

What is this Thing Called “Phenomenology”?

There is a number of different uses of the term “phenomenology” in contemporary philosophy: In the philosophy of mind, “phenomenology” denotes a property of some mental states, namely their “what it’s likeness”. In the philosophy of science, phenomenological laws are those that concern observable entities and processes (instead of a supposed reality “behind the phenomena”). Historians of philosophy track the development of the so-called phenomenological movement, a philosophical school that was inaugurated by Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl and that later took a more continental route due to the influence of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others.

Even though all of these notions of “phenomenology” are related in one way or another, my concern in this paragraph is with the meta-philosophical dimension of the term. I am primarily interested in portraying a certain way to do philosophy, namely a way that accords to the basic principles of the phenomenological *method*. In my view, there are three fundamental characteristics to this method: First, it is a *descriptive* analysis of the ways how objects¹ appear in conscious experience from the first-person point of view. Secondly, the phenomenological method is committed to an ideal of *neutrality* from presuppositions that are not themselves grounded in the phenomena. Thirdly and lastly, the phenomenological method is supposed to give us insight in the *essential* characteristics of the ways how objects appear in conscious experience. Let me briefly discuss these three characteristics in turn.²

One of the basic problems in philosophy is to understand how objective truths can be known in subjective acts of knowing, how “the intrinsic being of objectivity becomes ‘presented’, ‘apprehended’ in knowledge, and so ends up by becoming subjective” (Husserl 2001a, 169). For instance, philosophers try to account for the fact that perception seems to be an immediate access to reality, that we seem to attain justified true beliefs about the world by relying on acts of visual, auditory or olfactory perception. But how can this issue be approached? One strategy is to construct theories that account for the explanandum we’re interested in: According to one such theory, photons enter the eye, forming an image on the retina that is then processed through a complex biochemical pathway. On another theory (that may complement the first), mental images or models are postulated in order to bridge the alleged gap between the interiority of the mental and the exteriority of the world.

Phenomenology is, quite generally, not in the business of such theory-constructions. To be sure, phenomenologists do not deny that theories are indispensable tools in mastering the world around us. However, phenomenologists emphasize that before one can even begin to develop a theory about something, one has to provide a faithful description of whatever it is one wishes to account for. And if we’re interested in mental

¹ A word on the terminology: In accordance with Husserl’s usage, the term “object” is construed broadly, denoting everything that can become the object of an intentional act. Hence, “an object [...] may as readily be what is real as what is ideal, a thing or an event or a species of a mathematical relation, a case of being or a what ought to be” (Husserl 2001a, p. 145). The term “thing”, on the other hand, is used only for physical objects. Finally, the term “phenomenon” is reserved for objects and things as they appear from a first-person perspective. Thus, “phenomenon” and “object/thing as it appears” are equivalent in my usage.

² It is needless to say that this brief overview cannot do justice to the complexity of the phenomenological research program. Readers interested in a more comprehensive treatment may either refer to Crowell 2006 for a highly instructive introductory essay or to Smith 2007 for a more detailed, book-length study.

acts and the objects as they are experienced in these acts, description proceeds by way of reflection on these acts and their contents from a first-person perspective. Following this meta-philosophical maxim, phenomenology doesn't aim at *explaining* things and their behaviour, as do the positive (i.e. natural or cognitive) sciences. Rather, phenomenology aims at reflectively *describing* and thus *clarifying* our experience of objects. Hence, to stay with the example from above, phenomenologists seek to highlight those distinctions that allow us to understand the difference between perceptual acts and their contents and, say, acts of phantasy and their respective contents.

So, first of all, phenomenology is not an explanatory, but a descriptive enterprise. But what does this mean exactly? Is any first-person report about the appearance of objects already a description in the phenomenological sense of the term? Not quite. Phenomenologists typically claim that their descriptions must aspire to an ideal of neutrality from metaphysical, ontological, epistemological and empirical presuppositions that are not themselves grounded in the phenomena (cf. Husserl 2001a, 177-179; Husserl 1983, §24). However, to achieve this aim is easier said than done. Since our standard ways of approaching the world are deeply infected with myriads of mostly unarticulated assumptions of various (scientific, cultural, linguistic etc.) origins, Husserl introduced the methodological device of the so-called *epoché* in order to make the goal of neutral phenomenological descriptions possible. The term "epoché" has its origin in Greek skepticism and is best translated as "suspension of belief". To perform the epoché means to strictly abstain from, to "suspend", to "put out of action" or to "bracket" (Husserl 1982, §31) empirical, ontological and metaphysical commitments regarding a certain subject area and to stick exclusively to what is given in conscious experience. However, the goal of this method of bracketing is not only neutrality in ontological, metaphysical or epistemological matters: Stepping back from the usual ways of engaging with our environment and restricting ourselves to how we experience objects also allows us to become aware of many presuppositions that aren't even recognized in the normal course of events.

As we have seen so far, phenomenology is concerned with descriptions of how objects are given in conscious experience. But this characterization must be qualified in another important way: Phenomenologists do not aim at collections of *particular* facts about phenomena and the modes of how objects are given in *particular* conscious acts. What phenomenologists are really after is to uncover facts about the *essential* natures of phenomena as well as about the *essential* structures of consciousness in which these phenomena become present. Hence, phenomenology is not a *factual*, but rather an *eidetic* inquiry, focussing on the *essential* forms and types of consciousness and its contents.

However, this qualification is likely to be met with resistance: Isn't a method that consists in the faithful description of phenomena from a first-person perspective necessarily limited to the description *of the inquirer's experiences*? And isn't the description of how objects appear in conscious experience necessarily bound to the *particularity of the objects thus described*? The phenomenological answer to these questions is as follows: Right from the start of their analyses, phenomenologists are concerned with particular acts and their contents only insofar as they are regarded as examples of a more general kind. For instance, we may start with the concrete givenness of a coffee mug. But this particular example of a physical thing only serves as a "guiding model" for the process of imaginatively varying the starting example until the limits of

variability come to the forth. The point of this method of *eidetic variation* is to make “evident that a unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures, that in such free variations of an original image, e.g., of a thing, an *invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all” (Husserl 1973, 341). Operating in the background of this method is a distinctively anti-empiricist theory of universals according to which particular appearances of objects are governed by “*necessary laws* which determine what must necessarily belong to an object in order that it can be an object of this kind” (Husserl 1973, 352). The aim of the method of eidetic variation is to bring these laws to direct, intuitive givenness.³

³ One could wonder how a distinctively anti-empiricist theory of universals can operate in the background of a method that praises itself for neutrality in metaphysical and ontological matters. The phenomenological answer is that the necessary laws which are uncovered in the course of eidetic analyses are not deductively, inductively or abductively inferred from other experiences such as the series of variations of the starting example. Rather, necessary laws can and must be intuitively given to the phenomenologists in order to be accepted as such. Hence, a theory of universals is, phenomenologically construed, not a matter of postulation, but a descriptive finding.