

What is Phenomenology?

Lester Embree, Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology.
Created March 1997; updated August 29, 2005.

For many people, the word "phenomenology" is difficult to pronounce and those who hear the word for the first time often ask what it means. The present attempt at an answer is in part methodological but is chiefly historical. It reflects lessons learned in editing the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, and derives immediately from the Introduction of that work, which contains references to fairly detailed entries on disciplines, individuals, tendencies, etc. The following sections sketch aspects of phenomenology:

- Seven widely accepted features of the phenomenological approach
 - The 100-year spread of phenomenology according to nations and disciplines
 - Tendencies and stages within philosophical phenomenology thus far
 - Phenomenology into the 21st century
-

Seven Widely Accepted Features of the Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenologists conduct research in ways that share most of the following positive and negative features.

1. Phenomenologists tend to oppose the acceptance of unobservable matters and grand systems erected in speculative thinking;
2. Phenomenologists tend to oppose naturalism (also called objectivism and positivism), which is the worldview growing from modern natural science and technology that has been spreading from Northern Europe since the Renaissance;
3. Positively speaking, phenomenologists tend to justify cognition (and some also evaluation and action) with reference to what Edmund Husserl called *Evidenz*, which is awareness of a matter itself as disclosed in the most clear, distinct, and adequate way for something of its kind;
4. Phenomenologists tend to believe that not only objects in the natural and cultural worlds, but also ideal objects, such as numbers, and even conscious life itself can be made evident and thus known;
5. Phenomenologists tend to hold that inquiry ought to focus upon what might be called "encountering" as it is directed at objects and, correlatively, upon "objects as they are encountered" (this terminology is not widely shared, but the emphasis on a dual problematic and the reflective approach it requires is);
6. Phenomenologists tend to recognize the role of description in universal, a priori, or "eidetic" terms as prior to explanation by means of causes, purposes, or grounds; and

7. Phenomenologists tend to debate whether or not what Husserl calls the transcendental phenomenological *epoché* and reduction is useful or even possible.

The 100-Year Spread of Phenomenology According to Nations and Disciplines

Phenomenology began in the philosophical reflections of Edmund Husserl in Germany during the mid-1890s and is thus over a century old. Before World War I it spread to Japan, Russia, and Spain and also from philosophy to psychiatry;

during the 1920s it spread to Australia, France, Hungary, The Netherlands and Flanders, Poland, and the United States and to research on communicology (then called symbolism), education, music, and religion; and

during the 1930s it spread to Czechoslovakia, Italy, Korea, and Yugoslavia and to research on architecture, literature, and theater.

Right after World War II, phenomenology then spread to Portugal, Scandinavia, and South Africa, and also to research on ethnicity, film, gender, and politics;

in the 1960s and 1970s it spread to Canada, China, and India and to dance, geography, law, and psychology; and, finally,

in the 1980s and 1990s it spread to Great Britain and also to ecology, ethnology, medicine, and nursing.

In view of its continual development and its spread into other disciplines as well as across the planet, phenomenology is arguably the most significant philosophical movement in the 20th century.

Tendencies and Stages within Philosophical Phenomenology Thus Far

Four successively dominant and sometimes overlapping philosophical tendencies and stages can be recognized within the century-old, planetary, and multidisciplinary movement called phenomenology, and an expanding agenda of issues can be related to this broad scheme.

(0) The phenomenological movement began with Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900-1901). This work is most famous for its attack on psychologism, which is the attempt to absorb logic into empirical psychology. Besides logic, this work reflects interest in mathematics, language, perception, and various types of re-presentation (e.g., expectation, imagination, and memory), and also describes how ideal objects might be made evident and known.

Because of its reflective, evidential, and descriptive approach to both encounterings and objects as encountered, the beginning of phenomenology is sometimes characterized

as "descriptive phenomenology." If this is the trunk, there is then a succession of four large limbs that branch out from it as the tree of phenomenology has grown (probably smaller branches and even twigs could also be recognized with this image):

(1) *Realistic phenomenology* emphasizes the search for the universal essences of various sorts of matters, including human actions, motives, and selves. Within this tendency, Adolf Reinach added philosophy of law to the phenomenological agenda; Max Scheler added ethics, value theory, religion, and philosophical anthropology; Edith Stein added philosophy of the human sciences and has been recently recognized for work on gender; and Roman Ingarden added aesthetics, architecture, music, literature, and film.

Alexander Pfänder, Herbert Spiegelberg, and now Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith have been the leaders of the successive generations of this tendency, which flourished in Germany through the 1920s, but also continues today.

(2) *Constitutive phenomenology's* founding text is Husserl's *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie I* of 1913. This work extends Husserl's scope to include philosophy of the natural sciences, which has been continued in later generations by Oskar Becker, Aron Gurwitsch, and Elisabeth Ströker, but it is chiefly devoted to reflections on phenomenological method, above all the method of transcendental phenomenological epochê and reduction.

This procedure involves suspending acceptance of the pregiven status of conscious life as something that exists in the world and is performed in order to secure an ultimate intersubjective grounding for the world and the positive sciences of it. Use of this method places constitutive phenomenology in the modern tradition that goes back at least to Kant, and also characterizes the rest of Husserl's work.

Besides those mentioned, Alfred Schutz, J.N. Mohanty, Thomas M. Seebohm, and Robert Sokolowski have both criticized and continued constitutive phenomenology.

(3) *Existential phenomenology* is often traced back to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* of 1927, the project of which was actually to use an analysis of human being as a means to a fundamental ontology that went beyond the regional ontologies described by Husserl.

Hannah Arendt, influenced by Karl Jaspers (as was Heidegger), seems to have been the first existential phenomenologist after Heidegger. It is also arguable that existentialist phenomenology appeared in Japan with Miki Kyoshi and Kuki Shuzou's early work in the late twenties. However, this third aspect and phase in the tradition of the movement took place chiefly in France. The early Emmanuel Levinas interpreted Husserl and Heidegger together and helped introduce phenomenology into France. This period included Gabriel Marcel and was led in the 1940s and 1950s by Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

This third tendency is concerned with topics such as action, conflict, desire, finitude, oppression, and death. Arendt contributed to political theory and the problematics of ethnicity, Beauvoir raised the issue of gender and old age, Merleau-Ponty creatively continued the appropriation of Gestalt psychology in his descriptions of perception and the lived body, and Sartre focused on freedom and literature.

Existential phenomenology has recently been continued by such figures as John Compton, Michel Henry, Maurice Natanson, and Bernhard Waldenfels.

(4) *Hermeneutical phenomenology* chiefly stems from the method set forth in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, according to which human existence is interpretative. The first manifestation of this fourth tendency is Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Platons dialektische Ethik* (1931), and it reemerged after Germany's National-Socialist period with his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Other leaders include Paul Ricoeur, Patrick Heelan, Don Ihde, Graeme Nicholson, Joseph J. Kockelmans, Calvin O. Schrag, Gianni Vattimo, and Carlo Sini.

The issues addressed in hermeneutical phenomenology include simply all of those that were added to the agenda in the previous tendencies and stages. What is different is the emphasis on hermeneutics or the method of interpretation. This tendency has also included much scholarship on the history of philosophy and has had extensive influence on the human sciences.

While realistic and constitutive phenomenology arose and first flourished in Germany before and after World War I and existential phenomenology spread out from France after World War II, hermeneutical phenomenology appears to have been most actively pursued in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s.

Phenomenology into the 21st Century

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and greater contact with the remarkably enduring Eastern European traditions of phenomenology as well as the ever growing interest within Latin America and Asia and indeed in most nations on earth, and, finally, with the continuing increase in international travel and means of communication such as the Internet, it may be that the fourth, hermeneutical, and American period is giving way to a fifth and planetary period of phenomenology.

The shape that phenomenological philosophy will take in the first decades of its second century is difficult to say. Work in the four established tendencies will certainly continue. But perhaps the emphasis will be on philosophical anthropology and related issues such as ecology, gender, ethnicity, religion, and technology as well as continuing concerns with aesthetics, ethics, philosophy of the human and natural kinds of science, and politics.

Lester Embree, March 1997