



Interdisciplinarity within Phenomenology

by Lester Embree

Abstract

Recognition of phenomenological tendencies in several dozen disciplines beyond philosophy raises the question of how phenomenology in general might be defined prior to specification in terms of the agendas of the particular disciplines. After an attempt at an answer to this question, some observations concerning the possible benefits of interdisciplinary encounters, especially for philosophical phenomenology, are offered.

Introduction

To judge by the suffixes of the e-mail addresses of the subscribers to the *Newsletter of Phenomenology*, there are at least 3,750 self-identified phenomenologists alive today in over 50 countries.¹ Recent efforts to understand the combinations of these phenomenologists across the planet have thus far identified over 180 local phenomenological organizations, including one in Siberia, and considerable progress has been made to include these organizations in the world-wide Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, as well as to establish five regional organizations for them. Of these, the Circulo LatinoAmericano de Fenomenologia was the first, and the fifth, the Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists, has just been founded.

There is reason to believe, however, that what has

thus come together in a loose and bottom-up way is still chiefly composed of phenomenological philosophers, while the approximately three dozen disciplines beyond philosophy which include self-identified phenomenologists are underrepresented.² It would seem probable, then, that non-philosophical phenomenologists will in coming years considerably increase the counts just offered of colleagues and organizations in our tradition. Efforts prominent in East Asia are already fostering this trend.

There is also reason to believe that relations between phenomenology and philosophy could benefit from more contact with phenomenology in disciplines beyond philosophy, and hence to ask how this might happen. And when one tries to get beyond specifically philosophical phenomenology, the question also arises of what phenomenology in general might be.

¹ Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Venezuela.

² Archaeology, Architecture, Cognitive Science, Communicology, Counselling, Cultural Anthropology, Ecology, Economics, Education, English, Ethnic Studies, Ethnology, Ethnomethodology, Film Studies, French, Geography (Behavioural), Geography (Social), Hermeneutics, History, Linguistics, Law, Literature, Medical Anthropology, Medicine, Musicology, Nursing, Philosophy of Religion, Political Science, Psychiatry, Psychology, Psychopathology, Religious Education, Social Work, Sociology, and Theology.

An attempt is made in what follows to answer this second question before the first.

What is Phenomenology?

This question has been struggled with ever since Edmund Husserl named his effort more than a century ago. Most attempts to answer it have come from philosophers and focus on philosophical phenomenology, but it is now also a regular question in disciplines beyond philosophy, and the answer may be different if one seeks to cover all the disciplines within our multidisciplinary tradition. There is need for a generic answer that can be specified according to the discipline. Having pondered this issue for some time, let me offer a “stratified answer” by which I go to deeper levels according to how strong the interest of my interlocutor is.

When I am asked these days what phenomenology is, I first explain that Husserl thought he was founding or re-founding first philosophy as a strict science and hence gave it a name ending in “-ology” as would be appropriate for a science, but that if one were an intellectual historian one might well speak of something like “reflective descriptivism” and include similar positions, such as those of Bergson, Dilthey and the early James. Then I suggest that it is better to characterize the Husserlian effort by its approach rather than by its results, and hence report that I like most simply to call it “reflective analysis” (Embree, 2003, 2006). If this answer does not satisfy, I go down to deeper levels of definition.

To characterize the approach shared in disciplines beyond philosophy as well as in phenomenological philosophy, I then propose three defining characteristics by saying that this approach is, in essence, (a) reflective, (b) descriptive, and (c) culture-appreciative. But I usually still need to go deeper.

I describe the *reflectiveness* of phenomenology as involving the observation in oneself and one’s groups, and in others and their groups, of encounterings of things, things-as-encountered, and also of the collective and individual subjects who encounter things. (I quickly clarify that I use “thing” to refer to anything at all and not merely material objects.) Then I explain that I prefer words based on the verb “to encounter”, because mention of “encountering” nicely raises the question of what is encountered, and because it is easier (at least in English) to recognize that encounterings concretely include, in addition to experiencings, the components best called believings, valuings, and willings. These thetic or positional components can be positive, negative or neutral in modality, and moreover, correlatively, the things-as-

encountered – which can be ideal as well as real and, if real, then spatio-temporal as well as purely temporal – include appearances, manners of givenness, and intrinsic and extrinsic positive, negative and neutral belief characteristics, values and uses. Reflective observation, which is a skill that needs to be cultivated, discloses a great deal that this taxonomy only begins to sort out.³

As for how phenomenology is *descriptive*, I say that description involves the mental transition from the grasping of things reflectively or unreflectively to words naming and characterizing them, and add that, when the thing from which one thus proceeds is a speech or a text, it is appropriate to speak of interpretation, but then interpretation is a species of description in my broad signification. Furthermore, descriptions can be of universal essences, concepts, and both fictively and seriously experienced real things. Moreover, description is prior to explanation, knowing what something is being necessary for knowing why something is. Finally, descriptions invite the reader or hearer to look for herself to see whether the things described are as described and, if not, to correct or improve the descriptions and thus to advance the investigation.

What I have said thus far is hardly new for phenomenologists, but some may be intrigued by my assertion that phenomenology is *culture-appreciative*. I came to recognize the importance of this property by asking what it is that phenomenology in all of the disciplines that I know anything about is opposed to. That contrasting position is called “naturalism”, “objectivism” or “positivism.” Husserl preferred “objectivism”, but this expression has not become widely accepted. While positivism is a movement in theory of social science and philosophy that goes back over 150 years and holds that all knowledge should be, or be modelled on, naturalistic science, “naturalism” seems to convey the broadest concept, one that extends beyond science into a spreading worldview that some consider a major source of today’s ecological crisis. For naturalism, everything is physical nature, and what is not physical does not count; and this excludes, above all, culture and mental life.

³ An incomplete chart may be useful here:

Encountering	Things-as-Encountered
positive, negative, and neutral willing	Intrinsic & extrinsic uses
<i>ditto</i> valuing	<i>ditto</i> values
<i>ditto</i> believing	<i>ditto</i> belief characteristics
experiencing (perceptual, recollectional, expectational)	appearances & manners of givenness

Let me insert that a suggestion of Geoffrey Lloyd (1991) deserves consideration. This is the suggestion that the West is different from other cultures because, in effect, it learned early on to abstract from culture and mind in order to focus on physical nature. With nature defined, one can develop not only naturalistic science but also naturalistic-scientific technology and ever more power over practically everything. But, of course, if the abstraction from spirit is the source of naturalism, and if one goes on to consider the result – that is, nature – to be concrete, which defines naturalism, then the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is committed, because the lifeworld is originally and concretely not only natural but also socio-cultural.

Phenomenologists are currently quite interested in how we encounter others and are encountered by them, so sociality is now receiving its due attention. As for how the world is originally cultural, however, I do not believe this has received the attention in our tradition that it deserves. I believe that the world is cultural in two ways. On the higher level there are, as Alfred Schütz has shown, conceptual constructs of things in common sense that we chiefly receive from contemporaries and predecessors through ordinary language. But, under the stratum of language, there is a subconceptual stratum that I call “basic culture” (Embree, 2008a). On this deeper level, reflection can disclose encounterings, and the values and uses of things-as-encountered, whether or not these are grasped in commonsense constructs, and these matters of basic culture are also chiefly learned from and shared with individual and collective others. It may be that the original cultural character of all things is often mistakenly overlooked because there is so much variety to it.

That the world is socio-cultural seems more appreciated in the human, socio-historical, or, best, the cultural sciences than in phenomenological philosophy thus far. I prefer to call them cultural sciences also because, as Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty already knew in the 1930s, chimpanzees have basic culture (Embree, 2008b). This is culture as often focused on in ethnology or cultural anthropology, but it is distinctively present in the subject matters of all of the cultural disciplines if one looks carefully (Embree, 1994).

Edmund Husserl, of course, recognized the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but he and his early followers saw the need to analyze the foundations of socio-cultural things first, thus abstractively focused on the constitution of experienced nature, and did not finally come fully to give culture and society the attention they deserve. The naturalism in the mentalities of their readers has not helped in this connection.

Nevertheless, there have been places for valuing and willing and thus axiology and praxiology in Husserl’s project at least since he analyzed how warriors ought to be courageous in his *Prolegomena zur reinen Logik* of 1900, and, if looked for, these aspects are also quite evident in his *Ideën I* and *II* of 1913 and elsewhere (Embree, 1992, 1996).

I hope I have said enough to clarify how I believe phenomenology in general is not only reflective and descriptive, but also culture-appreciative. Let me now turn to the topic of interdisciplinarity.

Phenomenology Can Be More Interdisciplinary

There seems a disciplinary imbalance within our tradition. Colleagues in other disciplines continue to learn much from philosophical phenomenology, and philosophers must be proud of that, but they do not benefit in return nearly as much as they might. Research is interdisciplinary when convergent research in one or more other disciplines is taken quite seriously.

The question of traditions becoming more interdisciplinary has tended to be approached beginning from the disciplines and then considering tendencies, orientations or schools of thought, such as phenomenology, as at best secondary. After all, where our professional identities are concerned, most of us are philosophers, economists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists and so forth *first* and Marxists, positivists, phenomenologists and so forth *only second*. The structures of academic institutions and degree programmes support this approach. And we have had disciplinary differences since Aristotle and the seven liberal arts of the Middle Ages.⁴ But here I shall ignore other traditions such as Marxism and positivism and focus specifically on how, *within* our own huge phenomenological tradition, there are disciplinary differences that can be dealt with for maximum benefit to all involved.

Thus far, and as intimated, while disciplines beyond

⁴ The phenomenologist Joseph Kockelmans (1979) offered this definition of “discipline” late in the 20th Century: “A branch of learning or a field of study characterized as a body of intersubjectively accepted knowledge pertaining to a well-defined realm of entities, systematically established on the basis of generally accepted principles with the help of methodological rules or procedures, e.g., mathematics, chemistry, history.” It deserves mention that Kockelmans draws, among much else, on the work on interdisciplinarity of the phenomenologist Georges Gusdorf, author of “Interdisciplinaire (Connaissance)” in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (1966-73) and of *Les Sciences Humaines et la Pensée Occidentale* (1966-88).

philosophy have adapted concepts, distinctions, methods, terminology and so on from philosophical phenomenologists, relatively little has been learned by philosophical phenomenologists from disciplines beyond philosophy. To be sure, much was learned in the past by Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty from *Gestalttheorie*, by Schütz from *Verstehende* sociology and marginal utility economics, and by hermeneutical phenomenologists from classical philology, and others have gained much from studying psycho-analysis and other schools of psychiatry; but these past cases seem exceptions more than the rule, and today there seems little other than the phenomenological interest in the multidiscipline of cognitive science. But what if encounters with non-philosophical phenomenology could help self-identified philosophical phenomenologists become better phenomenologists?

Please permit me to proceed now somewhat autobiographically. I was an undergraduate major in philosophy with a minor in psychology, but that was behaviouristic psychology and rather off-putting. In my doctoral studies at the New School for Social Research, which was still under Weimar influence and thus unlike American programmes of typically monodisciplinary British influence, I was required to have a minor. So I took courses on Wilhelm Dilthey and on German sociology with the Weber scholar Albert Solomon. Then, for almost 30 years after graduating, I was immersed in American academic philosophy, which was then, and still is, quite naturalistic – and, I would add, anti-interdisciplinary, very few philosophical colleagues even recognizing the human or cultural sciences as sciences.

At Duquesne University, however, I did have friends in the psychology department where phenomenological psychology was developed as a human science. (In retrospect, I must also recognize that I was always fascinated by the phenomenological theory of value and theoretical ethics of Dorion Cairns, as well as by how Aron Gurwitsch related the analysis of *Zeug* in the early Heidegger to Wolfgang Koehler's account of functional objects as encountered by chimpanzees.)

When I came to Florida Atlantic University in 1990 and had a great increase in resources, I reacted against the intellectualism of most Husserlians in my generation by, as noted above, studying the noetico-noematic analyses of valuation and action in Books I and II of Husserl's *Ideën*. By then I was also deeply involved in studying the thought of Schütz, whose *Wissenschaftslehre* focuses on the genus, species, and some particulars in the cultural sciences, and also in reflecting on the history and philosophy of

archaeology, ecology, gender and technology. In retrospect, I can now recognize that I was then seriously turning toward culture.

Next, Alexander Schimmelpenninck proposed in 1992 that I and my colleagues in the Centre for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Inc. edit the *Encyclopaedia of Phenomenology* (Embree et al., 1997). It was in that connection that I began more clearly to recognize not only how, in the course of a century, our tradition had spread across the planet, but also how it was pursued in over a score of non-philosophical disciplines, namely architecture, behavioural geography, cognitive science, communication, dance, ecology, economics, education, ethnic studies, ethnology, film, hermeneutics, literature, music, nursing, political science, psychiatry, psychology, religion, social geography, sociology, and theatre. I kept finding more and more disciplines beyond philosophy with phenomenological tendencies, if not schools of thought, within them! Since then I have, of course, identified more and more such disciplines.

In the introduction to our encyclopaedia, Jiten Mohanty and I sketched the evolution of the phenomenological agenda – that is, how issues were added to it decade by decade, such as gender by Edith Stein in the 1920s (Stein, 1996) and generational difference by Simone de Beauvoir in 1970 (Beauvoir, 1989). Re-reading that introduction in preparation for the present essay, however, I self-critically find it rather philosophy-centric and hence must say that at that time I still had not fully appreciated how multidisciplinary our tradition has long been. But I am still proud enough in this respect of the opening paragraph of our introduction to quote it now:

Although anticipations can be found in the works of Henri Bergson, Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Dilthey, William James, and others, the phenomenological movement began in the reflections of Edmund Husserl during the mid-1890s and is thus more than a century old. It spread from Germany to Japan, Russia, and Spain and also from philosophy to psychiatry before World War I; to Australia, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Flanders, Poland, and the United States and to education, music, and religion during the 1920s; and to Czechoslovakia, Italy, Korea, and Yugoslavia and to architecture, literature, and theatre during the 1930s. Phenomenology then spread to Portugal, Scandinavia, and South Africa, and also to ethnic studies, feminism, film, and political theory soon after World War II; then to

Canada, China, and India and to dance, geography, law, and psychology in the 1960s and 1970s; and finally to Great Britain and also to ecology, ethnology, and nursing in the 1980s and 1990s. Given its spread to other disciplines as well as across the planet, phenomenology is arguably the major philosophical movement of the 20th Century. (Embree, 1997, p. 1)

In retrospect, however, I can now recognize that I then still had what might be called a merely intellectual appreciation of the non-philosophical disciplines within phenomenology. This seems to have still been the case for my paper at the second meeting, in Lima in 2005, of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations (Embree, 2007). Three more events took me beyond that. The first was a conference in Taipei in September 2006, and the second was a conference in Seoul in February 2007. What happened at those conferences was that *I encountered phenomenology as actually being done by colleagues in disciplines beyond philosophy*. It is amazing that this had not happened for me before then, or at least that I had not recognized it. And the third thing was when Tom Nenon and I came to write the introduction to the volume on North America for *Phenomenology 2005* and I began to suspect that the distinctive feature of phenomenology in our geographical region is its multidisciplinaryity.

These three events had what some might consider a curious impact on me. I have long been among those who have complained that the vast majority of those who call themselves phenomenologists are only scholars who contribute to the secondary literature. Much of my own contribution is of this sort, of course, and I do believe we need secondary literature because so much of the writing of the giants of our past is difficult to understand and we must help each other understand them. But such secondary literature is a means to the end of phenomenological investigations of the things themselves – that is, not philology but phenomenology, and thus the production of primary literature. This is what I hope philosophers in our tradition who have not previously got beyond interpretation of texts can learn to do by encountering phenomenology as actually done in disciplines beyond philosophy. And this is why I have sought to found the Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists (ICNAP). I hope it will be a place where *soi disant* philosophical phenomenologists will be reminded of the need to be or become phenomenologists.

Let me mention one other factor. When called on not to think or write about earlier phenomenology, but

actually to do phenomenology, I suspect that many colleagues in effect ask themselves if they could be the next Merleau-Ponty and quickly answer in the negative. In that case, however, it is still possible to attempt modest and concise reflective analyses, and I have increasingly tried to do that myself in recent years, and also started a book series with Zeta Books, *Phenomenological Workshop Texts*, for collections of such analyses.

A Final Caution

Having now not only thought about phenomenology as a tradition that has become ever increasingly multidisciplinary during little over a century, but having encountered some phenomenology as actually done in disciplines beyond philosophy, let me offer some final remarks to fellow phenomenologists in philosophy. To begin with, I urge not just reading work by colleagues in disciplines beyond philosophy, but also hearing their presentations and discussing their work with them. It can be very encouraging when colleagues in different disciplines meet and find they have convergent practical *as well as* theoretical interests. (Discovering that an associate dean in our nursing school is a phenomenologist has already improved enrolments in one of my courses!)

Interdisciplinary encountering is like foreign travel – often initially difficult and uncomfortable, with many strange things and unexpected developments, even a type of culture shock is possible, but ultimately it is rewarding. Philosophers can become irritated by misused terminology and deeply misunderstood methods used by non-philosophical colleagues. Often, I must confess, I find a “disciplinary superiority complex”, as it might be called, actually in myself as well as in others. Is it not easy, however, to imagine that an economist similarly believes that her discipline addresses the most important aspect of social life, or that a psychologist or sociologist believes that hers does?

If one’s superiority complex is overt, it can be called “disciplinary arrogance”, something I have seen in phenomenological philosophers who look down on social scientists, nurses, and so forth. Such philosophical colleagues would do well, however, to consider how ridiculous our philosophical preoccupations with such things as ultimate grounding, being qua being, whether the world exists, why there is something rather than nothing, transcendental intersubjectivity, and so forth, may possibly appear to colleagues in disciplines beyond philosophy, especially the practical ones! Being “discipline-centric” seems inevitable and is probably not a bad thing where the development of specialized

knowledge and skill are concerned. But, just as with class, ethnicity, gender and nationality, where there are also tendencies toward superiority complexes and arrogance, it is wise to practise tolerance,

“disciplinary tolerance” as it might be called, for then the benefits of interdisciplinarity on all sides are the more likely to come.

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Professor Embree has produced over 200 publications in the areas of modern philosophy, the theory of science and constitutive phenomenology, including three books: *Reflective Analysis* (2006 in English; also in Castilian, Chinese, Japanese, Polish, Romanian, and Russian with translations into Czech, French, German, Korean and Portuguese in various stages), *Fenomenologia Continuada* (2007) and *Environment, Technology, and Justification* (2009). Currently he is in the process of completing a text on Alfred Schütz's theory of the cultural sciences. He has also edited, translated and co-edited several dozen collective volumes, and served as General Editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Phenomenology* (1997).

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