On Phenomenology and its Practices[1]

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A concrete philosophy is not a happy philosophy. It must hold close to experience, and yet not limit itself to the empirical but restore in each experience the ontological cipher that marks it internally. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a)

It was the practice of a former colleague, a nostalgic admirer of J.S. Mill,[2] to begin the segment of her course in the philosophy of the social sciences to which she referred, rather tellingly, as "The Non-Scientific Approaches" with the following strategy. She would announce to her students that, instead of studying methodological treatises on the subject, they were to learn about phenomenology in a direct and practical way. To that end, she would say, each one was to choose some aspect of his or her everyday experience, something simple and straightforward, and, setting aside all interpretations and causal accounts, write a description of that experience, telling what it was like, personally, as an event of his or her own consciousness. Happy for any respite from the demands of conceptual analysis, the students would typically warm to the task. Unbeknownst to them, however, their fledgling efforts were never read, though each one would be promptly returned bearing the same terse comment: "too abstract, interpretive and theoretical, not concrete nor descriptive enough." Less enthusiastically, the students would set about rewriting; yet with each revision my colleague would take the same tack. This cycle would continue until, at last, some exasperated student would inevitably blurt out: "This is hopeless!" "Yes it is," my colleague would concede. "So much for phenomenology."

Phenomenologists are apt to find the plot of this drama more galling than challenging. After all, it hinges on taking one aspect of a phenomenological procedure, abstracting it from the broader context and purposes in terms of which alone it could make sense and be defended, and uses this on unwitting students to dismiss phenomenology *tout court.* Even my erstwhile colleague would have had to grant the dubiousness of the strategy. For, with equally scant explanation or guidance, one might just as well (or as badly) have asked the class to garner statistical data randomly from their observations of classroom

behavior, pressing them for more and more, until the scene had been set for a like dismissal of all application of natural scientific methods to social research. Nevertheless, my colleague's portrayal of phenomenology was not completely implausible. Following Heidegger (1972) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), there are phenomenologists who do claim that a proper understanding of phenomenology can only be achieved in and through phenomenological practice itself (e.g., Ihde, 1986; van Manen, 1984). As well, there are those who do recommend a practice which, in its initial steps at least, resembles the descriptive procedure my colleague invoked (e.g., Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1984). The issue, then, is not whether phenomenologists make such claims and recommendations, since some evidently do, but what these claims and recommendations mean. That matter, however, is not so easily decided.

My own hestitations in this regard arise in part from pedagogical experience. Philosophy students are wont to approach phenomenology "with strictly theoretical standards in mind" (Tyman, 1985, p. 57) as an artifact and orientation in the history of philosophy, yet often lack any direct experience of doing phenomenology, or any sense of the existential needs that might impell one to try. Students for whom phenomenology does seem to meet such needs, and who are initiated directly into this or that version of its practice, typically lack a systematic and critical understanding of the deeper consequences of their own assumptions and discoveries, or the place of their research in the panoply of competing perspectives. Each group regards the other skeptically: The former views the latter as unschooled and blithely unquestioning about "fundamental" issues; the latter views the former as pedantic and smugly indifferent to lived experience. In the extreme, this mutual doubt outweighs any shared allegiance they may avow to phenomenology itself. In patching this rift, the canonical literature has been of uncertain help; for the writing *about* phenomenology and the writing *exemplifying* it seem seldom of a piece, reflecting rather than solving the difficulty. My own pedagogical role has been equally split, changing personae as the context demanded. At one time, I was able to content myself with the thought that, unlike my students, I did know how the unity of phenomenological theory and practice should be conceived, and that my ineptitude was strictly pedagogical. As the semesters pass, however, it becomes clear that this was an illusion. The ineptitude is more deeply rooted and requires a more radical *philosophical* therapy.

What follows, then, is a personal attempt, both tentative and schematic, to situate some basic issues regarding phenomenology and to show their broad relevance for human science research. I make no pretense to exploring the topic exhaustively, were that even possible, nor any to being innovative. I merely offer some "sitings" which, in relation to one version of the phenomenological orthodoxy, mark *an* orientation to the topic. The effort belongs to the local discourse on "phenomenology and pedagogy" and speaks to "the place where our voices are gathered" (van Manen, 1983, p. i). What that "place" is, and whether I speak to it unocclusively, remain to be seen.

A Theoretical Orientation

In one sense, the initial question is neither "existential" nor "methodological" (Smith, 1986, p. i), but encompassing and transcending both, has its meaning and ground in the nature of philosophy itself.

> We can assume nothing, and assert nothing dogmatically; nor can we accept the assertions and assumptions of others. And yet we must make a beginning; and a beginning, as primary and underived, makes an assumption, or rather is an assumption. It seems as if it were impossible to make a beginning at all. (Hegel, 1892, p. 4)

Now, this is hardly the stuff of lived experience nor directly of its concrete interpretation, and those already committed to phenomenology or engaged with practical problems will no doubt be impatient with it. Still, the question of a beginning does bring into contention directly the essential origin of phenomenology as philosophy, and before any partisan theses, specific themes, or practical involvements, concerns in principle the intelligibility, rationale, and legitimation of this form of thinking. In this way, it serves to undercut the tendentious terms in which the two groups of my students typically broach the issue of phenomenology and offers a perspective, precisely because it is so general, from which to begin to mediate their differences. More importantly, it serves to bring into view the essential manner in which phenomenology as a form of research *first* opens up a domain for systematic investigation, and thus offers a vantage from which to decide in principle the meaning of phenomenological knowledge and its relation to practice. In this regard, the first task is to determine the *formal conditions* under which phenomenology in general is intelligible and defensible and the basic consequences which these conditions have for phenomenological theorizing. "By 'phenomenology' we mean all those forms of thinking or inquiry which in some way maintain a perspective on the lived human experience" (van

Manen, 1983-1988, masthead). Accordingly, the second task is to show how these formal conditions and their consequences are related essentially to lived experience itself and what broad implications this relation has for a phenomenologically oriented human science. This second task will be addressed in a follow-up article.

"To begin with, philosophy can be characterized in general as the thinking study of things" (Hegel, 1892, p. 4), a definition broad enough to be relatively uncontentious. But once we substitute "phenomenological reflection" for "thinking study" and "lived experience" for "things," a definite stand is taken. We judge in principle what the "things themselves" truly are and the method appropriate to investigating them as such, and hence what should be of ultimate interest to us and how as researchers we should be oriented to it. Yet what justifies this judgment in the first place? Seemingly not phenomenology, because it is phenomenology itself that is in question. And not something outside of phenomenology, since it is the primacy of phenomenology that is being asserted. On these bald terms, then, it would appear "impossible to make a beginning."

My students' mutual skepticism bears the mark of this conundrum. One group is primarily concerned to know how the theory of phenomenology, its general definition and legitimation, relates to phenomenological practice as itself a particular mode of theorizing. The other strives to understand how phenomenological theorizing as a thoughtful practice can inform and alter our social being and acting, in particular our pedagogical competence. To the first group, an unqualified appeal to the primacy of phenomenological practice looks like a clever dodge, a disingenuous attempt to render phenomenology virtually immune to radical theoretical critique. For, without warrant, it seems to imply that either one is already simply doing phenomenology, which commits one *eo ipso* to the overall legitimacy of its principles and practices, or one is merely theorizing about phenomenology from the outside, and thus inevitably missing the point, not truly understanding. To the second group, an exclusive preoccupation with the theoretical foundations of phenomenology looks antiphenomenological, an abstract and bookish effort to determine in advance the scope and limits of phenomenological knowledge without a grounding in lived experience nor an engagement in practice. This seems to belie the central place of phenomenology in the very attempt to establish it and to render its theorizing otiose. At one level, this disagreement is semantic. At a deeper level, however, it points to the contentious nature of phenomenology itself.

If phenomenology were not radical reflection but merely *a* limited research technique, then the relation of its theory and practice would be less problematic. Its definition, method, and subject matter (i.e., the theory of phenomenology) would be determined by a more fundamental thinking that, in grounding phenomenology, would be other than it and prior to it. Thus, like any other positive science, phenomenology would be limited to a particular domain of objects delineated in advance through this other thinking. Its explanation of those objects (i.e., the practice that would constitute phenomenological theorizing) would in principle rest on the more fundamental thinking, and the results of phenomenological explanation would have a corresponding practical application in the form of procedures for controlling and predicting outcomes in its limited and predefined domain.

That this is contrary to the "local" discourse on phenomenology need hardly be said. It is also contrary to what the originating proponents of phenomenology (e.g., Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) steadfastedly claimed. Despite their differences, they all placed phenomenological theorizing squarely in the tradition of "first philosophy," and thereby affirmed its radical, ontological significance. "Phenomenology ... rests on itself, or rather it founds itself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. xx-xxi). As such it cannot take its measure and justification from any other orientation (e.g., common science, natural sciences, nonphenomenological philosophizing), but must be essentially *self*-defining and *self*-legitimating. Yet it also cannot found itself by simple fiat, but only in terms of an essential relation to the "things themselves." The theory which determines phenomenology's essence and legitimates its practices must itself be phenomenological theorizing, as the "way" to phenomenology must be a phenomenological path. At the same time, this theorizing and the paths that it takes must be prescribed by the essential nature of things and thus reflect a *logos*, not just self-consistent and self-dependent, but immanent in reality and demonstrably so.

This points to the formal solution of the conundrum. Radical phenomenology is *possible* only if, in some sense, we are always already involved essentially with the truth of things, and are thus able through our thinking to make this involvement explicit and to work out its implications.[3] At the same time, radical phenomenology is necessary only if, in some sense, this truth is as a rule concealed, distorted, or misapprehended. Thus phenomenology does not garner new information, nor provide knowledge hitherto simply nonexistent, but appropriates and

interprets a meaning already implicit to lived experience as its truth. Without this experiential relation, phenomenology would be groundless. Yet phenomenology does not simply iterate what is already given and understood in lived experience in the way that it is given and understood. It seeks a transcending theoretical understanding that goes beyond lived experience to situate it, to judge it, to comprehend it, endowing lived experience with new meaning. Without this transcendence, phenomenology would be superfluous.

It is one thing to pose this solution; it is quite another to say what it means and to hold to it. The ready danger is that one will fail to keep its two "moments" in proper relation, adhering one-sidedly to one or the other. In the event, the original unity of phenomenological theorizing fragments into two opposing and equally untenable perspectives. This, I believe, is the chief *philosophical* basis for the rift between my students. The one group looks to phenomenology above all to issue transcendent judgments on the meaning of lived experience and thus to speak to lived experience principally as arbiter and critic. It regards the discipline of phenomenology as an independent exercise of philosophical reason, one in which all existential commitments and relations have been "bracketed" and thus deliberately put out of play. The other group looks to phenomenology above all to recover an immanent sense for what particular lived experiences are like and thus to speak to lived experience principally as chronicler and eulogist. It regards the discipline of phenomenology first and foremost as a descriptive practice, one in which lived experience is viewed from the standpoint of lived experience itself, validated and confirmed through our existential commitments and relations. Each of these versions of phenomenology does have its particular rationale; yet neither singly nor in sum do they serve to realize fully the solution to phenomenology's conundrum. On the one hand, it belongs to the essence of phenomenological theorizing to reenact the categories of lived experience in transcending thought, and in this process, to venture discriminating judgments on the meanings operative within lived experience. If phenomenology did not do this, it would have no critical force. At the same time, however, phenomenology cannot simply issue "authoritarian pronouncements" concerning the "possibilities and liabilities" of lived experience. Its judgments must be rooted in a prior existential understanding (cf. Heidegger, 1962, p. 360). On the other hand, this means that every explicit phenomenological questioning of lived experience must in some sense (though a sense not easily mapped) have "had the way already prepared for it" within lived experience itself, and be worked out with essential regard

to the categories and interests of lived experience (Heidegger, 1962, p. 360). If phenomenology did not do this, it would remain in empty abstraction. At the same time, however, all such interrogation is itself already a specific orientation and thus a particular interpretive stance with its *own* categories and interests (cf. Langan, 1984). And however rooted in lived experience, it is a questioning that goes beyond our everyday conversations and concerns to comprehend them fundamentally.

Implicit in the conflict of these alternative versions of phenomenology is a middle ground, on which alone phenomenology proper is possible. Nevertheless, there are three factors that preclude our saying straightway where and how this ground lies. If phenomenology is truly self-defining and self-legitimating, then its full meaning (and the meaning of its key terms) cannot be given definitively in advance but only in and through the actual process of phenomenological theorizing. Indeed, as it proceeds to disclose its subject matter essentially, phenomenology must necessarily appropriate and reappropriate its own beginning and the previous course of its thought (cf. Fackenheim, 1961). Thus the initial characterization of phenomenology, although not arbitrary, can only ever be provisional.[4]

Second, even though phenomenology is first and foremost *about* lived experience, and extends a theoretical propensity to reflect on our lives more or less native to us all, it is not of the same order as our everyday thinking about things. As a particular theoretical attitude, phenomenology strives systematically for essential insights, for demonstrable universality, and for theoretical self-transparency, seeking to communicate, not just ideas and information about everyday experiences and matters of concern, but also the manner of our participation in truth. Thus, however tentative phenomenology remains, it marks a standpoint distinct from all perspectives that arise as a matter of course within lived experience and in terms of which we get by. For this reason, phenomenological theorizing cannot presume to explain or justify itself as such, nor to comprehend the truth of lived experience in a sufficiently rigorous way, in terms borrowed indiscriminately from ordinary language and held up as the standard of truth simply because they are familiar to everyone. Indeed, to phenomenological vision, it is precisely the familiarity of the familiar that is so "uncanny" and in need of essential comprehension. As Hegel once observed, "the familiar, just because it is *familiar*, is not comprehended [*erkannt*]" (Hegel, 1977, p. 18). In principle, then, what calls for phenomenology is just that which lies hidden in the familiar as its "meaning and ground" and which therefore "first and foremost does

not show itself" to everyday understanding (Heidegger, 1962, p. 59). To say this, however, is not to presume for phenomenology absolute autonomy from the claims of lived experience, nor to grant it license for any esoterica.

> The everyday way in which matters are interpreted is one in which [we] have grown and *are never able to extricate ourselves.* In it, out of it and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting and communicating, all rediscovering and appropriating anew are performed. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 213; my emphasis)

Yet the question of phenomenological truth can never be decided simply on the basis of what is readily understood and passed along publicly. Such discourse is a concern, not the unquestioned measure of phenomenology.

This points to the third and the most difficult impediment to the understanding of phenomenology—a deeper conundrum that lies at the center of the whole phenomenological project. On the one hand, phenomenology "seeks to recover a naive contact with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii) and to find truth essentially prefigured in lived experience itself. On the other hand, it "is not the reflection of a previous truth, but like art, brings a truth into being" (p. xx), transfiguring lived experience in the act of comprehending it essentially. Simply put, the conundrum is this: *How can phenomenology be at once grounded in lived experience and faithful to it, yet transcend lived experience to comprehend it, and in comprehending it, alter it essentially?* This question goes beyond to situate any particular intepretation of lived experience and its relation to practice, and thus beyond the language and immediate interests that mark the domain of "phenomenology and pedagogy." For, although it arises inevitably from the theoretical commitments that inform that language and those interests, and for that reason cannot legitimately be avoided in determining the place of that theorizing, its full meaning cannot be understood outside the philosophers' *self-founding* quest for truth, which has its own vocabulary, traditions, and ways of thinking. "The social field constituted by the philosophers' language ... is not limited to communication through the spoken and written word among contemporaries, but extends historically from a distant past, through the present, and into the future" (Voegelin, 1987, p. 14). Phenomenology's conundrum is thus doubly problematic. Not only is it perplexing in its own right, but also the path to its "solution" leads inexorably to a philosophical plane where everyone is at first apt to be more baffled than enlightened. Still, as Plato (1968) long ago noted, this is an essential and

therefore inescapable risk of all philosophical pedagogy (515c-516a).

Despite appearances, the tension in the conundrum is one specific to phenomology. It does not lie in a mere juxtaposition of immediate experience and mediating thought and it undercuts the banal forms of all realist/idealist aporias. At root, the concern of phenomenology is never with lived experience as an immediate datum for objective cognition, which it then presumes to know "better" than is possible through other, more abstract approaches. Phenomenology is more radical than that. It is concerned with lived experience as the place where meaning originates at the basis of all subject/object relations and their ancillary functions. Accordingly, the "naiveté" it seeks does not lie in simply describing things as they are given in themselves, neither subjects nor objects, but in deciphering the "origins" of things in the whole system of experience, in order, as with art, "to show how things become things" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 181; cf. Burch, 1985). In this respect, phenomenology never purely coincides with lived experience in itself, but by probing its ultimate horizons and seeking to grasp the englobing sense of what appears within them, renders lived experience anew. The subject matter is the *intelligibility* of lived experience, which phenomenology realizes essentially; and it is in rendering this "intelligibility" that the faithfulness of phenomenology to lived experience lies. Thus the basic predicament is not that phenomenology must attempt to recover an experiential purity by interpretive and therefore seemingly discrepant means; this is not even its putative goal. "One never returns to immediate experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 30). The real predicament is that the intelligibility which phenomenology realizes must fulfill requirements whose conjunction seems paradoxical: As the *truth* of lived experience, this intelligibility must precede a priori the specific meanings realized *within* lived experience itself. "Phenomenological truth is ... *veritas transcendentalis*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 62). As the truth of *lived* experience, it must in some sense be explicitly available to experiential understanding and inform it prior to and independently of phenomenology. And as phenomen*ological* truth, it must be more than what to lived experience alone is known and understood.

What makes this predicament sharp are two factors taken in conjunction: Phenomenology is essentially self-constituting, and in its self-constitution it constitutes the truth of its subject matter. At the same time, phenomenology takes its directive and measure from the subject matter itself and seeks to render it truly as it is in itself. To succeed in this, phenomenology must

perform at once a twofold dialectic (cf. Fackenheim, 1961, pp. 83ff.). In constituting itself, it must constitute a truth not yet realized (*realisé*) within lived experience and thus in some sense other than our everyday self-understanding; and in constituting itself, it must appropriate a truth already immanent in the intelligibility of lived experience and thus in some sense an essential part of our everyday self-understanding. Accordingly, the key to resolving the predicament does not lie in denying that phenomenology in any way alters lived experience as it is lived, but in showing that the faithfulness of phenomenology to lived experience consists in an altering that is called for essentially, but not accomplished, within lived experience itself. This solution is already known from poetic insight. "We had the experience but missed the meaning/And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form" (Eliot, 1963, p. 208).

Phenomenology can realize this "true" altering or "restoration" only if the possibility of doing so already inheres in the essence of lived experience. For this to be the case, two conditions must hold: (a) The truth of lived experience must be located, not in the explicit meaning accomplishments within lived experience (i.e., what subjects expressly know), but in the totality of the implicit and unthematized fundamental dimensions of the meaning contexts out of which lived experience and all explicit understanding essentially unfold; and (b) these meaning contexts must ultimately be understood, not as a set of formal organizing principles for the consciousness of objects in general, but as the concrete interpretive horizons which, in disclosing things in a characteristic way, account for the existence of the actual "worlds" in which we experience and interact. On these two conditions, phenomenology's paradoxical requirements would be formally met insofar as (a) some such context would always already be presupposed in any reflexive awareness and any consciousness of objects; (b) it would be available, albeit fragmentedly, to experiential understanding itself as the inexhaustible font from which it actually projects explicit meanings; and (c) it would be realized as an integral phenomenon only through phenomenology, which overreaches and thereby alters lived experience. On this reading, then, phenomenology does not simply make more clear what is already known in lived experience (against supposed obfuscations by abstract theory or scientific construction). Nor does it simply abstract transcendental structures that account for the consciousness of objects in general, but not for any actual subjective meanings within lived experience. Rather, *phenomenology elaborates fundamental possibilities of lived meaning inscribed as possibilities in the*

intelligibility of lived experience. In this, it neither repeats nor negates lived experience but reinstates it in its truth. Through phenomenological interpretation, lived experience comes, as it were, into its own for the first time.

From the perspective of this formal characterization, we can begin to situate phenomenology more concretely by mapping its scope in relation to the following traditional terms. As a form of "critical" thinking, phenomenology reflects on essentially and thereby transcends all lived experience and objective cognition to discover the intelligibility that is their implicit ground. As radical and therefore self-critical thinking, phenomenology reflects on itself to account for the possibility of its *own* transcending comprehension and "to recover [its] own theoretical grounds" (Darroch & Silvers, 1982, p. 1). Thus, against positivism and empiricism, phenomenology necessarily affirms a truth that goes beyond the exclusive dichotomy of abstract and experimental reasoning, analytic and empirical assertion. Against dogmatic rationalism, phenomenology necessarily affirms an existential matrix (i.e., lived experience) in terms of which alone its truth is first accessible and against the totality of which its truth must be tested.

There are a number of specific assumptions and categories that need to be plotted if this orientation is to be intelligible and defensible in the terms proper to it. First, transcending phenomenological comprehension is genuinely possible only if there is a transcending dimension already in lived experience itself, a dimension neither simply subjective nor objective, yet in some sense always already understood. This transcendence is itself possible only if we have a share in its essential constitution, and insofar as we constitute it, we constitute ourselves.[5] The principle involved here is one implicit to the intelligibility of all forms of transcendental philosophizing. The transcendence in virtue of which objects of experience are constituted a priori is at the same time the transcendence that is the subject's own self-constitution—the two poles of experience belong together essentially and are mutually implicated. Moreover, we are able to have ontological knowledge of this transcendence only because its realization is at the same time our self-realization. "Without this creative intuition there would be no awareness of self-identity, and without the awareness, no self-identity; but without self-identity the self would not be a self at all" (Fackenheim, 1961, p. 94, n. 50). On these grounds, the issue for phenomenological philosophy is not to what extent lived experience *has* an intelligible transcending dimension, but in what way lived experience *is* transcendence. "Transcendence constitutes

stitutes selfhood" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 39). For this reason, it is always already understood in lived experience itself, even if it is not grasped there in its essence. And the phenomenological task with regard to it is correspondingly one of explicit ontological self-interpretation.

It follows from this first set of categories and assumptions that the transcendence which phenomenology explicates cannot be an "aprioristic construction" intelligible only to philosophical cognition, but must be a meaning in principle commensurate with lived experience *as it is lived.* In this regard, "positivism"—even including the so-called "genuine positivism" of Husserl (1982, p. 39)—"cannot even properly ask about transcendence, since it does not abandon [*verlässt*] the standpoint of consciousness in general" (Jaspers, 1971, p. 13). For, however much it remains at first merely implicit in lived experience, the meaning phenomenology discloses must be such as to make sense of, and account for, the concrete historical worlds in which we live. It must be a meaning, not just of objects present at hand, but of a domain of human aims and projects. Insofar as this meaning belongs to our self-constitution, its elucidation shows us in our actuality; and insofar as this meaning also defines the domain in which we dwell, the question of our actuality is inseparable from that of our present situation.[6]

Third, it is possible to make intelligible the fact that in lived experience transcendence is at the same time both understood yet not grasped essentially, only if we hold that the essence of lived experience is differentiated accordingly. Heidegger (1977a) is the first to make this requirement explicit in these terms. He argues that, in its essence, human being is at once "existent" and "insistent"—existent as the proximal locus and medium for transcendent meaning; insistent in its preoccupation with whatever is at hand. Our everyday dealings always have a prior context of meaning that situates and directs them, yet a meaning which recedes from focus in favor of our involvements with the immediate objects of experience, cognition, and action.[7]

Fourth, phenomenology must still make intelligible the fact that it presupposes a meaning already implicit in lived experience, and yet is true to that meaning only by constituting it anew and thus transforming it. This is intelligible only if one holds that the *possibilities* of meaning inscribed as such in the transcendence of lived experience (even as implicit and unthematized) ground and thus precede the specific meanings *actually* realized. "Higher than actuality stands *possibility*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 63). In one form or another, this tenet is basic to all

phenomenology. It lies at the center of every phenomenological epoché and serves to differentiate the phenomenological concern for essence from all sciences of fact.

To understand these categories and assumptions properly, we need to draw the comparison with critical (i.e., transcendental) thinking more sharply. The relation of truth and essence will be our guide in this, because it serves best to plot philosophically what is distinctive in the approach of phenomenology to its topic. All critical thinking involves a step back from the manifold appearances of truth within lived experience and objective cognition—the genuine, the veridical, the correct, the consonant, the honest, the right—to truth as the essential conditions to which these appearances must always already conform. It thus seeks to map the original domains wherein, truly or not, we are able to perceive, judge, speak, and act. This step back from appearances to transcendental conditions also involves a corresponding shift in the notion of "essence," from "what" a thing is to the "primal internal principle of everything that belongs to the possibility of a thing" (Kant, 1970, p. 3, n. 1). In this form, critical thinking presupposes the primacy of the subject/object dichotomy, and in one way or another, locates transcendental truth and selfhood in the subjectivity of the subject. Moreover, its step back assumes an "ontological difference" between what is disclosed to a subject within experience and what that disclosure presupposes essentially.

Far from subsuming this "step back" and this "difference" into an absolute synthesis (idealism), or denying its decisiveness out of hand (deconstruction), phenomenology works through the theses and standpoints of critical thinking to consider the essence of truth and the truth of essence more radically (cf. Heidegger, 1977a; Burch, 1982). Thus, in affirming the primacy of lived experience, phenomenology shows that the various modes of correspondence that can obtain among beings (i.e., truth in the usual sense) and the original presence as such of objects to consciousness (i.e., truth in the critical sense) are founded on the occurrence of a prior, integral context of lived meaning. It further argues that the general idea we have of a thing as the sort of thing it is (i.e., essence in the usual sense) and the manner in which a thing is first posited in consciousness (i.e., essence in the critical sense) are founded on the whole way in which in experience the thing first comes meaningfully to be and abides, prior to any reflective distinction between its "what" and its "that," its "possibility" and its "actuality."[8] In its highest form, phenomenology locates transcendental truth and selfhood in the original event of transcendence, the coming

to be of the world as the meaning context wherein, as embodied agents, we dwell. And it understands this "event" ultimately, not as the subject's positing of a domain of objects, but in terms of the way in which all disclosure of beings to consciousness, and the meaning on the basis of which beings are always already understood, arise, and are differentiated in and through our human essence (cf. Heidegger, 1969, pp. 27-29).

Theory and Practice

To attempt to determine all of even the most basic implications of this orientation would be beyond my present scope. Nevertheless, there are a number of immediate consequences that can be readily adduced and that pertain to the philosophical basis of my students' dispute. First, in seeking the truth of lived experience in a transcending yet concrete context of meaning, phenomenology both presupposes and makes problematic the empirical/a priori distinction. As philosophy, phenomenology does have "the 'a priori' as its theme, rather than 'empirical facts' as such" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 272). Yet the "a priori" it seeks is not "absolutely independent of all experience," abstract, eternal, and immutable. It is instead a concrete context of meaning that, in "already preceding" our encounters with things and our explicit meaning accomplishments, relates to these, not by determining them absolutely, but as ongoing situating figure to ground. Such a context of meaning would be essentially historical; indeed its transformations would constitute the essence of history itself (cf. e.g., Hegel, 1975, p. 30; Heidegger, 1971a, p. 76). Yet it would not hold sway independently of the manifold figures it situates, nor then of the various accomplishments that make up the totality of our dealings within the world (cf. Langan, 1980). In this view, the empirical and transcendental, ontic and ontological are in essence inseparable yet differentiated.[9] Thus, although remaining philosophical (i.e., a nonempirical determination of essence), phenomenology yields "no absolutely pure philosophical word" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 266).

Second, insofar as the intelligibility of lived experience precedes the distinction between "what is in me and what is before me" (Marcel, 1950, p. 211), the effort to comprehend it goes beyond any attempt, systematic or otherwise, to understand subjects or to explain objects. Before all such problems, phenomenology asks about that which precedes and makes possible subjects and objects and their manifold interrelations, and thus about that which grounds "understanding" and "explanation" as specific modes of cognition (cf. Heidegger, 1962, p. 182).

Third, this phenomenological task is essentially open-ended. It is so in the first place because the subject matter itself, the intelligibility of lived experience, is in essence not an objective fact for certain cognition but a latent and mutable context of meaning. As such it can be evoked and illumined but not pinned down in a closed system of concepts (cf. Dreyfus, 1980). This is reflected synchronically in that not everything in lived experience can simply be reduced to a single overarching sense. Within the current hegemony of instrumental reason, for example, there are still disparate meanings inscribed in particular contingent things, relationships, practices, heritages that are other than "technological." It is reflected diachronically in the historicity of the truth of lived experience itself. This is not to deny more or less permanent structures or enduring facts and needs of the human condition. But it is to say that these structures, facts, and needs enter into the truth of lived experience only as they are intelligibly appropriated to it in particular contexts. The contexts are multiplex and prior—no experience "means" singly—and even that which is universally human comes to be relative to them, its truth is not an abstract universal.

This open-endedness is also evident on the side of the interpreting, insofar as the priority of possibility which holds of lived experience holds mutatis mutandis of phenomenology itself. The truth of phenomenology lies neither exclusively nor primarily in the correspondence of its explicit claims with lived experience taken as a fixed object of knowledge, but in the possibilities of meaning which at any given time are inscribed in the intelligibility of a particular phenomenological explication of lived experience. These possibilities are realized only through further interpretation which, in focusing the truth of phenomenology as a determinate figure, has its own elusive ground. As with the truth of lived experience, the truth of phenomenology too is essentially latent, an ever implicit context of meaning that surrounds and supports all explicit phenomenological claims. Thus "in any such inquiry one is constantly compelled to face the possibility of disclosing an even more primordial and universal horizon" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 49; cf. Ortega y Gasset, 1961, pp. 59ff.).

This account of the open-endedness of phenomenology still needs to be qualified in a decisive respect. For, in exploring it formally, the distinction drawn between the act of interpreting and the subject matter interpreted is too abstract and artificial. The truth of lived experience only discloses itself explicitly to phenomenological theorizing; and the truth of phenomenology is measured only against the truth of lived experience, so dis-

closed. The two truths are at root inextricably united in the ongoing process of phenomenological theorizing, which remains within the circle that the correlation of these truths define.

Fourth, as radical philosophy, phenomenology's overriding interest is systematic and integrative. It seeks to comprehend lived experience, not just occasionally and piecemeal, but "in totality," to explicate its universal structures and to discern in its protean forms and abiding concerns the "sense of it all." This "sense," which lies beyond all pragmatic opinions and precepts and the accumulated information of the positive sciences, is disclosed essentially to theory, that is, to a *totalizing bethinking of truth.*[10] It is "totalizing," not as system building, but as the systematic search for the integral meaning of experience;[11] it is "bethinking," not as a mere bringing to consciousness, but as the careful, englobing recollection of a fundamental meaning implicit to experience, though forgotten in the rush of things; and it is "of 'truth,'" not as a sum of correct assertions, but as the "intelligibility [gnome] by which all things are steered through all things" (Kirk & Raven, 1957, p. 204). Phenomenological interpretation steps back decisively from everyday perspectives and involvements to comprehend their encompassing intelligibility. This is the true meaning of the phenomenological "reduction."

In its purity, then, phenomenology itself is something other than action and practical involvement. It is not, for example, identical with teaching, publishing, dialoguing, working together, even though these can and should be thoughtful activities. As a theoretical task, to comprehend lived experience in its truth requires distance and withdrawal. "The philosopher pays attention to the serious man—of action, of religion, or of passion—perhaps more acutely than anyone. But precisely in doing this, one feels that he is different. His own actions are acts of *witness*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1988, p. 59; my emphasis). This is not to resuscitate in a hackneyed form the old metaphysical dualism—that philosophers withdraw to a "higher" region to grasp a truth always invisible and inaccessible to ordinary folk (cf. Arendt, 1978, p. 93). For phenomenological theorizing is still of this world, rooted in a prior existential understanding and obliged to "maintain a perspective on lived experience." However, its perspective is not that of the actual living, impelled this way and that by a variety of exigencies and concerns. It is to look on lived experience as a spectacle in order to get the overall sense of it and to understand it for its own sake. "The philosopher of action is perhaps the farthest removed from action, for to speak of action with depth and rigour is to say that one does not desire

to act" (Merleau-Ponty, 1988, p. 59). Yet this "distance" is not as it might at first seem, a complete disengagement from life, smugly maintained. It is rather an engagement of a different sort, with its own value, interests, and goals. In this regard, the Frankfurt-school theorists are surely right: "The detached observer remains as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the tiny freedom that lies in knowledge as such" (Adorno, 1974, p. 26).

Securing the Topic

The preceding sketch, albeit rough and underdrawn, grants a perspective from which to meet three related and commonplace objections to phenomenological theorizing. According to the first, phenomenology, in its turn to lived experience, is in principle unable to give an account of the possibility of false consciousness, that is, of individuals or groups who are unaware or mistaken about the truth of their own experience (cf. Bernstein, 1976, p. 163). Yet this is to assume that phenomenological thought merely repeats the evidence within lived experience itself, as if the subject's everyday self-understanding were a pristine measure of phenomenological truth. To the contrary, this self-understanding is precisely what, in the turn to lived experience, a genuine phenomenology finds most problematic. In this regard, the real question is not how, on a phenomenological reading, consciousness can be false, but in what sense it can ever be true, when truth goes beyond the reflective self-certainty of a subject.

It is also objected that, in the turn to lived experience, phenomenology simply assumes its own legitimacy as a privileged mode of knowledge and does not question the conditions under which it itself comes on the scene (cf. Bourdieu, 1977, p. 233, n. 15). In this way, it leaves unexamined the possibility that it too is false consciousness, and thus on a theoretical plane, an ideology. Yet this criticism assumes wrongly that lived experience has for phenomenology not merely a basic but an exclusive claim to truth and that its "primacy" precludes consideration of any other meaning accomplishments, including those of phenomenology itself. To the contrary, however, a radical phenomenology must, among other things, explore its own phenomenality as a form of knowledge among others, giving the underlying sense of all of the appearances of knowledge in the human world. It must do this, even if the exploration reveals that ideology and false consciousness are themselves relative, not to an absolute truth, but to the contingent scope of self-criticism, and hence that their elimination is an infinite task. No doubt,

there is a point at which one must set aside this self-criticism in order to get on with things. But the determination of that point is a practical question.

Third, it is argued that phenomenology lacks any transcendent criteria by which to appropriate the evidence of lived experience, or more specifically, that it retains the classical notion of theory without the immutable content "cosmological" that gave this theorizing its critical force (Habermas, 1971, p. 306). This objection too is misplaced. There can be no positive determination of epistemological or normative criteria prior to acts of theorizing, and hence no ready check that the claims of phenomenology correspond to "reality." Indeed, it is in virtue of phenomenology that this reality is disclosed essentially in the first place. That phenomenology must work out its critical standards from within its own perspective is not its peculiar fault, but an inescapable aporia of all radical thinking. Moreover, to recognize this aporia does not "cause" the traditional questions about truth, knowledge, and value "to disappear" (Carson, 1986, pp. 83-84); but it is to see that these questions are always inevitably sorted out only in medias res.

The Place of Phenomenology

We are now in a position to venture some general responses to the questions with which we began. First, as radical theorizing, phenomenology bears no immediate relation to practice. It contains no instructions for accomplishing ends, and yields no practical empowerment or usable results. Indeed, we cannot "do" anything with phenomenology (Heidegger, 1959, pp. 11-12). Its chief practical benefit lies instead in the reform of understanding, in what its serious pursuit "does with us." But the understanding reformed is not that of humanity in general, nor even directly of those with whom we speak and act, but of the individual who thinks through lived experience for herself. Although it has public expressions, topics, and occasions, this thinking is a singular affair and its own end. Phenomenological theorizing (though not theory as an objective body of doctrine) can indeed inform and ground our actions, insofar as the person who understands and the person who acts are the same. The understanding that theorizing initiates and carries forward enables one to situate what she does in a more encompassing context of meaning and thus opens her to the possibility of acting more thoughtfully, that is, with a view to her whole person and the wise conduct of her life. Moreover, if to understand genuinely is not just to affirm a set of beliefs but to transform ourselves singly to truth, "to change, to go beyond ourselves" (Sartre, 1968, p. 18), then understanding should be

more or less reflected in all our actions. But in themselves, theorizing and understanding, including the ontological transformations they directly effect, are not action. To say that they are is little more than rhetoric; to believe that they are is a self-deception. Action (especially pedagogical action) is undertaken essentially in relation with others and, for better or worse, with their sake in view, whereas theorizing serves first a legitimate need intrinsic to human reason to seek personally and for its own sake an understanding from which to assess meaning to experience. To acknowledge this, however, is not simply to juxtapose theory and action at the expense of the latter. The need to realize transcendent meaning that lies at the origin of our theorizing also precedes and makes possible our existential commitments. It is in virtue of this "need," and the ontological conditions it presupposes, that we "exist" in a world in the first place, and hence that our action is distinguished from mere behavior, and our pedagogy from the natural development of instincts.

Second, there are two respects in which phenomenology is only properly understood by doing it. The first pertains to the situation of all radical thinking, namely, that the effort to examine it critically, to map its scope and limits and determine its meaning and ground, is already itself inevitably an act of theorizing. The second pertains to the fact that the "results" of phenomenology have their force, not as a set of fixed claims passed on as correct doctrine, but as an intepretation of meaning appropriated and renewed in continued questioning and interpretation (cf. van Manen, 1984, p. 40).

To situate phenomenology in this way leads beyond the crude opposition between subjectivism and objectivism that underlies the anecdote with which I began. Both parties to that opposition were portrayed as appealing in some way to primal data—to objective facts to be observed or subjective experiences to be described—as the foundation for a social (human) science. My colleague thought that one form of this appeal was hopeless, though she happily embraced the other. Yet her dismissive strategy in the one regard works just as well in the other, a naive empiricism with respect to objects observed faring no better under it than one with respect to subjects described. All of this, however, was in the realm of caricature; in truth, the story is more complicated. For phenomenology does not simply juxtapose at the empirical level private subjective impressions to public objective observations and, in some arcane way, attempt to found the latter on the former. Rather, it recasts the question of the empirical, and hence all questions of subjectivity and

objectivity with regard to it, on a fundamentally different plane, tracing these back to the intersubjective origins of meaning. "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (van Manen, 1986), bringing to light an underlying sense or coherence somehow unclear within lived experience itself, yet nonetheless inseparable from it, a sense on the basis of which subjects and objects within experience are first possible.

In truth, however, even our friends berate us for an "insistence on interminable description" (Misgeld, 1983, p. 197). And they would be right to do so, were we to presume, in contrast to other theoretical orientations, that phenomenological descriptions are neutral and absolute. Yet

> when I have decided for some reason, arising in some definite situation which itself contributes to setting a context, to describe something in a particular way, then, however intensely, however "objectively" present the experience of the thing to be described, the description itself is interpretive. (Langan, 1984, p. 102)

Every description is essentially a selective reorientation to a phenomenon, in terms of which the particular descriptive possibilities it exhibits and focuses (i.e., what it shows in the phenomenon) are *first* explicitly constituted. In this respect, description resembles the art of painting. Every painting selects and enframes, according to the interests and intentions of the artist, a specific item or Gestalt from an infinite range of possible visual experiences. Yet no original painting, however accurate of hand and eye the painter or hyperrealist of style, is simply a copy of any experienced thing. It is essentially the creation by the artist of a new visual object from out of the materials specific to painting itself. And it is this creation precisely because "it no longer imitates the visible, it 'renders visible,' it is the blueprint of a genesis of things" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 183). Similarly, every description fixes on and circumscribes a particular item or Gestalt from the phenomenal field, real or imagined, according to the interests and intentions of the describer. Yet no description, however attentive its author to her subject, is simply a copy of a given phenomenon. It is essentially a new creation from out of the materials specific to description itself, that is, a text written by the describer according to certain purposes and perspectives. In this sense, every description is also an "inscription," not an exact mirror image, but an original writing of the phenomenon. And it is this "writing" precisely because it does not copy but renders meaning, and in this way too is "the blueprint of a genesis of things." Thus what makes a description phenomenological is not that it

represents a virtual facsimile of a given phenomenon (e.g., a single experience just as it is lived) on the basis of a presumedly pure unbiased looking and translation. Rather, from possibilities of meaning already inscribed as such in experience, it constitutes the attended to phenomenon as a text, in order specifically to exhibit and focus essential dimensions of human being in their integral significance. A pretheoretical sense of what is essential is thus already built into the description itself and not just found there by felicitous accident. In this respect, moreover, the difference between fictive and literal texts is not especially relevant. In any radical inquiry "we are not doing natural science, nor yet natural history—since we can indeed also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes" (Witgenstein, 1967, p. 230).

The interpretive character of phenomenological description does not rest, however, simply on the general thesis that pure descriptions and presuppositionless perspectives are impossible, nor the claim that all description is essentially constitutive, a creation of the phenomenon as text. It also rests on the ontological thesis that lived experience is itself essentially an interpretive process that calls for a correspondingly interpretive appropriation. In this regard, our friends are right to remind us also of the centrality of our situation in the understanding of experience (Misgeld, 1983, p. 196). Yet this centrality too needs to be interpreted phenomenologically.

In its essential structure, a situation (in contrast to an environment) serves both to locate and to enable the thing it situates because it limits it in a particular way. A human situation is constituted in part from the contingent interplay of three limiting dimensions—natural events and the possibilities inherent in physical things (including our bodies); the possibilities that inhere in one's own antecedent accomplishments, actions, and experiences, as well as in those of one's contemporaries and predecessors; and the a priori structures that define the human condition itself (e.g., natality, mortality, temporality, finitude, sociality, etc.). Yet these limiting dimensions do not constitute a situation in the form of objective facts—natural, historical, anthropological—laid out before a detached knower (cf. Fackenheim, 1961). Rather, the very factuality of these limiting "facts," and thus the situating character of the situation they define, is itself constituted in a dialectical relation with our actions.

There is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human reality everywhere encounters resistences and obstacles which it has not created, but these resisten-

ces and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice that human reality *is*. (Sartre, 1956, p. 489)

In the deepest sense, however, this "free choice" is not just the arbitrary willing of this or that envisioned thing—a power we possess as a property—nor the mere absence of causal constraints on what we do. "Prior to all this ('positive' and 'negative' freedom), freedom is the engagement [*Eingelassenheit*] in the disclosure of beings as such" (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 128; cf. 1977b, p. 25). Looked at in this way, the power we have to choose this or that thing presupposes our being already open to a world as a context of significance, a context in which alone things are first meaningfully disclosed to us as what they are and in which choices can meaningfully be made. Our engagement in that world (i.e., in the "disclosure of beings as such") is the freedom that we *are*. In this sense, then, for human being "to be" is "to interpret." Its essential freedom is the original projection of possibilities of meaning, a fundamental process of interpretive understanding that takes place on the basis of a world always already in play. This world, and the subworlds of meaning contained within it, make up at any given time our "hermeneutic situation" (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 119, 182ff.; cf. Gadamer, 1975, pp. 268ff.). As situating, this context of meaning is structurally limited and limiting in two respects. In its implicit intelligibility, there is always only a limited set of possibilities of meaning that could be taken up and projected. And because it is always a disclosure "of beings," it is limited by those capacities and potentialities in beings themselves that we do not simply create. Moreover, because we ourselves are obviously one sort of being among others, where and how we are situated is inseparable from the ontic conditions (physical, historical, anthropological) that in various ways pertain to us contingently or universally. But in their meaning, and hence their existential reality, these conditions ultimately presuppose, and are themselves situated by, the intepretive context that is our hermeneutic situation. In the effort to determine phenomenologically where we stand, this situation is the ultimate referent and guide. In this respect, the *place* of phenomenology is essentially the phenomenology of *place* (cf. Burch, in press).

On this reading, all our phenomenological descriptions and theoretical insights arise from and must be traced back to the interpretive understanding through which, each in her own way, one is defined essentially, and in which one's hermeneutic situation is originally disclosed to her. "Even the phenomenological 'intuition of essences' is grounded in existential understanding" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 187). Now, insofar as it

constitutes at any given time the most englobing context of significance, the hermeneutic situation transcends and situates every specific encounter with and explication of things. Yet, insofar as this situation holds sway not generically but existentially, understanding of it "implies the possibility and necessity of the most radical individuation" (p. 62). This means that any concrete possibilities for phenomenological theorizing are individual, inextricably tied in each case to the specific ways in which the individual theorist participates and has participated in a hermeneutic situation. What is disclosed by such theorizing is not something essentially other—some new fact about things or some hitherto unknown aspect of someone else's private experience—but possibilities of meaning that in one way or another already inform the understanding of the theorist herself. In this sense, then, "all understanding is ultimately self-understanding" (van Manen, 1984, p. 50). Yet this self-understanding is not merely egocentric, since it concerns first and foremost the meanings in and through which one is already open to and implicated in a *shared* world of discourse and action. In contrast to the incidental remembering of this or that forgotten thing, the "recollection" of this meaning, like Platonic *anamnesis,* is always the discovery of something more or less general. Still, the specific involvement of the theorist in this shared world is always a matter for critical vigilance. It is easy to mistake such involvement for an enhanced form of a pretheoretical interpersonal involvement; to overlook the most basic prejudices and assumptions that inform one's own theoretical interests and vision; and to assume that the agreement of one's compatriots is a sure guard against all such self-deceptions. In its individuality, phenomenological theorizing in principle always pertains at the same time to a shared world. Yet how it does in any concrete instance is always open to question.

The primacy of the hermeneutic situation determines as well the meaning of phenomenological "concreteness." Phenomenology is not concrete because it focuses purely and simply on particulars; rather, it is concrete only insofar as it seeks to understand particular phenomena specifically in terms of their hermeneutic situation, the englobing context of significance that constitutes their essential meaning and ground.

> To look at any phenomenon, whether it be a schoolboy or an atom, apart from its belongingness in a vital whole, is to be abstract. Part of the very being of schoolboy and atom consists in their position and participation in a larger context. (Gray, 1968, p. 2)

Phenomenologists may themselves appear guilty of such abstraction, and thus fall short of the full measure of phenomenological truth, to the degree that they strictly juxtapose the particular and the universal and hold fast to the separation. In this, they would share a basic presupposition of positivist thought, while seeming in their role as phenomenologists to eschew the particular canons of "scientific" rationality (cf. Nagel, 1961) that ensure the rigor of that thought. The unhappy consequence is that their phenomenology looks more like a positivism manqué than the methodological basis of a distinctive "human science." For it would seem compelled to move illicitly between the universal and the particular—reasoning either from some objectively certain universal fact about human being to a judgment in principle about all the particulars which instantiate that fact (e.g., from the fact of human mortality to the assumption that there is a universal and univocal nonvacuous meaning of death in all human experience); or from the thematic analysis of a random particular to a universal truth valid for everyone (e.g., from one's own particular experience of grief at the death of a loved one to a universal essence of the experience of grieving). Phenomenologists cannot dispell this appearance by claiming that, after all, they simply have different though equally stringent criteria for moving between the universal and the particular. They do have such criteria, as well as a different account of our ability to abstract general structures and configurations and hence to conceive universals. At a more fundamental level, they must reject the terms in which positivism conceives the universal/particular relation and thus the specific demands for validation that are based on this conception. This does not mean that phenomenology rejects altogether the demand for universality, insisting instead on the absolute uniqueness of every particular (which is what my erstwhile colleague believed). That would be absurd; for universality in some sense is presupposed in the very possibility of cognition and communication. Instead, what phenomenology rejects is the specific assumption that, with respect to human reality, the true universal is an abstract one, a sum of merely formal properties that hold indifferently of all the particulars in its extension, these particulars in turn being essentially the same in virtue simply of having these properties in common. The truth of phenomenology is disclosed in a concrete unity of universal and particular that constitutes a situation. Its universality is relative to the shared meanings that make up the individual and changing contexts of action and communication and which at various levels define our very communality. In this sense, the universal is effectively realized only in and through

the particulars and their interrelation; and the particular is realized only as it appropriates a universal. Thus, for example, the universal fact of risk in pedagogical relations has its meaning and reality only in and through the manifold ways in which risk enters into the experiences of particular people who stand in such relations; and these people in turn become who they are insofar as they face up to this risk in particular ways as their own, or avoid it in bad faith (cf. Smith, 1989).

On this reading, phenomenology does have its own narrative rigor, one that lies outside the "logic" of the positive sciences, with its specific problems of falsification and prediction. To one phenomenological "story" one does not juxtapose a pure datum in itself to find truth in the comparison, nor a more workable set of nomological hypotheses, but another more plausible, more revealing story. What is at issue in these stories is not an objectively correct picture of matters of fact, nor empirically testable solutions to predefined "problems,"[12] but the disclosure of an essential meaning that situates together *both* our phenomenological theorizing and our lived experience. It pertains to the essence of such topics that we never understand exhaustively nor with absolute certainty. For, in the intelligibility of every actual disclosure of essential meaning, there lies implicit a superfluity of possible meaning, a fundamental "unthought" dimension of significance extending from past into future, that is the truth and ground of the explicit disclosure. And in the interpretive distance required by the theoretical recollection of essential meaning, there lies inevitably a certain forgetting and concealing, along with remembering and disclosing. Nevertheless, within these essential limits, we can still understand adequately. Yet adequateness is always relative in the first place to some question posed (cf. Collingwood, 1970, pp. 29ff.), in the case of phenomenology, to a question about the essential dimensions of our being in the world and thus about where we stand in truth. However, a question posed is not a neutral tool of research, but in itself discloses the subject matter, and establishes our relation to it, in a particular way. "The essence of the question is the laying open and holding open of possibilities" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 266), which means also the closing off and turning away from other possibilities. In this respect, "every question that does justice to the subject matter is *already* [in some sense] the bridge to the answer" (Heidegger, 1949, p. 351; my emphasis and interpolation). Yet it cannot construct a bridge from any place outside the subject matter itself. A phenomenological question can only "do justice" to its subject matter—in the first place, the intelligibility of lived experience—only if it "lays open and holds open" possibilities of

meaning already implicit in the intelligibility of the subject matter and hence is formulated from the same locus of meaning. With such questions, then, "we do not want to get anywhere. We would like, for once, only to get to just where we are already"(Heidegger, 1971b, p. 190). The adequacy of our understanding will thus depend on the adequacy of our questions. This issue has an ontic dimension, insofar as we distinguish genuine questions from idle curiosities on the basis of perceived existential needs. But the perception of these needs has an ontological root in the understanding of our hermeneutical situation, grounded in the "need to preserve truth" that characterizes us essentially (Heidegger, 1949, p. 358). It is in "the explication [*Ausarbeitung*] of the hermeneutic situation" that the "achievement of the proper horizon of questioning" lies (Gadamer, 1975, p. 269), "proper" in the sense that it yields the most revealing context of our thinking and acting.

> The adequacy of the question ... is determineable only in terms of the widest investigation of the field of possible experience, illumined by one's "natural faith," [that is, by one's] on-going assessment of how it stands with the world. (Langan, 1984, pp. 110, 105)

In this, there is a manifest circle: the adequacy of our understanding depending on the adequacy of our questions, and the adequacy of our questions depending on the adequacy of our understanding. Yet this comes with the territory. For the only measure of situated self-understanding is further self-understanding that makes more sense of who we are and where we are at, interpretively appropriating and reappropriating our hermeneutic situation for the sake of our being in the world.

At this point, one group of my students will no doubt think I have gone too far, whereas the other group will think that I have not gone far enough—too far because concrete problems of methodology, let alone existential questions, have been postponed in favor of general theoretical issues that may seem overly abstruse and scholastic; not far enough, because the theoretical issues have been treated summarily, and with only passing hints at the supporting arguments and potential difficulties. To begin to meet these concerns, the ontological grounds of phenomenology in lived experience have to be mapped and the place of phenomenology in human science research outlined.

Notes

Editor's comment: the use of the generic pronoun *she* is at the express wish of the author.

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a biweekly meeting of the "Human Science Circle," University of Alberta, in Fall 1986. I am grateful to Professor Max van Manen for his comments on that occasion, and to Professor Margaret Van de Pitte for reading the penultimate draft.

2. It is one of the small ironies of intellectual history that the English term "human sciences," which now as a rule designates a field of inquiry different in its "logic" from that of the natural sciences, derived from the German expression *Geistes-wissenschaften,* which first "gained currency chiefly through the translator of J.S. Mill's *Logic*" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 5). The irony, of course, is that Mill "was a foremost advocate in 19th-century England for employing the logical methods of the natural sciences in social inquiry" (Nagel, 1961, p. 454).

3. Thus, for example, we read: "The absolute ... is with us in and for itself all along" (Hegel); "The vague average understanding of being is a fact" (Heidegger); "Philosophy is the study of the *Vorhabe* of being" (Merleau-Ponty). Yet this form of the solution at least is not exclusive to self-avowed phenomenologies. It can be traced back certainly to Plato's discussions of *anamnesis* in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo,* and arguably even to the fragments of Heraclitus.

4. Even when they acknowledge this point in principle, expositors of phenomenology often overlook it in practice. Commentators on Heidegger's version of phenomenology, for example, typically focus almost exclusively on section 7 of *Being and Time* (1962), despite the fact that Heidegger explicitly warns his readers that the discussion in this section yields "only the preliminary conception [*Vorbegriff*]" of phenomenology (p. 50). Toward the end of *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: "The following deliberations are preparatory to the understanding of this problematic [i.e., the question of the meaning of being and the 'connection' between being and truth], within which, moreover, the *idea of phenomenology*, as distinguished from the preliminary conception of it which we indicated by way of introduction, will be developed for the first time" (p. 408; my emphasis).

5. Presupposed in these claims is a complex argument concerning the essence of ontological cognition in relation to self-knowledge and self-being. For a discussion of the issues at stake see Fackenheim, *Metaphysics and Historicity*, (1961).

6. "In circumscribing what contemporary man can experience and do, that situation ... circumscribes also what contemporary man can be and is. It is for this reason that man's 'present situation,' once considered irrelevant for metaphysics, has pre-occupied modern metaphysicians from Hegel ... to Heidegger" (Fackenheim, 1961, pp. 51-51; cf. also Foucault, 1988, p. 145).

7. Without presuming to review Heidegger's entire existential analytic, we would do well here to remind ourselves of the following key points. "To exist" is to be in a "world," that is, to appropriate and project possibilities of meaning which, in an integral and englobing way, go beyond any natural system of actions and reactions among things. Similarly, "insistence" is not merely focused and telic behavior within an environment, but our "concernful dealings" with things encountered within a world. As opposed to mere advertence, "concern" is possible only on the basis of a world, that is, in terms of an understanding of transcendent meaning. And only a being that is such an understanding, can insistently take things in hand.

8. On this point, see Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 174 and Heidegger, 1977b, p. 30. This transformation in the understanding of essence necessitates a corresponding transformation in the understanding of the phenomenological epoché, one that goes beyond all naive and dogmatic formulations to reinterpret as well the interrelation of actuality and possibility. If the phenomenological concern for essence is based on the epoché and this interrelation, then their reinterpretation will touch at the very heart of the phenomenological project.

9. On the problems involved in conceiving this differentiation, and on the shortcomings of the figure ground metaphor, see Burch, 1982, pp. 338-39, n. 29 and p. 379. One could well argue that on the theoretical plane the very fate of phenomenological philosophy depends on how the empirical/transcendental, ontic/ontological differentiation is understood. Not surprisingly, in this regard, with the more excessive "postings" of postmodernism, which seem to invoke "indecidability" as virtually a first principle (cf. Silverman, 1986), the end of philosophy itself is also announced (or put more coyly, its specific domain is also said to be indecidable). It would be rather too modern, which nowadays means old-fashioned, to point out that on these terms the truth of indecidability at the theoretical level would itself be indecidable.

10. This expression is my own, although its meaning has its origins in Heidegger's consideration of theory (cf. 1977b, pp. 164-65).

11. This demand for systematic "totalizing" comprehension is a regulative principle that guides theorizing and not a constitutive principle that serves absolutely to level all differences among phenomena. Thus, like the semioticians and poststructuralists, phenomenologists too can grant a manifold of "codes" and "discourses." Yet to leave these loci of meaning wholly disparate and unrelated is not a deference to truth but a failure of thought. The more pressing danger in "totalizing" phenomenological thought is that all ontic differences and particularities will be dissolved into the univocal ontological determination of essence. In the case of Heidegger, this tendency has been called "scandalous," when, for example, "the

manufacture of corpses in gas chambers and death camps" is reduced without essential difference to the level of all of the other manifestations of the essence of technology (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe, 1987, p. 58).

12. The distinction between a "problem" and a "question" is outlined in my article "Confronting Technophobia: A Topology," in *Phenomenology + Pedagogy, (1986), 4,*(2), 6-7.

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(Although for non-English texts I have referred where possible to available English translations, the translations themselves are, in most cases, my own.)

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