Phenomenological Reductionism
An Explanation and a Critique

This paper tries to convey to readers not already immersed in the tradition, some of the types of phenomena of concern to phenomenologists as well as some of their approaches and techniques. Hopefully, the descriptions that follow will help general readers gain access to phenomenological readings by making a somewhat exotic language more amenable to interpretation. This approach has certain consequences which must be stated. First, phenomenology has no common perspective and it is not unreasonable to claim that there are 'various' phenomenologies.[1] Therefore, such a perspective as will be displayed stands as an approximate construct for illustrative purposes only. Furthermore, my own style of writing is so assertive in character that a reader will almost inevitably start assessing the truth of propositions, the validity of critiques, the political consequences of ideological positions, and so on. This is trouble. For one construes phenomenology as an epistemological theory only at the risk of grave misunderstanding. It is more a general approach to understanding and certain ways of looking at things. Thus, as one reads a sentence that seems like an assertion, it is best to avoid asking oneself immediately, 'Is this valid?' It would be better to inquire how phenomenologists evaluate their own claims, and try to answer, 'What does validity consist of?' from their viewpoint. More generally, phenomenological writings discuss perceptions and insights not easily describable in ordinary language. Therefore, I ask you to query the forthcoming discussion predominantly with the question: 'What could he be talking about?'

Let us start with a familiar phenomenological prescription: 'all existents must be transformed into, and treated only as, phenomena.' Statements like this are often coupled with refusals to use anything like causes, facts or objective reality, in order to explain subjective experience. As a result, many readers assume that phenomenologists maintain a Cartesian-like doubt of all external reality, a position long since discredited. However, this is not the nature of the scepticism which statements like the above allude to. The existence of the objective, real world is not for a moment denied, only construed as problematic.

The Phenomenological Epoché

To explain how the reality of something can be both real and problematic let's distinguish two aspects of the objects of our experience. Objects are presented to us, so that it is clear that 'they' exist and that they 'exist'. We distinguish the meanings (content) of our experience from their mode of presentation. A friend, for example, is presented to us as a real, object that exists, in our normal eyes-open, wide awake, state. Alternately, we are daydreaming with eyes closed and see the same person in our proverbial 'mind's eye'. Here, the person is presented as a mental image. Those who dream 'lucidly' and can know and remember a friend as a dream-object, while they are actually experiencing the dream. Similarly, some

[1] However, this paper explores the phenomenology, and the phenomenological reduction, as initiated by Edmund Husserl.

schizophrenics and some of those with neurological disorders actually realise that something they see is a hallucination, while they are seeing it.[2] Under all these modes of presentation, the meaning or content of this person, with all its implications, and consequences, remains the same.

It is perfectly clear that most objects of our experience in daily life are presented as concrete, existing things. This presentation is accomplished with such irresistible force, that the denial of this reality is academic. They are not illusions—not perceptual reports from the senses. They exist. Phenomenologists make this existence problematic by 'bracketing' it.[3]

Existence becomes a mode of presentation. The reality of this object becomes—not a fact that we believe (or doubt)—but an aspect of experience, which occurs. As modes of presentation, reality and existence become features of experience, and therefore phenomena to be observed and described.

By an 'existent', then, is meant any physical, social, abstract, emotional object—which has content, meaning, characteristics, features—which coheres in our experience as an enduring object, and which somehow presents itself to us as existing.[4]

The phenomenological epoché is one way to render the existence of an object, problematic. It is by no means the only way. And phenomenology is but one among many disciplines that have found it necessary, through the centuries, to inquire if, and in what sense, various objects 'exist'.

Plato presented us with abstract objects, such as the number 3, the could never be observed either in the outside world or in anyone's brain. Mathematicians needed to assert the existence of (mathematical) objects they could never construct or exhibit.[5] Physicists discovered particles that were so 'small' they had no mass whatsoever, could never be seen directly, and could never definitely be located in one particular place.

Marx indicted conceptual 'reifications' through which our socially created abstractions become more real and important to us than actual human beings. He would be amused but not surprised to find the US legal system seriously considering denying the copyright for a recent book, to its human publisher. Why? Because the plaintiffs claimed 'God' was the true legal author.[6]

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2 For a discussion of some of these issues see Jeff Coulter (1998), 'Can We See Things that Are Not There?' *Ethnographic Studies*, 3: 7 – 16.

3 This is more commonly called the phenomenological epoché, where epoché is the Greek word for 'bracketing'. For over a century there has been a lively debate concerning what the phenomenological epoché is, if there is one or many, and which of them accomplishes what.

4 That is, it presents as a real something. `Real' is not always identical to physical. It can be a real emotion, real idea, real scientific fact, and so on.

5 The axiom of choice is one famous statement that permitted mathematicians to refer to collections of objects that could never be constructed. Some of these collections turned out to be paradoxical and contradictory. For a discussion of problematic statements of the form, 'There exists at least one X, with property Y' see Schwartz, Howard, Mental Illness and the Study of Subjective Experience: Some ways that each can elucidate the other. Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1971, Chapter 1.

6 Actual lawsuit brought by the Endeavor Academy in 1996 challenging the copyright held by Kenneth Wapnick and his FACIM (Foundation for a Course in Miracles) for the book, A Course in

Phenomenology is different than these other approaches in several ways. It does not treat, 'What makes 'real' things real?' as the subject of theory or philosophical debate. It claims to learn about this empirically, by direct observation and study of experience. The objects studied in this way are any and all real objects, no matter how mundane, complex, or unproblematic.

Finally, the empiricism of phenomenology is not the study of other people's reality. it is a collection of 'first person' methods for doing self observation.[7] Inquiry begins with what one might initially consider 'my' everyday reality.[8]

When I deal with MY OWN everyday, taken for granted, world, this program become extremely difficult. When a friend of mine walks in the room, I am not be spontaneously puzzled or even interested in the experiential phenomenon, 'my friend walked in the room—really.' These perceptions present themselves as vividly, unremarkable realities.

Thus, I must focus on the very things I view as regular, stable, well understood features of the world in order to go about my daily affairs with any kind of proficiency. It is axiomatic that, what one pays attention to while learning, becomes taken for granted when one becomes proficient.[9] Yet, it is precisely these kinds of phenomena that, through some shift of experience, must become puzzling, interesting, or miraculous in order to 'make strange, a familiar world.' This is what the phenomenological epoché or the 'bracketing' of existents attempts to do. I must re-experience what I take for granted, in such a way that, 'How does consciousness do it?' becomes as natural a question to me as how the magician takes the rabbit out of the hat. And I must do this, while retaining my hard won social competency.

If I pull this off, it will reveal the phenomenological 'world of everyday life,' the 'world as lived in,' the 'Lebenswelt'—what we learn to regard as real, rely on as obvious, disregard as trivial—specifically so that we may go about our business doing the everyday things we do in a recognisable competent manner to our fellows and to ourselves.

The response to the previous points is probably that this is news from nowhere. Researchers have pointed to human blindness due to fluency and practicality on many occasions. In this regard, Max Weber points out one of the advantages of research and science as a profession: Society provides funding, tools, and a block of time every day—where people are granted 'time out' from the practicalities of everyday life. They can study as problems and regard as important, many of the things most of us gloss over or take for granted in the midst of

Miracles. After much litigation, this suit is still unsettled.

7 Actually 'self' observation is a misnomer, since whether an experience is 'mine', where I am an isolated individual, is itself open to investigation. For a good and rare manual on how to do self observation, construed as observing one's individual experience, see Noelie Rodriquez and Alan Lincoln Ryave 'Systematic Self Observation' Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers, forthcoming.

8 One begins Husserl's phenomenological journey thinking of oneself as an one individual among, and separate from many others, 'trapped in one's own skin.' As inquiry proceeds, experience and knowledge of who and what 'I' consists of, begins to expand and change.

9 See for example, Polanyi, Michael. The Tacit Dimension. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966.

daily living. Why then do not the concerns of a research psychologist, cognitive scientist or sociologist lead him[10] to uncover just the types of things which were pointed out as going unnoticed in daily life? The entire field of psychophysics is devoted to studying how human experience creates some of the most basic visual, auditory, and attention-realities. There have been innumerable studies on how human cognition, language, and motivation, creates and reconstructs what we know of as realities.

Phenomenology's refusal to except the results of other sciences could not come from the considerations just discussed. For much of social science is specifically engaged in replacing the very gaps in common sense knowledge that were alluded to, with the results of careful research.

The answer to this objection involves the very core of the phenomenological orientation but, unfortunately, is difficult to make verbally clear. We can start with an inaccurate, but perhaps useful summary: Phenomenology is a 'non-ordinary' way (or ways) of looking at things. From this vantage point, 'ordinary' problems and puzzles 'in' the everyday world are those that most of us learn to recognise as such, while doing, and in order to do, our regular activities. These activities include washing the car, preparing dinner, and all of the inquiring professions, construed as daily activities. They include sociology, physics, political science, philosophy—as they are practised hour by hour by ordinary human beings. The traditions, cultural milieus, and communities that are part of these professions provide a context in which certain matters are natural questions, be they:

- Is IQ related to income?
- Is light a particle or a wave or
- Why didn't they grant me tenure, if my research was so highly reviewed?

We could regard as phenomenological problems, those matters phenomenologists seek to treat as mysteries, but which virtually everyone else takes as clear and not in need of explanation. The world at large, including the scientific professions, would regard turning these matters into problems as a mere philosophical or intellectual exercise. By their very rootedness in socially contexted, daily life, they could hardly do otherwise. Yet, through certain approaches and techniques, phenomenologists create for themselves, serious puzzles and problems, from what would otherwise seem arcane matters. Some of these problems may be unfamiliar, others may be familiar questions approached in an unusual way.

Further, phenomenological solutions to problems would be equally different than what others regard as solutions. A feature of most problems recognised as such is that while, initially, we may not have a solution, we do know what a solution to a given kind of problem should look like; be it a causal statement, an equation, or a 'yes' to our dinner invitation. This is intertwined with our original understanding of the nature of the problem. But phenomenologists wouldn't be interested in such things as correlation coefficients, mathematical equations, or expository theories—in fact, any explanatory

[10] Forgive the male pronouns and similar artefacts of sexism in this paper. I am presently unaware of solutions to this problem in English that do not create awkward prose.

device that solves a puzzle by reference to objective, existing, objects or events. Such solutions wouldn't be wrong to phenomenologists but irrelevant. To them, objective conditions, as existents, are a core phenomenological phenomenon. To cite such conditions as part of an explanation would be explaining one puzzle by another.

We have disavowed objective conditions, the problems of other disciplines, and the solutions of these disciplines as resources for phenomenology. These rejections have a familiar ring. Yet another discipline thinks it has found a way to escape the human condition, and see things better, more clearly or correctly from some superior vantage point 'outside' the world that people live in. They reject objective reality as untrustworthy, and substitute something called 'experience' as a superior form of data from which to draw conclusions. It can be observed—learned about—it can have structure. But it is intrinsically immune to various kinds of doubt. How, indeed, could I doubt that I 'experience' my friend walk through the door—whether awake, dreaming, or whatever? Therefore, by putting aside objective reality as produced within the human world, I paradoxically can achieve a kind of better, more certain, super-objectivity.[11]

Seen from without, however, such claims make phenomenology seem like just another alternate 'system.' They are dissatisfied with culturally sanctioned meanings and procedures used in other knowledge disciplines. So phenomenologists create new Gestalts and cultural settings to define alternative activities. All the talk about 'in the world' versus 'of the world' etc. simply reflects the assumed superiority of the new activities over the old. 'In the world' is what they do; 'of the world' is what we do.

This view, however, ascribes to phenomenologists a bit less than they deserve. Even though Husserl, indeed, makes statements such as,

> I reach the ultimate experiential and cognitive perspective thinkable. In it, I become the disinterested spectator of my natural and worldly ego and its life.[12]

It should be no surprise to learn that he and his colleagues recognise they remain human beings whose perceptions and descriptions as quite definitely phenomena 'in' the everyday world and thus inexorably part and parcel of the phenomena they wish to understand.[13]

This admission may be laudable. However, it makes the characterisation of phenomenology as just another system even more plausible. For it does not appear that phenomenologists have effectively resolved the problems raised by this admission, problems resolved by positivists by simply ignoring them. Indeed the only attraction phenomenology has in this regard, is its willingness to admit, up front, that its practitioners have no exalted, value free position from which to observe and understand the world.

For example, what is it that will be described by them? Any 'conscious experience' which is designated as the

[11] Although, of course I would never use such a term, as a phenomenologist.

[12] Husserl, Edmond. The Paris Lectures. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1970, p. 15.

[13] As we will later see, this is a controversial claim that I (the author) make on behalf of phenomenologists, which may well be contested by others.

subject matter, they admit, could only be—what comes to be noticed, as well as what comes to be disregarded, while, and in order to, perform the routine, daily activity, phenomenology. What features of their descriptions and explanations makes them better or different than those in other disciplines? What saves their knowledge from being just another, in the world, socially created reality, that merely different from the realities of competing schools of thought?

More pointedly, phenomenologists highlight the perspectival, relative nature of' conventional' explanations in many ways. They point to the fact that the issues considered by scientists, philosophers, etc., are those which come to be recognised while, and in order to perform routine activities, in daily life. In particular, they indict the 'existents' whose objective, stable, real character is assumed as a matter of course; existents, in terms of which, other phenomena are analysed to make their nature clear and understandable. To them, 'existents' are mere phenomena occurring in the experienced world in a manner as problematic as any other. As an alternative they propose to describe something called immediate lived 'experience'. True, this means they proceed from a different starting point, but there are innumerable different starting points. They admit that their descriptions must also be routine activities in the world and thus experiential phenomena. So how could their descriptive activity be doing anything but explaining one mystery by another?

Indeed, if we accept Louch,[14] we can be even more specific. Assume that matters like 'that which is a problem' or 'that which needs describing' is essentially an contextually-recognised phenomenon. Only by reference to something(s) non-problematic or not in need of description can what does need describing, be recognised. Therefore, phenomenology must contain unanalysed, taken for granted 'givens' if they are to do any describing at all. In an eerie analogy to Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' they arrive at immediate, lived experience as the givens whose presence (existence?) is not possible to doubt.[15] As their starting point, they can not tell us much about it, except that they trust it. They claim it is impossible to deny the presence and content of lived experience, although its nature is open to analysis. Thus, anything like 'experiences' in terms of which they account for phenomena that 'exist' serves the same ends as the 'existents' of other inquiring sciences. Their givens are open to the same objections that they level against other disciplines. As the sciences have a different starting point than common sense reasoning; as Descartes had a different starting point than the sciences; why is not 'lived experience' just another starting point like any other? What makes it better or different just because they find it more cogent?

Like all starting points 'you have to see it to appreciate it', i.e., exactly what ' what it is and what it ain't' remains unexplicated. In addition, by describing/explaining more complex phenomena in terms of more primitive

[14] Louch, Alfred R. Explanation and Human Action . Berkeley: University of California Press. 1966.

[15] Indeed, Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is characterised as an attempt to redo Descartes' task of getting back to undeniable basics, but getting it right this time. Refer to, Husserl, Edmund . *Cartesian Meditations*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970.

givens, they employ the classical form of constructive analysis[16] exemplified by mathematics: One 'understands' something by characterising it is a meld or combination of more primitive elements, combined by certain operations.

Furthermore, the previous admission makes it impossible for phenomenologists to accomplish their stated aim in still another way. They wish to describe all and only features of conscious experience. Yet, we have seen that what they treat as conscious experience and how they describe it, must be conditioned and influenced by 20 or more years of cultural learning, and life—before they undertook phenomenology as adults. It is effected, as well, by their colleagues, their profession, the socio-cultural contexts within which they work. These accomplishments depend for their success on the very same processes as other routine accomplishments, like doing successful sociology, philosophy, or physics.

Thus, they describe their experience of a (proverbial) cube in terms of the cube's meaningful 'essence'. As a social group, does a new budding phenomenologist not, in fact, simply learn and pick up the concept of essence from reading Husserl, and/or from his or her colleagues? If so, is this not a case of a person using an idea and/or phenomenon as a resource, when it should point to just another cluster of experiences/memories/assumptions (s)he needs to explain? Why then, should 'essences' or 'noemas' be confidently announced as undeniable features of conscious experience? Do we not have the famous problem of 'experimenter-effects' in taking essences as independently discovered features of objects, verified by each phenomenologist.[17] Why is it not more plausible to consider essence, as a concept they take to their analysis and impose on what they experience—a concept socially created, modified-in-use, and shared by a group of specialists?

Recall the dictum, 'describe only and all, aspects of conscious experience'. We have already dealt with the fallacy of the 'only' part, noticing how 'essences' and other socially shared ideas crept into the phenomena in order to do any describing at all. Now for the 'all.' It is clear that conscious experiences must be described just from their own contextual perspective; this has been admitted. But conscious experience varies with perspective. The aspects of experience appreciated by the physicist, the biologist, the religious mystic, or a one year old, congenitally deaf child are clearly not going to be in evidence when a phenomenologist describes something. Thus, all aspects of experience will not be described by this discipline any more than they were by any of the others.

Finally, the way phenomenologists define their work seems to even lose some of the possibilities for verification, repeatability and abstraction found in conventional science. Presumably, experience is a

[16] The Greek meaning of analysis is (to understand by) breaking into parts. Harold Garfinkel refers to this form of understanding more generally as 'constructive analysis.'

[17] See Rosenthal, Robert, *Experimenter Effects in Behavioral Research*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966. While Rosenthal described investigator contamination, when observing others, there is no reason why his findings would not apply equally well to self observation.

phenomenon essentially related to the contexts, activities, and settings within which it is embedded. But the settings and contexts comprising my past and present are, on any given occasion, regularly different from my fellow's in a multitude of ways. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that a given experienced object as a constituent of my present contextual world is a different object for me than it is for my colleagues. Therefore, as a phenomenologist, aren't I condemned to describing only my own experiential objects, no matter how many transcendental tricks it employ to do so? How could I obey phenomenological rules and have a chance of dealing with any similarities or differences between their experiential-objects and my own?

Their experienced reality is usually not perceptually available to me, in two senses. It is generally different than my own, because of context; and I can not directly experience many of their objects. For example, they can neither hear the voice in my head saying 'phenomenology' as I read, nor can I hear theirs. I am thus required to not utilise 'their' experience (since it is non-direct experience) for the same reasons I couldn't talk about invisible atoms, not in evidence, as comprising an experienced object. It would seem that only in cases of empathy or similar situations—where my experiential world actually coincides with that of one or more of my peers—would my descriptions be capable of any kind of generality. Yet, even here, it would be impossible to know on which occasions this generality is indeed obtained. To know this would require an independent way of discovering this coincidence of realities. But without a notion of a shared objective world, such a method is not available. It would require just what we don't have: direct experiential access to the world of others.

In sum, how am I to collaborate and share my findings with others, while retaining any semblance of validity?

After the previous discussion, it may seem that regarding phenomenology as just another alternate 'system' is eminently justified. However, I'll try to make a few magic passes and cause all of the foregoing difficulties to vanish permitting me to continue on the course already set.