



Introduction: the phenomenological method today

Anthony Vincent Fernandez^{1,2}  · Steven Crowell³

Accepted: 13 February 2021
© The Author(s) 2021

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology is typically characterized as unified by its method. In *The Phenomenological Movement*, Herbert Spiegelberg argues that if there is any core identity to phenomenology, then it must be found in its method, which runs like a thread through the history of the tradition.¹ More recently, Dan Zahavi, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, writes that the contributions in the volume are unified not by their subject matter—as is the case for many other fields of philosophy—“but in terms of their methodological approach, which is indebted to and affiliated with a specific philosophical tradition.”² These claims echo throughout the classical and contemporary literature: Phenomenology is, first and foremost, a method—and this method constitutes the core identity of the field.

In line with this view, it is easy enough to find secondary literature on the various methods employed by the classical phenomenologists. We find work on Husserl’s epoché and reductions, on Heidegger’s formal indication, and on Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the impossibility of a complete reduction. However, despite the careful historical attention devoted to these philosophical methods, it is difficult to find any literature that actually explains how to *do* phenomenology. If phenomenology is a method, then shouldn’t a good part of one’s phenomenological training focus on how to carry out a phenomenological investigation?

The aforementioned detailed studies of phenomenology’s classical methods doubtless contribute to our understanding of phenomenology as a major tradition in the history of philosophy. They help us understand why these methods were developed and what challenges they were introduced to overcome. This kind of understanding is important, but it is no substitute for concrete advice on how to practice

¹ Spiegelberg (1981, p. 677).

² Zahavi (2012, p. 1).

✉ Anthony Vincent Fernandez
aferna15@kent.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Kent State University, P.O. Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242, USA

² Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, Radcliffe Humanities, Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6GG, UK

³ Department of Philosophy, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, USA

phenomenological investigation. The researcher who wants to explore some concrete phenomenon in a genuinely phenomenological way will readily find detailed accounts of what the epoché, reductions, or formal indication *are*, but very little on how to use them. Reading these accounts is akin to listening to a surgeon explain everything there is to know about a scalpel—except how to pick it up and use it.

Yet, despite the scant literature on how to practice phenomenological research, phenomenologists are today studying a more diverse set of topics than ever before. We find not only continuations of classical debates over the nature of selfhood, temporality, and intersubjectivity, as well as studies of philosophy's traditional topics, such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. We also find phenomenological studies of nearly every facet of human life, including racial and ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, child development, chronic illness and disability, and mental disorder, to name just a few. The sheer diversity of phenomenological research makes the question of phenomenology's method all the more pressing. Even if we did have a clear understanding of how to do phenomenology in a classical sense, can we simply assume that these classical methods apply just as well to the broad array of phenomenological interests today?

The diversity of topics now being submitted to phenomenological analysis points to a further issue: In all fields, the methods used to investigate them are modified and developed right along with increasing insight into the topics to which they are applied. The days are long past when one could speak of “the” scientific method, a set of procedures that one could simply impose on work in physics, biology, astronomy, and neuroscience—to say nothing of fields like sociology, economics, or political science. Some very high-level procedural generalities could be derived from reflection on work in these areas, but such generalities would be of little practical use. Their concrete application is necessarily guided by the matter under investigation and, with increasing knowledge of that matter, the methods used to approach it are modified. Such exchanges between matter and method are negotiated as part of the work in the field, and it is no different in the tradition of phenomenological philosophy. When the main topics of phenomenological investigation were mathematics, logic, and judgment, phenomenological method appeared tightly connected to its claim to establish fixed essences and apodictic evidence. As phenomenology moved in new directions—for example, exploring the structure of the self, historical experience, aesthetic experience, and the various phenomena of sociality—it began to integrate “hermeneutic” elements into its practice, as in Husserl's famous “zig-zag” method for uncovering historical sedimentations of meaning. Though often seen as moments of rupture within the phenomenological tradition, such adaptations of phenomenological method are better seen as the inevitable way in which matter and method evolve together. The phenomenological method of intuiting essences is not left behind; rather, what it means is modified as our understanding of what it discloses increases.

In light of this state of affairs, we asked a number of phenomenologists and historians of phenomenology to reflect on the phenomenological method as it is used today. This special issue of *Continental Philosophy Review* brings together their wide-ranging contributions. Some authors reflect on the challenges of using phenomenology to address philosophy's traditional topics and questions, including

topics that typically fall within the domain of practical philosophy such as ethics, history, politics, and aesthetics. Others reflect not only on how phenomenology might be applied to the study of particular aspects of human life, such as child development and illness, but also how these aspects of human life can themselves play a methodological role in phenomenological research. Still others reconsider some of phenomenology's classical topics, such as empathy and the nature of the transcendental, in light of their methodological roles in contemporary philosophical research—characterizing, for instance, what it means to grasp a philosophical position through empathy or to elaborate the notion of embodiment from a transcendental standpoint. Finally, some authors directly address the question of what applied phenomenology is and how it differs from what we might characterize as pure or transcendental phenomenology.

We hope that these contributions will spur renewed interest in the phenomenological method today—not only in what it is, but in how to put it to use in concrete and productive ways.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Spiegelberg, H. 1981. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Zahavi, D. 2012. Introduction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. D. Zahavi, 1–4. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.