and potentially there, but not often seen. Phenomenology is the door to the possible, a possible that can be experienced and verified through the procedures that are, in fact, the stuff of experimental phenomenology.