

Putting Phenomenology Back into Phenomenology: A Review of Michael van Manen & Max van Manen (Eds.), “Classic Writings for a Phenomenology of Practice.”

Tone Saevi, PhD

VID Specialized University, Norway

Email: tone.saevi@vid.no

More than eight decades have passed since the putative Utrecht School phenomenologists began to write their phenomenological analyses of every-day life as experienced by professional pedagogues, psychologists, psychiatrist, social workers, and medical doctors. They were reflective doers of phenomenology. They were describers of concrete human experiences rather than theoretical academics reflecting on phenomenological matters. They wrote close to practice and to the experience of the persons at the heart of their practice and had the talent to identify core experiential qualities. What made their work unique, van Manen (2023) writes, is precisely that they wrote from “a practical professional interest” [...], they “used a variety of literary and artistic ingredients in their phenomenological studies,” and they “demonstrated a vivid narrative quality that appealed to the professional readership but was not self-consciously discussed” (p. 335). This little book turns to four representatives of the “Utrecht Circle” (p.333), “the group of thinkers on the move” as van Manen & van Manen (2021, p.2) also calls them. They include the psychiatrist Jan H. van den Berg, medical doctor, physiologist Fredrik J.J. Buytendijk, pedagogue and psychologist Martinus J. Langeveld, and psychologist Johannes Linschoten. Rather than writing with a professionally objectifying look at the other, they addressed human intentionality and meaning, and were occupied with trying to understand the relationship between the human being and the world. Their clinical orientation to the pre-reflective world of the human being in their manifold and complex writings was remarkable in their time and still is today.

This book presents six classic phenomenological essays written by the four proponents of this practically oriented phenomenology, each of the essays precluded by a brief introduction of its author and followed by a descant written by Michael and Max van Manen. They have also newly translated the six essays from Dutch to English and reworked parts of some of them for the purposes of this book.

The book has a brief and helpful index indicating central phenomenological methodical and context-related terms to the texts. An example is the word ‘analysis’ as it is connected to the words ‘concept’, ‘phenomenological’, ‘quantitative’, ‘radical’, ‘scientific’, ‘situational’ and ‘structural’. After each presentation of the authors there is a list of selected works in both Dutch and English. The reference lists following each descant are significant for my own further thinking and writing, and along with the reflections building up the commentary itself, they offer much support for my own and my students’ work. As always in van Manens’ publications there is a thoughtful preface that draws the reader into the book. In the preface,

they emphasize that phenomenology is resting on two basic considerations: first, “to be attentive to the ordinary, the quotidian, the everyday” [...] a quality that is “built into the very focus of phenomenology on the manner in which we directly experience the world before cognitive acts of conceptualization, theorization or abstraction”. And secondly, “the realization that, on closer attention, the ordinary is not so ordinary at all” (p. ix). The phenomenologist is after the meaningfulness of human life, that which constitutes our existence, that which is connected to the lives of others and to the world we all live in. ‘Doing phenomenology’ is the headline of the first chapter of the book, and we read a comprehensive text clarifying the difference between writing phenomenology and writing about phenomenology. This book, as the headline indicates, is an example of writing phenomenology directly on the phenomenon rather than theorizing or discussing phenomenological matters. What does it mean to “do phenomenology”, and why does the difference matter? Van Manen & van Manen (2021, p. 2) indicate that the classical texts of this book are not meant to be read only by philosophers or academics. Instead, the texts address “the practice of doing phenomenological research for the purpose of better understanding aspects of professional practice as well as ordinary life phenomena and events”. The authors of the classic texts were professional practitioners within a variety of academic fields, much like the phenomenologists today who associate themselves with the Utrecht School. They tried and we try to stay as close to the phenomenon as possible and avoid technical philosophical theorizing in order to get at the unique and inceptive (rather than conceptive) quality of ‘the things themselves’. “Developing phenomenological insight into human existence may even be considered the original and primary task of phenomenology”, van Manen & van Manen says, (2021, p. 4-5), and refers to a number of contemporary phenomenologists who are doing just that (e. g. Casey, Lingis, Marion, and Nancy, to mention some).

Exploring the human lifeworld is exactly what the classic texts and the descants do in this book. The descants are singularly thought-provoking, by way of being the editors’ reflections on the classic authors’ own reflections on concrete evocative phenomena. The commentaries in particular address methodical aspects like the phenomenological attitude and the phenomenological example, which both are paramount to phenomenology of practice. A phenomenologist “is obsessed by the concrete” van den Berg writes (1972, p. 76). In addition, she or he must be genuinely gripped by philosophy and by the tremendous linguistic possibilities that occur at the moment a phenomenologist starts writing. Rather than being merely academically clever the phenomenologist therefore must be one who sees and is able to put into words what he or she sees. Janicaud (1996) asserts that the phenomenologist needs an *intelligence avec*, where *avec* means to have “a close understanding of, and empathy towards or a collusion with a set of phenomena, a situation, as person or a group of people” (p. 52-53). Janicaud continues a few pages later that the new intelligibility consists in “finding a consistent and unceasingly renewed access to the moving limits of phenomena” (p. 60). This is exactly what the classic authors in this book can do, and what van Manen & van Manen value to the degree that they translated and edited the book with an inspiring introduction, and descants that truly elevate our understanding of the classic text. This publication enriches experienced phenomenologists and novice phenomenologists who buy or happen to get a copy to read and think over. One thing I mulled over at the outset of reading the book, was why it would be required to put phenomenology back into phenomenology? I think now after having read the book that I may see one of the reasons. van den Berg, Buytendijk, Langeveld, Linschoten and the other Utrecht phenomenologists decelerated some phenomena of the world by writing texts that made us discover their human meaning. They knew that in order to see the human every-day amazements, in their simpleness and

complexity we need time to linger with them, and we need careful and detailed descriptions. And this is what they offer in this book: inquiring descriptions that captivate us, delay us and help us stay with the phenomenon. Otto. F. Bollnow, another phenomenologist associated with the Dutch movement, explores in a paper translated into English quite recently by Norm Friesen (Bollnow, 2022), the relation between theory and practice. His position is that theory starts by a thorough description of the thing to be put forward. He asserts that we in daily life tend not to really see things, but rather believe that things are limited to how we put them into use. “We do not see things as they present themselves in the fullness of their qualities, but in order to use them, very few characteristics suffice for us to recognize them and to grasp them as if with one’s hand”, he writes (Bollnow 1989, p. 95). It is almost impossible for us to “penetrate the fog of our imagined ideas”, he continues, and thus “we are in a sense “blinded” to the real appearance of this and other things” (p. 96). The classic Utrecht phenomenologists are witnesses of a time where professional practitioners and phenomenologists delayed time by exploring basic human phenomena in order to see, reflect, write and start over again, and again to possibly subjugate to the world’s more or less quotidian wonders in order to explore them on their own premises. This, I think, is what the editors want phenomenologists today to recapture, and they give indirect support by letting us discover in these classic phenomenological texts what we would never expect.

References

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