

## PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is a philosophical methodology that was first developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and that has been taken up and modified in different ways by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and many others. Husserl's original goal in developing the methodology was to provide a radically new point of departure for addressing a particularly intractable problem in the theory of knowledge: how can cognition, which is a subjective mental act, get outside itself and reach its object? Indeed, how can the cognizing subject know whether the cognized object exists at all? The major contribution of phenomenology towards solving this problem consists in questioning the common sense, pre-philosophical understanding of the world that gives rise to it. This understanding, which Husserl calls the natural attitude, treats the world and the things in it as '*simply there*', as "*on hand*" completely independently of any subject's thinking about them (Husserl, 1998: 51). The first step in the phenomenological method is to put out of play this natural belief in the independent existence of the world 'out there'. This act of putting out of play, which Husserl calls the *epoché*, is not to be understood as a denial of the existence of the external world; it is rather a refusal to take any position at all on the matter. Under the *epoché*, Husserl insists, the world continues to appear exactly as it had appeared within the natural attitude. The only difference is that the world and the things in it come to be encountered strictly as appearances, or in Husserl's language, as phenomena. Phenomenology, then, is the rigorous, systematic description of how these phenomena are given within our experience.

The most important discovery about the givenness of phenomena that becomes possible under the *epoché* is that of intentionality, or the a priori correlation between cognition and its object: every experience we have is necessarily an experience *of* something, and conversely, every object given in experience is necessarily the correlate of a subjective act. Subject and object, in other words, are not discrete things in the world; they are necessarily given together. Phenomenological descriptions focus on the ways in which different kinds of objects are given as the correlates of different kinds of subjective intentional acts. The centrality of intentionality in phenomenological descriptions gives the methodology a strongly subjectivistic orientation, which Husserl expresses unambiguously in his *Cartesian Meditations*: 'Imperturbably I must hold fast to the insight that every sense that any existent whatever has or can have for me—in respect of its "what" and its "it exists and actually is"—is a sense *in* and *arising from* my intentional life' (Husserl, 1995: 91). This orientation provides the key to the solution of the epistemological problem that phenomenology was originally meant to address: if the object is given most basically as the correlate of a subjective intentional act, then the question of whether and how that act gets outside itself and reaches the object loses its sense.

Nancy is both an inheritor and a critic of the phenomenological tradition. His thought can be characterized as phenomenological in the broadest sense of the term, since it does not presuppose the validity of the natural attitude. When Nancy addresses themes such as the body, community, the work of art, and the world, he never treats these as objects that are

simply present, standing over against him. Instead, he provides close descriptions of how these phenomena become present most originally. But Nancy's thought challenges Husserlian phenomenology in rejecting the idea that sense resides in and arises from constituting consciousness. Nancy expresses this point most explicitly in *The Sense of the World*: 'there is no *epokhe* of sense, no "suspension" of a "naïve thesis" of sense, no "placing in parentheses"' (*SW*, 18). There can be no *epoché* of sense, no containing it within the subject-object correlation, because the subject's very act of performing the *epoché* is responsive to a sense that is already there. To be in sense, on Nancy's account, is to be exposed ineluctably to an outside that cannot be appropriated even in principle. This outside is given most originally not as an object present to a constituting consciousness, but rather as an obscure materiality that touches and that weighs on thought. As Nancy argues in *The Gravity of Thought*, 'sense needs a thickness, a density, a mass, and thus an opacity, a darkness by means of which it leaves itself open and lets itself be touched *as sense* right there where it becomes absent as discourse' (*GT*, 79. Translation slightly modified). This opacity resists being reduced to a transparent signification, fully present to consciousness. A stone, to take one of Nancy's favourite examples, is never present before our minds without remainder as the signification 'stone'. We encounter its sense as exceeding its signification. This excess is not to be understood as another signification, but rather as 'the spacing of a "there"' where sense takes place as event (*C*, 132). Nancy's most basic criticism of phenomenology is that it fails to think this event-character of sense: it 'does not open us up to that which—in sense and consequently in the world—infinately precedes consciousness and the signifying appropriation of sense, that is, to that which precedes and surprises the phenomenon in the phenomenon itself, its coming or its coming up' (*SW*, 17).

Husserl, Edmund (1995) *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Trans. Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Husserl, Edmund (1998) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy--First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.