



Editorial

by Rex van Vuuren

Guest Editor

Special Edition on the Teaching of Phenomenology

Now, after more than a century, the development of phenomenology, from the time of Brentano and Husserl, is in its fourth to fifth generation of scholarship. A large body of texts, libraries full, on philosophical phenomenology and its influence, concepts and application within a range of discourses, reaching across many disciplines through many languages, is available. Many fine scholars have passed the baton of phenomenology to the next generation. However, seldom, if ever, will one find a concerted attempt to ask how one can improve the depth and reach of scholarship and research from within this perspective. Would an answer to such a question require us to attend not only to the question of what readings could or should be recommended to a relative neophyte, perhaps an advanced undergraduate or postgraduate student, but also to the question of how phenomenology is taught in different disciplines and at different levels?

Books and articles on phenomenology attempt to aggregate, synthesize, clarify and critique much of the scholarship grounded in phenomenology. On the other hand, and in spite of the lifeworld as the well-established point of departure for all understanding and knowledge, it often remains difficult to arrive at some common conceptual ontological, epistemological and methodological core for phenomenology. Without listing or even describing more fully a range of core ideas and their reach into scholarship and research, allow me to cursorily touch on one example: Every major text on phenomenology will explain, and deal with, the phenomenological reduction. An author must mention the epoché and reduction – or, more correctly, the four steps of epoché, reduction, eidetic variation and intersubjective corroboration – because

they are distinguishing features of phenomenology. The epoché, as the “placing in abeyance” of “naïve” beliefs about the world, has led to much misunderstanding. The epoché is the condition of possibility for the reduction, which is a radical shift in attention or focus. The reduction has been described as an attitude, a device, an operation, a practice, a method “assisting us to study the structures of human existence by explicating lived experience” (Giorgi, 1970, p. 160). The reduction helps us to become aware of our own contribution to what we experience. Over the past century, many views and reviews of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction have been put forward. Some describe the reduction as easy – in fact so easy that even subjects who are required to reflect on their immediate experience can be trained to practise the epoché and reduction or at least some form of the reduction (Lutz, 2002; Lutz & Thompson, 2003). On the other hand, Maurice Natanson noted (1973, p. 70) that a “veteran phenomenologist” told him that it took years to master the phenomenological reduction. “Some students, on the other hand, report that they are able to understand the reduction in twelve minutes.” Natanson humbly comments that, “although I doff my cap to such feats, I must confess myself to be among the slow learners.” I suspect this today still to be true of many students and even their teachers.

As far back as 1970, Giorgi reminded us that the “world is given and appears in and through the phenomenality of the lifeworld”. And, for Husserl, intuiting the given as it appears was “a proper source of knowledge” (1913/1983, p. 92). Phenomenology proceeds from the presupposition that the “world is a condition of the mind” (Levinas, 1998).

Some years ago, Jean-Luc Marion (1998, p. 85) asked “What provokes the given to appear?” Without hesitation, he answers: the reduction. Yes, it might be intuition that authorises an appearance, but there is, according to Marion, no givenness without reduction, and no reduction that does not lead to givenness. This strong position echoes Levinas, who also made much of the reduction. He went so far as to state that the phenomenological reduction is a method of spiritual life through which our freedom can be rediscovered. But then Marion (1998, p. 53) would warn us that, while objects appear and are perceived, they are not lived. Therefore, do not confuse the experience and the appearing thing. The word “phenomenon” first applies to the lived experience in which, secondly, it appears.

On the other hand, Ricouer (1998), following Merleau-Ponty, argued that Husserl’s “bracketing” – one of the moves in the reduction, as a suspension of presuppositions as a starting point – is an illusion. Consequently we cannot simply describe meanings as they appear; we are also obliged to interpret meaning as it conceals itself.

Rightly understood, the reduction functions or operates like a distillation process, distilling the essence (of a phenomenon). The reduction, in such a view, is not a concept or a doctrine, but an operation necessary to bring “the semblance of appearing to the appearing of phenomena as they are” (Marion, 1998, p. 46). The reduction “dissolves” the phenomenon, just as a distillation leads to a reduced solution.

So, can one – and how does one? – teach the “reduction”, which in itself is a cognitively complex process and an often misunderstood term?

The phenomenological reduction is an operation through which the mind suspends the validity of the natural things of existence in order to study its meaning in the thought that has constituted it (Levinas). The reduction is a process by which the given becomes consciousness, or where the given becomes visible, where the unseen becomes seen. The reduction operates like an electric resistor, transforming unseen or invisible movement into light. The more pressure from the given, the more resistance required to reveal a phenomenon (Marion). However, there is always an excess of the given, a surplus of the visible – the stream of consciousness. The reduction, a way of looking, is also a way of managing the excess. The way to manage the excess is to frame it in a frame like the frame of a painting. The original as excess or surplus can only be managed as a resemblance, a re-presentation, and not as a construction (Levinas). A painting is a resemblance, and the resemblance provokes more vision, “more” to see, summons the look more than

the “original” does. Therefore, Marion claims that the reduction, like a painting, produces phenomenality, and, by privileging the resemblance, the reduction, like art, takes possession of phenomenality.

The reduction can thus be presented by way of three analogies: a distillation process, an electric resistor, and the frame of a painting. The reduction is not a process of analysing the meaning of words or merely studying the etymology of words in the hope of recovering or reducing the excess of meanings. The reduction is a way or a process of discovery of how the world is constituted, giving voice to the phenomena. Toward this end, descriptions are essential. Of course, the question of how truthful our descriptions are, how to re-present reality as best we can, is a never-ending quest.

The four contributions to this special edition of the *IPJP* on *The Teaching of Phenomenology* come mainly from phenomenological psychology. Answers to the question as to how one teaches phenomenology are infinitely varied and reflect precisely the journey that any student/scholar has to undertake to cultivate the open mind and open heart required in order to understand how a phenomenon is given to consciousness, how it is structured, appears and is experienced.

The reflections on the teaching of phenomenology offered in this edition are prime examples of scholars, drawing on years of experience, contributing to the development and improvement of phenomenology, whether conceptually or methodologically. Not only are the specifics of the phenomenological reduction challenging to convey, but elucidating the general intent of the phenomenological method can also be very challenging. George Kunz, in his contribution, explains inter alia how he guides students to counter the main characteristics of the methods of science by helping them to appropriate the topics of general psychology from a phenomenological approach, grounding his work in Levinas’s ethical philosophy, and thus seeing psychology (and, for that matter, all human science disciplines) as a moral science. The contribution of Shaun Gallagher and Denis Francesconi reflects how the teaching of phenomenology – with teaching conceived in its broadest sense to include guidance of advanced researchers engaged in qualitative research, as well as interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration – can contribute to new scientific advances in not only the traditional human scientific disciplines such as psychology, education and nursing, but also in the cognitive neurosciences. Most importantly, this contribution argues for a continued dialogue at the interface between phenomenology and cognitive science.

The thrust of this paper derives primarily from the authors’ teaching experiences at the interface between

education science, cognitive science and neuroscience, which Francesconi describes as “the birth of a mixed new scientific field”. A look at the institutions to which they belong as listed confirms and reflects this new mixture. Although written in English, this new mixed field also reflects a mixture of European languages and higher education institutions – in this case, French and Italian.

The examples and references are all taken from the work of colleagues in this mixed field. They are all participants in research on consciousness as reflected by articles in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. The reader will be introduced to a range of members of this scholarly community.

The approach is to focus on the phenomenological method rather than on history and origins. The method must assist the researcher in accessing lived experience. But placing the discourse at the interface between pedagogy, cognitive science and phenomenology leads to some novel uses and broadened appreciation of the possibilities of phenomenology. This focus confronts phenomenologists with the question of “naturalising phenomenology”. If we understand this concern, then we recognise that there are several ways in which cognitive scientists can use phenomenology. Varela’s neurophenomenology, for instance, places the phenomenological method squarely in an experimental situation in which not only the researcher but also the subjects are trained in the phenomenological method. On another level, the experimental design of neuroscientists can be informed by phenomenology by means of the notion of “frontloading phenomenology”. And, in the interview situation, examples from Petitmengin’s work are given of what it involves to track an experience rather than an opinion or explanation of an experience. (See e.g. Lutz & Thompson, 2003)

All four contributions demonstrate the importance of both continuous dialogue with other psychological movements and remaining in close touch with phenomenological philosophy. Respectively, they also demonstrate different styles in presenting and explaining, applying and exercising phenomenological ideas. Steen Halling’s paper proceeds from the assumption that “phenomenology is not just a style of thinking, but also of perceiving and acting”, and is oriented towards showing “how through specific assignments and practices phenomenological research can become personally as well as professionally meaningful for students”. As a teacher, he guides students to give their full attention to the appreciation of human experience.

Halling places personal (first person) experience at the centre of his teaching. He wants students to appreciate the value of experience and how to “get to (the essence of) experience”, reflecting on experience as a valid exercise rather than running quickly to “other sources” of authority and explanation. In learning how to slowly move with and in, to dwell with the implicit and explicit, tacit knowledge is a key discovery for students. Providing a structure such as Giorgi’s method is very helpful, as also is working in (dialogical) groups. Halling wants to arrive at a point where students have appropriated a respect for and understanding of the value of lived experience, along with a way of practising phenomenology which is “restorative”, edifying and “deeply satisfying”.

Reading Steen Halling’s paper leads me to ask how an individual achieves a sense of intellectual agency and ownership of experience and reflection on phenomena. It asks for some understanding of the visible and invisible of the process of appropriation of insight and knowledge.

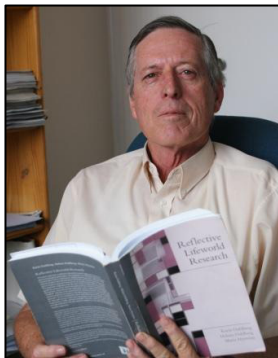
Scott Churchill’s contribution recognises that, in phenomenological research and thinking, the starting point is first person singular experience, often moving to the collective “we” experience, and easily shifting toward the third person perspective. But Churchill provides us with a most provocative challenge: “If today’s phenomenologists are not yet at home dwelling reflectively in second person perspectivity, it is nonetheless the case that there is a necessary shift from first person singular to second person awareness the moment we embark on the task of an ethics”. The value of this contribution is not only the elaboration of “the meaning of taking up one’s role as a ‘witness’ of behaviour in the mode of second person perspectivity”, and, in particular, the elucidation of the notion of the “reversibility of flesh” as allowing for a deepening of the encounter between self and others, but that Churchill also offers the reader a sketch of his history in teaching phenomenology, including some exercises that he uses to teach a special mode of observing both human and non-human expression. His travel back into his reading and teaching history, with an inspirational return to Kohler and von Uexkuell – and then attempting to feel what Churchill felt/experienced in his dance with the bonobo – is very rewarding.

The contributions to this special edition of the *IPJP* not only capture how some core ideas from the past have been appropriated and “lived” by the authors, but also reflect the frontiers and promise of phenomenology.

Referencing Format

Van Vuuren, R. (2012). Guest Editorial. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 12 (Special Edition, September: *Teaching of Phenomenology*), 4 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2012.12.1.2.1110

About the Author



Professor Rex van Vuuren is registered with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa as both a Clinical Psychologist and a Research Psychologist.

Currently the Academic Dean and Acting Registrar at St Augustine College of South Africa, and previously Head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, Professor van Vuuren has been engaged for a number of decades in teaching, supervising research, dialoguing and writing in the field of phenomenological psychology. More broadly, his academic interests, while grounded in existential-phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, are in the areas of personality theory, psychotherapy, and qualitative research methods. In addition to his role on the management team of St Augustine College, he has continued to participate in teaching psychology and supervising Master's and Doctoral candidates, and is also involved with teaching topics at the interface between disciplines such as psychology and spirituality, psychology and family and gender ethics, educational leadership and spirituality, and qualitative research methods.

While his focus has more recently been on collaborating in the compilation of a profile of "Private Higher Education in South Africa", Professor van Vuuren's publications in the field of phenomenology include a chapter on "The History of Existential-Phenomenological Psychology in South Africa" in C. H. van Ommen & D. Painter (Eds), *Interiors: A History of Psychology in South Africa* (Unisa Press, 2008), and his still highly topical chapter with the provocative title "Phenomenologophobia? The Aversive Reaction to Phenomenological Psychology" in *Dialogue Beyond Polemics* (HSRC, 1991), a volume, which he edited, of articles on psychology as a human science.

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