

1986

## Phenomenology in Psychology: Worth Pursuing?

Roelof J. Bijkerk  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bijkerk, Roelof J. (1986) "Phenomenology in Psychology: Worth Pursuing?," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 14.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol1/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Phenomenology in Psychology: Worth Pursuing?

Life can be rather difficult for a psychologist (or any other social scientist, but I'll just write as a psychologist) who likes to think about the foundations of the discipline in methodology and philosophy. Any reflection upon social science foundations needs to include, at some point, a look at so-called "Phenomenological approaches," of which there are several, to put it mildly. Much twentieth century psychology in Europe, and some in the USA, was and is inspired by the loftily obscure writings of various phenomenological and existential authors. The humanistic-existential movement in American psychology, employing loosely and variedly a vague sort of phenomenological method, has become a major force, particularly in non-academic clinical work.

The term "Phenomenology," in its root meanings, suggests a "study of appearances," i.e. an inquiry into the world as it appears to human awareness. The point here is that the world of appearances IS the world in which we human beings exist and to which we respond. To understand human behavior, then, is to understand, first of all, in what world of experience that human behavior unfolds; that world is the world as it appears to the human subject and as it is constructed by that subject in all those products of human consciousness that we subsume under the concept of "culture." Phenomenology thus becomes an exercise in studying human subjectivity, an investigation of human experience.

That sounds rather innocuous so far. The trouble begins when the question is raised whether an inquiry into subjectivities can ever lead to generally valid knowledge, which is what a scholarly discipline is all about, after all. Many traditional, experimentally minded academic psychologists will answer the question in the negative. But others disagree, insisting that human consciousness is the central concern in psychology; and they further insist that a methodology must be developed to properly study that central subject matter. It is clear, however, that there is no unanimity at all about such a method. The one label, "Phenomenology," appears to cover a confusing multitude of sins.

A brief survey and critical discussion of the various and sundry phenomenological approaches is bound to leave readers (probably) and writers (certainly) with a sense of inadequacy and helplessness. Perhaps it would be better, then, not to deal with

phenomenology at all, as is done in many contemporary texts on (the history of) modern psychology when strictly academic American psychology, as pursued today in most colleges and university graduate schools, is to be the criterion for inclusion or exclusion of philosophically tinted phenomenology, it might indeed be more prudent to leave the whole thing alone, as it is at best a rather foreign minority report.

But what about psychology students, upperclass undergraduate and beginning graduate students, most of whom have been exposed to pitifully little of a philosophical and historical nature in their previous psychology courses, and most of whom are planning to move eventually into some kind of applied psychology, notably into clinical work? If what is being done outside the universities by various professionals deserves to be counted in as psychology, then a discussion of phenomenological and existential approaches can hardly be avoided, as these have had considerable impact, diffuse as that impact may have been. And, furthermore, even future academic psychologists might profit from some struggles with the obscurities and the intangibilities, but also the subtleties and intellectual challenges of what some pretty good minds have chosen to call "phenomenology" and what they see, not as a revival of poor old "introspectionism" from the days of good old Wundt and Titchener, but as a radically new method of rigorous and scientific inquiry into the fundamental facts of human experience. Even if the results of their method, and the method itself, may well have to be judged as wanting, so far, the combined influence of the various phenomenologies is widespread and pervasive, promises to increase, and can be well understood and evaluated only in a proper historical-philosophical context.

May then this little essay whet the appetite of curious students and lure them into consulting more competent and more complete studies, such as those by Herbert Spiegelberg (1960, 1972) and others.

In the next few sections I would like to summarize, from a relatively unsophisticated and philosophically naive point of view, the major ideas and distinctions that have come, in my own case, to offer at least some perspective on "Phenomenology" that makes sense and provides a framework for further exploration. It seems to me that "Phenomenology" in psychology, as we encounter the term today, can be legitimately taken to be not just a particular method, or set of methods, nor only a special kind of philosophy, but also a rather vague yet tangible mentality, and even, perhaps, a vehicle for a true revolution in the disciplines that deal with human behavior and experience.

### a. PHENOMENOLOGY AS NON-POSITIVIST MENTALITY.

The Cartesian-Newtonian scientific approach, elementaristic and mechanistic as it is, simply does not sit right with many people, especially not with those who are engaged in person to person work. The existentialists represent the most vehement and radical protest against the traditional scientism, and they have appropriated, particularly through Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological method for their philosophizing, to the point that for many writers and readers the terms phenomenology and existentialism have become almost synonymous, so that it could also happen that any existentialist display of personal emotional opinion was identified as a sample of phenomenological inquiry. This did not do phenomenology any good. Perhaps, now that existentialism, as a fad and a social movement of postwar Europe, has pretty much faded, can the core humanism of that age-old struggle for awareness and responsibility be salvaged and built into a properly intellectual humanistic and existential psychology, in which then a "phenomenological" method of analysis can indeed function appropriately.

The mentality that is shared by all those who have been called "phenomenological" in their approach can be characterized as one in which not only doubts about the traditional scientific method are voiced, on emotional as well as intellectual grounds, but also as a mentality that refuses to give priority to physical data as facts, and instead insists that inner experience, intangible (to physical science) and personal (for a start) as it may be, is nevertheless a matter of fact, as "real" as any rock, and as worthy and capable of objective study as any solid material thing. Anyone who would deny concrete factual reality to human conscious experience, calling it "merely subjective" or "irretrievably private" or "epiphenomenal," has to be an enemy to all phenomenological presumptions. And anyone who is willing to concede that contents and processes of consciousness are indeed facts will have to start working on some species of phenomenology, as it will not do to circumvent the methodological problem by talking of mental events in terms of "operational definitions"; intervening variables are not facts, but fancy tricks of the trade in a physicalist's logic.

Phenomenology, as method, did not suddenly appear out of the nowhere of a philosopher's speculations. Long before it began to find more explicit form, and a name, it was stirring vaguely in the dissatisfactions felt by many with the deadlines of much scientism. A Pascal, or a Kierkegaard, or a William James, could hardly have been called phenomenologists (though James comes quite close with his descriptions of the "Stream of consciousness"); yet they gave vent to a protest that was more than emotional and social and moral: they heralded a deeply intellectual concern with the

inadequacies and dangers of a one-sided materialist (or metaphysical idealist) conception of what is “real,” and with the consequent self-imposed limits of human understanding of the world we all live in.

This mentality is a good reason for the interest that has been growing, in many quarters besides psychology and psychiatry, for almost a century now, for alternatives to the positivist’s techniques of studying human doings. However, this mentality is also responsible for the widespread confusion, the promiscuous application, and the lack of intellectual clarity that exist today when “Phenomenology” is brought up and loosely linked with anything from existential anxiety to the experience of break-dancing, from description of varieties of orgasmic ecstasy to the transcendental subjectivity of God.

One solid insight may be distilled from all this, perhaps. It is the recognition that the first question has to be: is an aspect of human awareness a fact, or is it a fiction, as far as scientific inquiry is concerned? Tied to this is the next question: if it is a fact, can it be studied in a way that allows for objective verification in a non-physical medium? Nobody doubts that a mathematical theorem or a logical analysis can be objectively verified by “other minds,” even though the theorem and the analysis are products of human consciousness and can not be verified by physicalistic means. But the question still is: even if mathematics is indeed a pure phenomenology of the essential forms of physical reality, is it now also true that phenomenology can be a pure mathematics of the world of human experience? Here part the way of the experts in psychology and most everywhere else.

## b. PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD.

In his standard work on *The Phenomenological Movement*, Spiegelberg intends to capture the essentials of the method by discussing seven “steps,” of increasing sophistication and depth: investigating particular phenomena, investigating general essences, apprehending essential relationships among essences, watching modes of appearing, watching the constitution of phenomena in consciousness, suspending belief in the existence of the phenomena, and finally interpreting the meaning of phenomena. Spiegelberg mentions that the first three of these steps are universally accepted and practiced in the movement, but that the last four are much less commonly pursued (Spiegelberg, 1960, II, p. 659).

For the purpose of a quick survey biased toward the interests of (practising) psychologists it may be useful to lump the last four steps of Spiegelberg’s exposition together as more advanced philosophical inquiries. We can then concentrate on the

first three steps as more typically psychological varieties of phenomenology. Let us examine the different steps in four short vignettes, from simplest empathy to far reaching philosophy.

1. Looking at particular phenomena.

When Carl Rogers sits down across from a client and begins to practice his “Client centered therapy” he starts out with an attempt to suspend all he may have learned about psychopathology and techniques of psychotherapy, so that he may open himself up, in an objective i.e. unbiased way, to the subjective experiences of the client. Rogers cultivates the attitude of total empathy, a concentration on “feeling into” the person in front of him. This is not a simple matter! Much has to be “bracketed” for the purification of intuiting to occur. And this is only a start.

Mere empathy is not enough. As the session proceeds, therapist and patient will begin to engage in a close observation of the flow of conscious experience, as well as taking note of the specific experiences themselves. Content as well as activity of consciousness are brought out in an increasingly subtle sharpness which changes the awareness at the same time that it focuses it. It is this very act of watching the flow of consciousness with its contents that is experienced by both client and therapist as an exercise in objectivity. It is much more than an indulgence of subjective feelings. The search for objectivity is brought even more into focus by the necessity of describing the awareness, of both persons, as it flows and changes and peaks. If the journey has been successful, as happens occasionally, the people involved come out of it with a deep sense of tangible and objective accomplishment, as of coming out of a tunnel that has led them, temporarily, into a pure and true perception of reality. It certainly is something very different from “catharsis,” or “emoting,” or “gratification of need for attention,” or “selective reinforcement,” though all of these may occur too.

The key concept here is “objectivity”. Both client and therapist experience the events as a perception of facts of consciousness, a perception that is not mere opinion, but has all the qualities of confirmability; the attempts at verbalization are the test of this matter.

Spiegelberg points out that this first step (which is itself actually a fluid combination of three activities) is a quite commonly practised approach; practised not only by those identified officially with the phenomenological movement but also by others, such as Gestalt psychologists and cognitive psychologists who plan to set up an experimental situation to investigate processes of thinking, memory, problem solving, etc. (Spiegelberg, 1960, 659-676) Examples of recent American efforts, easily accessible to students, toward a descriptive phenomenology can be found, for instance, in

Ihde (1979) and Keen (1975).

But just to grasp, however clearly and objectively, particular contents and processes of consciousness is not enough. In the particulars is revealed, if one learns to look correctly, something of a general quality, a fundamental pattern of which the particular experience is a “particularization.” In other words: there must be an “essence” in (not behind!) the particular phenomena. The deeper the exercise penetrates into an investigation of the particulars, the more it will shade into a perception of essential features, which heightens the characteristic of “objectivity” already inherent in the process.

## 2. Grasping essentials.

When Carl Rogers ends the session with his client and begins to reflect upon the question of what it is, exactly, that he does in therapy, he may still try to look closely at specific sessions and their particular contents of experience, but he wants to reach beyond that and finally grasp something essential about the very process of therapy itself — at least as he practices it. When he compares and contrasts various sessions, examining their peculiar moments and processes, he may eventually begin to see that all good therapy sessions have a basic feature in common: there is “congruence,” within the client, within the therapist, and between the two of them. That is to say: there is a good fit between various levels and location of experiencing; the client is objectively aware of what is indeed in his experience of the moment, so is the therapist, and their awareness check out with each other.

Congruence, now, is not a matter of a little bit here and a little bit there. It is a fundamental quality, always there, in good therapy. Or better: when one says good therapy one says congruence, as congruence is of the “essence” in good therapy as a process of awareness, experienced by client and therapist both. And it is awfully hard to achieve, even for Rogers, as he has repeatedly described in his books (Rogers, 1942, 1951, 1961).

When Ronald Laing takes a number of cases of schizoid or schizophrenic personality and attempts to make the inner experience of the patients intelligible, he goes far beyond specific exercises of empathy, and eventually reaches a point where he can characterize schizophrenia as involving, “essentially,” a basic “ontological insecurity.” His descriptions of the inner world of schizoid existence lead into the essence of such existence (Laing, 1965, p. 39-61). With Heidegger one could perhaps say that ontological insecurity is a true Existential of schizophrenic *Dasein* (Being).

When a chess grandmaster looks for no more than a few seconds at a particular board position, which to the average chess player seems pretty well even in terms of position and pieces for the two sides, and if then that grandmaster (as would every

other grandmaster) declares apodictically that with correct play on both sides white will win, there is a quality to the expert's perception of the situation that is highly sophisticated, based on much practice, and quite "objective": he has learned to see past the accidental particularities of many hundreds of board positions similar to the one he just saw in passing, and he has observed what might be called the "essence" or the "inner truth" of the position. (This kind of instant pattern recognition, by the way, is precisely the sort of thing that no one has yet been able to program into a computer, notwithstanding much concerted effort in that direction, notably by Botvinnik, a former world champion).

It should be noted that the process of "eidetic phenomenology," as the grasping of essences is often called, has for the performer all the qualities of an "objective" seeing, which can be confirmed by anyone with the requisite training and competence.

### 3. Patterns in essence.

Investigating further the "essential" feature of "ontological insecurity" in schizophrenic experience, Laing discovers a pattern within that feature: aspects which he calls engulfment, implosion and petrification. To now try and determine whether, and to what extent, these aspects are necessarily present in the schizophrenic's experience, and to what extent they might be uniquely linked to that experience (i.e. not found in other experiences), might be an illustration of the attempt to grasp relationships within a single essence.

An attempt to contrast and compare the essence "ontological insecurity" with, for instance, a phenomenological essence found in manic-depressive psychosis, would be an example of studying the relationships between different essences.

Of this latter type of analysis Spiegelberg offers another example with the analysis of the relationship between color and extension (i.e. "extendedness"). "Color in this case proves to be inseparable from extension, which goes to show that color is essentially linked up with extension. What is as a rule not sufficiently realized is that the converse does not hold: extension can very well be imagined without color, for instance in the case of a transparent medium. Hence extension is essentially possible without color, and color is not required by it. This example also brings out that essential connections are by no means always symmetrical. Yet in any case it is always the essential nature of the essences in relation to each other which decides as to their essential relationships" (Spiegelberg, 1960, II, p. 682).

### 4. Advanced phenomenology.

The preceding three levels of phenomenology are fairly straightforward and none too esoteric in their ambition and character. The next four steps, as described by

Spiegelberg and others, are much less clear and much more easily shading into philosophically tinted statements about the “deeper nature” of what is being phenomenologically analyzed. Furthermore, the distinctions between the various advanced levels are not all that convincing. Finally, it appears that these steps are not at all commonly employed or similarly understood and explicated by the experts.

It seems fair to conclude that besides the three basic steps of phenomenological activity there may well be much room for further sophistication and more penetrating analyses, but that presently those further procedures need elaboration and explication, and are not as yet all that relevant for experimental and clinical psychology.

### c. PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY.

When Heidegger practices his “Hermeneutic phenomenology” to look at the structures of human *Dasein*, he does that within the context of a foregone philosophical conclusion: such a hermeneutics shall instruct us about Being, that is its purpose, and that is the one reason for its use. Heidegger’s phenomenology is needed and shaped by the context in which it functions: it is philosophy in the making.

When Merleau-Ponty employs phenomenology to see more clearly the essential features of behavior he cannot but arrive at a further explication of what he already knows: man and world are one, and behavior is the mutually determined expression of that unity. His philosophy makes his phenomenology and his phenomenology makes his philosophy. His very exercise elucidates his thesis of a circular causality.

When Jungians explore the world of archetypes as it comes to expression in a myriad of concrete and particular symbolic forms they do so with one fundamental notion in the background: there is such a “thing” as a collective unconscious, which cannot itself be “seen” phenomenologically, but which makes the essences discovered in the concrete forms intelligible and connected. Their phenomenology is “objective” and “confirmable” for anyone who can work within the framework of the prior assumption about a collective unconscious.

When Husserl tries to see what it is that makes it at all possible for such things as mathematical theorems to be created in the human mind AND THEN TO BE ABSOLUTELY VALID, he is drawn into a rationalistic apriorism as metaphysical and as transcendently oriented as anything Plato, Descartes or Kant ever left us. And it seems possible, if not probable, that for Husserl the method of phenomenology, pure and objective and neutral as it should be, led inexorably into the domain of philosophy proper.

When Binswanger looks at clinical cases and searches for essences and connections between those, he finally arrives at insights and formulations that express an existen-

tial and thoroughly philosophical position closely related to Heidegger's *Dasein*s analysis. His analysis of manic-depressive *Dasein* prefigures the philosophical context which finally emerges.

All of this does of course not invalidate the method as such. It only illustrates what is found to be true also for the positivist approaches: a mere method, pure and objective, entirely free from philosophical implications and presuppositions, is hard to come by. Perhaps it is impossible. It may be good, then, to at least be aware of all that is contained in a methodology, and honest, and explicit. Certainly for psychology it seems appropriate that questions of subject matter, methodology, and philosophical assumptions and implications be quite straightforwardly addressed — all of them, not just the first two, in the delusion that one can specify one's subject matter and one's techniques of investigation, without any further philosophical concerns about the very nature of what one is looking into.

#### d. PHENOMENOLOGY: A NASCENT PARADIGM?

If it is true that phenomenology is an inherently philosophical attitude as well as a methodology, and if it is true that phenomenology is on the rise, slowly but in many diverse quarters, then it may be the case that a transition toward a new "paradigm" is in progress. What with all the new ideas on human consciousness suggested by split brain research, biofeedback, hypnosis, sleep and dream investigations, meditation experiences, drug induced altered states, and even parapsychology, it does not appear to be outside the realm of possibilities that the ongoing concern with methodological issues might result in more widespread attempts to achieve phenomenological sophistication. One could even fantasize that all psychology majors in the future would be required to take not only a course on design and statistics for experimental research but also a course called something like "Psychological Phenomenology 101."

Of course, the reaction would also have to be present, both as regards methodology and with respect to philosophical implications. One could point at contemporary molecular biology of brain processes, at computer simulations of human functions, and particularly at the latest developments in "Artificial Intelligence" research, to indicate the renewed growth of an elementarism, a positivism, and a mechanistic materialism more vigorous, more militant, and more forceful than even a LaMettrie could have foreseen (see for instance Wooldridge, 1968).

#### e. PHENOMENOLOGY AND EPISTEME SHIFT.

Michel Foucault has made the case that scientific paradigms, particularly in the

discipline dealing with human existence, are just as much a part of a wider cultural context as mores, philosophies, literature, etc. If he is right it is to be expected that with a real shift in such a cultural context, a shift in what he calls the "Episteme" (i.e. the grand overall style of "knowing") of a culture, a basic shift in scientific paradigms and mini-paradigms will also take place.

Perhaps that is what we see happening today. Perhaps that is what the methodological struggle of positivism and phenomenology is about. Perhaps we have reached what one theoretical physicist with philosophical concerns has called "The Turning point." (Capra, 1982). Psychology, after all, is part of western culture at large, and it has always followed the lead of the more glamorous disciplines around it. As then in the sciences, from physics to biology, as well as in philosophy, a new respect and interest has grown for matters of consciousness-as-such, it would be reasonable to expect that psychology too will witness a renaissance of human awareness as the central subject matter for the discipline, with an appropriate methodology and a concomittant philosophy.

#### f. THE POWER OF SCIENCE AND THE MEANING OF PHENOMENOLOGY.

How shall then the results of a phenomenological inquiry be verified? That is the crux of the argument, from start to finish. The stark fact seems to be that an unbridgeable gap exists between the two attitudes of positivism and non-positivism.

In its simplest form, but at the same time most fundamentally, positivism requires verification by testing specific predictions following necessarily from whatever insight might be said to have been gained. And such testing must be quantifiable at that. The positivist's attitude is, quite rightly: "Show me! Make a specific prediction and we'll test it." In any introductory psychology text students are still told today that the basic characteristic of the scientific approach is that its observations and descriptions lead to an understanding in the form of specific predictions that can be verified objectively. And the ultimate goal is to achieve control over that which is studied. Let us face it: power is what all real science is about; and whatever does not lead to specific prediction and control is not science.

The phenomenologist uncovers essences, patterns, MEANING, and this does not, as a rule, lead to specific predictions. That is even true in the case of the chess grandmaster who may be quite justifiably confident that white will win in a position which looks even to the layman, while that same grandmaster would be hard put to say in specific terms how the game will proceed; many different moves are equally viable, the number of moves needed to reach the final result is quite unpredictable. And let us note that even the ultimate prediction of a win for white is not directly verifiable: who knows what will happen when two imperfect players (they may even be grand-

masters) sit down to play out the game! The actual result of the game, played out many times by actual players, will not change the “essential” insight into the merits of the position, one way or the other, for the grandmasters making their judgment.

Grasping “meaning” does not lead to specific short term predictions, and thus it can not be verified according to the positivist. Gaining “power” as such does not make any sense, as it lacks a meaningful perspective, and thus it does not lead to anything but destructiveness, left to itself, according to the phenomenologist — at least if he is of an existential bent.

Are they not both right? Do not the two polarities belong together? Is “knowledge” not necessarily the integration of both power and meaning? Does not each of these, left to itself, become necessarily ignorant of what human knowledge is and what it is about? Is not the whole history of the human search for knowledge of self and world, as exemplified in psychology and in all other disciplines, a continuous illustration of the “coincidentia oppositorum,” the polarity of meaning and power as the fundamental experiences in which knowledge can exist and grow?

## References

- Capra, F., *The Turning Point*, Simon & Schuster, NY, 1982.  
 Ihde, D., *Experimental Phenomenology*, Paragon Books, NY, 1977.  
 Keen, E., *A Primer in Phenomenological Psychology*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, NY, 1975.  
 Laing, R. D., *The Divided Self*, Penguin Books, 1965.  
 Rogers, C. R., *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1942.  
 Rogers, C. R., *Client-Centered Therapy*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1951.  
 Rogers, C. R., *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1961.  
 Spiegelberg, H., *The Phenomenological Movement*, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1960.  
 Spiegelberg, H., *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1972.  
 Wooldridge, D. E., *Mechanical Man*, McGraw Hill, 1968.