Phenomenology as Philosophy of Research: An Introductory Essay

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Phenomenology and human science inquiry

What is phenomenology? This is definitely a phenomenological question. Sooner or later every phenomenologist has dealt with this question. The exigency to suggest a possible response to this key question has been clear since Husserl's first books. Almost all of Husserl's work can be read as a more or less direct answer to this propositional question and some of his most meaningful and important texts were meant as introductions to phenomenology.[2] This need continuously to define itself is due, on the one hand, to the complex nature of phenomenology, which is never captured once and for all and is never dogmatic, which stays away from defining grids and rejects every oversimplification. There is no place for phenomenological orthodoxy, or for so-called "purism." The "ultimate book," one that defines phenomenological thought, can never be written.

On the other hand, the need for continuous clarification itself is probably due to the fact that the essence of phenomenology can be found in its practice. In this sense, the proper ques-

[1] Although both authors agree on the entire content of the present essay, Massimiliano Tarozzi is the author of the first, second, and fifth sections and Luigina Mortari is the author of the third, fourth, and sixth.

[2] "Philosophy as rigorous science" (1911), *Ideas I* (1913), and "Phenomenology and theory of knowledge" (1917, but published posthumously) were three introductions to phenomenology (see Husserl 1965, 1982, and 1987) written within seven years. Another introduction to phenomenology is the article written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1927 (see Husserl, 1997).

tion is not "what is phenomenology," but "how to do it." This question requires an answer on the pragmatic level. Phenomenology is a way to educate our vision, to define our posture, to broaden the way we look at the world. This is why phenomenology is seen not only as a method (or style) for philosophical research, but also as a powerful tool for research in human science.

In this essay, introducing a volume about the application of phenomenology in human science research, we will narrow our question in order to ask what the place of phenomenological thinking could be in this field.

It is very difficult to define phenomenology properly. According to Herbert Spiegelberg there are as many styles of phenomenology as there are phenomenologists (see Spiegelberg, 1982 Introduction), and Amedeo Giorgi observed that "a consensual, univocal interpretation of phenomenology is hard to find" (Giorgi, 1985, pp. 23–24). Max van Manen devoted the first chapter of his well-known book on phenomenological research in human science to an attempt to define what is and what is not phenomenology in human science (van Manen, 1990, pp. 8–24).

In this essay we refer mainly to phenomenology according to Husserl's transcendental method, which is based on the idea that the core of phenomenology in human science is the phenomenological description of the invariant aspects of phenomena as they appear to consciousness. Following Giorgi, "the scientific method is descriptive because its point of departure consists of concrete descriptions of experienced events from the perspective of everyday life by participants, and then the result is a second-order description of the psychological essence or structure of the phenomenon by the scientific researcher" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 251).

Giorgi (1985) refers to phenomenology in terms of method, following four characteristics outlined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his 1945 preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962, pp. vii–xxi), where the French philosopher, too, wanted

to answer to the question *Qu'est-ce que la phénoménologie?* Giorgi identifies four characteristics that qualify the specific nature of the method: description, reduction, search for essences, and intentionality. Starting from these, Giorgi establishes a phenomenological research method by suggesting a four-step procedure for data analysis.

In a broader sense, however, phenomenology can contribute to the debate about empirical research in human sciences not only on the procedural plane (i.e., the techniques of data collection and analysis), but especially in terms of theoretical perspectives. In other words, the role played by phenomenology in research is mainly theoretical, deepening the theory behind the method or the understanding of the mode of inquiry (van Manen, 1990, p. 28).

Michael Crotty suggests that there are four main elements for qualitative researchers (Crotty, 1998). They are our choice of methods; the way we can support this choice; our theoretical assumptions supporting this choice; and our understanding of what scientific knowledge is. These elements, which every researcher has to face in developing a research proposal, and which inform one another in a hierarchical pyramid from the more concrete to the more abstract, are (from the more abstract to the more concrete) *epistemology,* a theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective; *theoretical perspective,* the philosophical stance informing the methodology and providing a context, grounding its logic and criteria; *methodology,* a strategy, or plan of action, or process lying behind the choice and use of particular methods; *methods,* the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data (Crotty, 1998, p. 4).

Different authors tend to place phenomenology at different steps of this imaginary stairway of increasing abstraction. Some place it at the method stage (Giorgi, 1985, 1992, 1997, 2009), others at that of methodology (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990), while still others locate it at the level of theoretical perspective (Bentz-Shapiro, 1998) or even that of epistemological paradigm.

The perspective interpreting phenomenology as a philosophy of research is prevalent in continental Europe, whereas a more functional and pragmatic reading of it generally prevails in the Anglo-Saxon world: in the English-speaking social sciences, phenomenology is mainly seen as an approach aimed at exploring subjectivities and people's lived experience (Crotty, 1996). However, Husserlian phenomenology is primarily an approach that investigates the objects of experience in order to draw up a theory of experience.

With reference to research, phenomenology can be located in every one of the four previous elements. It can be an epistemological paradigm, an alternative to the idea of "normal science," which is grounded in the positivist paradigm. But it can be also a methodological approach that can offer proper research procedures and original techniques, mainly for data analysis.

Phenomenology as a movement

There are several research approaches and schools inspired by phenomenology; each offers both a research methodology and a set of procedures and tools to collect and especially to analyze data in empirical research in the human and social sciences. These approaches have already been broadly and critically examined in their historical development (Cloonan, 1995) and with reference to different disciplines and research areas like nursing (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Dowling, 2007) and psychology (Giorgi, 2006; Applebaum, 2006). A comparative outlook among different qualitative methods also exists (Creswell, 2007). That is why we eschew a thorough literature review in this paper.[1]

[1] There are three main approaches to what we can define as the "classical" phenomenological method in research (Applebaum, 2007); (1) The Duquesne school, including in particular Giorgi, but also Colaizzi, Fischer, and Van Kaam, was inspired by descriptive phenomenology with a Husserlian framework; (2) hermeneutical phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) " because of the influence of Lagenveld and the Utrecht School—is defined as "hermeneutical"

The Continental European phenomenological tradition has not produced a variety of methodological "translations" to guide research employing the philosophy inaugurated by Husserl, although many researchers have been inspired by it. The exception is the Italian Paolo Bozzi's studies of perception and his method, which he himself called "experimental phenomenology" (Bozzi 1989, 1990). His studies in experimental psychology are, unfortunately, not well known outside Italy. For Bozzi, phenomenology was more a philosophical horizon, a theoretical viewpoint, rather than a set of procedures. The same can be said for Piero Bertolini, the founder of phenomenological educational research in Italy (Bertolini, 1988).[1]

This is another reason why, in the present essay, we will refer to phenomenology as a philosophy of research, as a way of thinking about knowledge (how do we know what we know?) and as a way to look at the world and make sense of it. Following Crotty, we will position the following remarks on the epistemological plane, which has specific effects concerning our assumptions about the social reality under examination. We agree with

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because the Dutch approach is focused on the interpretive dimension, with the researcher as mediator of the meanings of the participants' lived experience; (3) transcendental (or psychological) phenomenology, developed by Moustakas (1994), focuses less on interpretations of the researcher and more on the eidetic reduction process reaching transcendental knowledge. In addition to these three main North American approaches, one can add other like the *phenomenographic* method (Richardson, 1999), influenced by Ferente Marton (Marton, 1988), and the tradition of the Department of Education and Educational Research in Gothenburg, Sweden, along with other recent developments of the method such as *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* or IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

[1] Beginning in the 1950s, Piero Bertolini, who was Enzo Paci's student, laid the foundation for what has become a phenomenological tradition in education in Italy. Since then, many researchers and scholars in education have been engaged in the epistemological and methodological debate around phenomenology and education. Some of them, led by Bertolini, established a group, mainly at the University of Bologna, and gathered around a journal—*Encyclopaideia*—as well as a series of books, and recently a Study Center, aimed at promoting the phenomenological approach in education.

Merleau-Ponty that phenomenology is first and foremost a stance, a posture of the researcher, a style of thought: *"phenomenology can be practiced and indentified as manner or style of thinking that […] existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy"* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. viii).

The main purpose of the present introduction is accordingly to explore the possibility of identifying a phenomenological style of research in human science, specifying its features and its boundaries. After having clarified in what sense phenomenology can be seen as a style of thought, contributions of phenomenological theory, method, and stance will be examined along five main lines.

First, although phenomenology represents an alternative to the form of knowledge characteristic of empirical investigation, it offers the latter a *theory of experience* that allows the researcher to think of the meaning of inquiry data and of the way in which that data can be elaborated as signs of the phenomenon under examination.

Second, and more generally, describing human experience raises a key point for qualitative research as a whole. Hammersley (1989) called this the "dilemma of qualitative methods." Typically, the qualitative researcher does not know how to reconcile subjective and objective knowledge. On the one hand, qualitative research successfully explores the empirical dimension of the subject, and this is extremely important, since social and human phenomena cannot be understood without taking into account subjective experience. On the other hand, today it is not possible to elaborate the subjective dimension empirically in a way that would fit the requirements of science as it is recognized by the scientific community. In other words, we can have credible but not reliable knowledge of subjectivity. Obviously, nothing can solve this dilemma. As we will show, however, phenomenology problematizes it. It poses the question in extraordinarily deep terms, but it also offers an original viewpoint, a

theory of experience, that allows us to think of subjectivity as a space of rigorous knowledge about the world.

Third, phenomenology offer us sophisticated and effective instruments for a descriptive practice that represents a fundamental standpoint from which to access the qualitative exploration of the human and social worlds.

Fourth, to access phenomena requires a fundamental epistemic act: the epochē, which assumes vast relevance in empirical research, allowing the researcher to take a fresh and unprejudiced perspective toward the phenomenon under examination.

Fifth, and finally, phenomenology is also a way of being, a stance encompassing a passive-receptive way of being, an open attention, a reflective discipline—three postures that allow the researcher to become a phenomenological heuristic tool.

Toward a phenomenological theory of experience

Phenomenology as a theoretical perspective informing a methodology

In addition to being a research method and a style of thinking, phenomenology is also, and perhaps mainly, a theoretical perspective offering a framework that encompasses a methodology. Phenomenology can also be seen as one of the pillars of a scientific paradigm. We define paradigm, according to Kuhn (1962), as "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by members of a given scientific community" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 75). Paradigms are frameworks that function as maps or guides for scientific communities, determining important problems or issues for their members to address and defining acceptable theories, methods and techniques. In particular, a paradigm offers to the researcher a conception of reality (ontology) and an idea of scientific knowledge (epistemology), before generating specific procedures for research (methodology). In this sense, phenomenology can offer the researcher relevant thoughts

about ontological and epistemological questions. In particular, in phenomenology the ontological (*what is reality?*) is closely related to the epistemological (*How do we know what we know?*). It is not true that the ontological problem only pertains either to a metaphysical or a positivist perspective. According to the Husserlian philosopher Roberta de Monticelli, even though post-Heideggerian phenomenology is usually seen as a philosophy that refutes ontology, phenomenology *is* an ontology, the study of being and of real and possible things, since it focuses exclusively on the way things appear, and on the relation between appearance and reality (De Monticelli, 2007; De Monticelli & Conni, 2008).

Phenomenology is ontologically revolutionary as far as the relationship between appearance and reality is concerned. This is a key point for researchers. In particular, a phenomenological ontology, according to Husserl's Göttingen circle (Besoli & Guidetti, 2000), accepts the existence of things outside the mind that thinks about them. So it is a somewhat realistic ontology. Many people believe that a realistic ontology should correspond to an objectivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). This is an idea of knowledge where it would be possible for researchers to "converge onto that reality until, finally, it can be predicted and controlled" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). An objectivist epistemology conceives of the knower and the known independently and makes it possible to know reality for what it is: a faithful mirror of the objective order of things. However, phenomenology goes beyond the paradigmatic Manichaeism, and allows the researcher to accept, at the same time, the existence of the "things themselves." To accept a world and the things in it as existing outside of our consciousness does not imply that their meanings exist independently of our consciousness (Crotty, 1998).

Beyond the paradigm clash that has often led to obdurate, dogmatic, and prejudiced positions, the theoretical contribution of phenomenology on the ontological plane is undeniable. It rests above all on the theory of experience that phenomenology

provides to empirical research. Many qualitative methodologies, not only the so-called "phenomenological" method, need a theory of experience that offers an ontological background that can make sense of the idea of data, of sample, of description, of coding, of participants, and handle all these concepts critically. We are thinking particularly of grounded theory, which, as Kathy Charmaz rightly stressed, has produced some significant ambiguities in its application, precisely because it fails to take the epistemological question into account (Charmaz, 2000).

The "external world" is a big problem, a thorny challenge for all of us who do qualitative research, and particularly for those who do it in such practical fields as education or nursing and must produce useful results for practitioners. This is the dilemma, and at times the anguish, of the qualitative researcher: seeking lines of coherence, recurrences, and rational structures within a reality that is itself complex, with the awareness that every attempt to make order of its multidimensionality is plagued by the need to avoid reductionism and oversimplification.

Phenomenology and qualitative research

To take this ambiguity into account, and o live within this dilemma, means that the researcher cannot take for granted the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of doing qualitative research. For example, what does "data" mean? What does it mean to "collect" or "gather" data? The term "data" is the plural past participle of the Latin verb *dō* (to give). As such, it connotes something fixed, established, *given*. It alludes to a vision of reality coherent with positivist assumptions, where the objects are *there,* in the world, and is very far from the theoretical claims of qualitative research. Where understanding the subjects' meaning is more important than collecting unbiased data. Moreover, the verbs "to collect" and "to gather," referring to data, require an action of epistemic investigation that includes assembling reality

samples that can be objectively analyzed by a neutral observer. Not surprisingly, some prefer to "construct data" instead of "collecting" it (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Qualitative research needs a philosophy that can provide a perspective with which to ponder some basic questions that should not be taken for granted by researchers. What is the epistemic nature of data in qualitative human (and social) research? What does it mean to collect data? What are "personal accounts"? What is the correspondence between an empirically generated theory and reality? How can researchers observe and/or describe without a theory of experience? Qualitative researchers cannot avoid these basic questions, although the answers need not be absolute or authoritative.

Researchers do, however, require some ontological and epistemological answers to these questions, answers that are consistent with their methodological choices. If these questions are not considered as problematic, the methodological choices embedded in qualitative research, tend to borrow natural science's assumptions about reality, adopting what Husserl called a "natural attitude." Too often qualitative researchers embrace this naive realism based on an objectivist notion of mirroring knowledge—not only through epistemological laziness, but also because of the evident advantages deriving from fitting with the dominant scientific paradigm.

On the other hand, phenomenology offers an alternative theory of experience as a theoretical horizon in which researchers can find space for the various epistemic acts they exercise. It is not interested in "mere facts," but in their impact on flesh and blood subjects, nor does it attempt to objectivize facts photographically; instead it is interested in analyzing the meaning that such facts assume for the subjects and the way in which their consciousness intends those objects. Phenomenology is seeking realities, not pursuing Truth. For phenomenologists, reality is a thick forest where the tangles of meaning that subjects and ob-

jects assign each to other are interwoven. This underbrush of reality is a lifeworld made of interconnected, lived experiences, and our knowledge of phenomena comes to life through them. Subjects, then, are embodied in that world, and that is why their visions of reality are so meaningful and revealing of the social reality that we, as researchers, intend to explore. However, this does not mean that phenomenological reality is only a social or discursive construction that arises at the crossroads of interconnections among social actors.

The "realism" of phenomenology

The object of phenomenological research is the participants' experience of phenomena, the way in which consciousnesses give meaning to their world in an intersubjective dimension. Experience, where phenomenological social research is located, is the description of the phenomenon as it appears to the researcher's consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology invites us to take what we see seriously. It is a philosophy of attention, of the careful description of the visible profile of things, while ever attentive to their hidden one. This descriptive attention is very far from relativism, subjectivism, or skepticism in regard to knowledge. Visible phenomena are entities to reckon with, as are social phenomena. They are not epiphenomena of a reality far from our knowledge, or mere subjective projections of human perception that cannot be shared. Phenomenology, as a method, aims at researching rigorous knowledge and presupposes the existence of a phenomenon to which we are faithful. Faithfulness to the phenomenon is the "principle of principles" as Husserl states in his 1913 *Ideas I* (Husserl, 1982, §24). Of course, the hidden profile of things, the essence of phenomena, the products of phenomenological reduction are not objective, universal or eternal truths. We do not know their exact ontological nature, and we do not really care. As phenomenological

researchers, we know the many ways, different and various, in which objects present themselves to our knowledge, although limited in number and quality. A chair can never appear to my consciousness as a pen; a cup can have different shapes and colors, but it always will be a convenient container for liquids.

This is the "realism" of phenomenology, according to Husserl—an intersubjective, rather than an objectivistic realism, based on the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon, which is extremely significant for social research.

What phenomenology provides to a theory of experience seems particularly original and important. In fact, on the one hand, it overcomes the objectivist assumptions of countless qualitative inquiries that do not adequately consider the theoretical underpinnings of the research methodologies they employ or that try to emulate the natural sciences. On the other hand, it prevents researchers from falling into anti-scientific positions. Such positions are often supported by postmodernism, although they threaten to deprive the research of its meaning. Postmodern social constructivism advocates, among other things, a world that does not exist independently of our consciousness of it; the idea of "empirical" knowledge as co-construction; the absolute centrality of subjects as individuals; and an overemphasis on language as the space in which the world is built. In sum, social constructivism refutes notions like science, truth and reality, while phenomenology seeks a better understanding of such terms (Giorgi, 2007).

Phenomenology also refutes an empiricist conception of reality. Its purpose is to reach a meaningful *comprehension,* prioritizing lived experience (*Erlebnis*), rather than aspiring to a *full explanation*. Experience is not conceived as a model of the external world, a "cast" of objective reality. Knowledge is not a mirror of nature. What is interesting is the way in which we experience things. In phenomenology, this originates a theory of reality based on the concept of intentionality and on the forms and

modes in which it is possible to be aware of objects, as Husserl explained in his Fifth Logical Investigation (Husserl, 1970a).

Objects, and research data that summarize, represent, and symbolize them, do not live in the mind. They are not mental events, as an extreme subjectivism or skepticism seems to uphold. Nor are they "things" that exist objectively in the world (or at least I can doubt their existence). But they are phenomena offered to our consciousness. They are clues, signs that allow us to describe, or to intuit, opinions, perceptions, circumstances, symbols, representations, and visions.

Therefore, what a phenomenologist uses in his/ her research are not facts or objects, not pieces of the world, but *phenomena*. Phenomena do not interfere between us and things, preventing our seeing them and perceiving their givenness. Instead, according to phenomenology, phenomena are the ways in which things themselves appear to us and exhibit their own being.

Subjects inhabit the lifeworld. The researcher extracts his/ her data from this world. So they are not fragments or samples of the world, but perceptions, intentional acts of consciousness that give meaning and organize that world. It is not a matter of purely objective visions, individual constructions, psychic phenomena, mere single representations, but rather of intentional objects, phenomena that reveal the things' hidden profiles. Husserl's phenomenology is a description of the experience attentive to its invariant features and to the intersubjective value of our perceptions.

The possibility of building an ontology of the real (so essential for human science research) therefore lies in the theory of experience provided by Husserlian phenomenology. It soon becomes clear to what degree Husserl advocates realism—a realism that is very distant from the naive realism of the "natural attitude" or the empiricism of the hard sciences. Husserl wrote in his *Nachwort* to the *Ideas:* "That the world exists, that it is given as existing universe in uninterrupted experience which is con-

stantly fusing into universal concordance, is entirely beyond doubt. But it is quite another matter to understand its indubitability which sustains life and positive sciences and to clarify the ground of its legitimacy."[1] To clarify the legitimacy of the belief in the existence of the external world (the qualitative researcher's dilemma) is a phenomenological imperative for anyone who is doing scientific research. The phenomenological theory of experience is an attempt to clarify the legitimacy of what seems obvious and what we take for granted.

This attempt draws on an ontological and epistemological background within which qualitative research can flourish, and delineates a middle path between two antithetical extremes: on the one hand, a neo-positivist objectivism that a-critically assumes the existence of objects in the world and believes in the possibility of discovering universal laws that govern them; and on the other hand, a postmodern subjectivism, skeptical and relativistic, that denies the possibility of a rigorous thinking about the world, and thwarts the urges to investigate the phenomena beyond their discursive construction.

The epistemological primacy of description

According to Husserl, if science is to be called such—a systematic and rigorous investigation—it needs to capture the profile of the investigated object itself (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 139), which is its essence. Husserl therefore describes phenomenology as a science that investigates essences, and, moreover, as a science that deals exclusively with with "essences and essential relations" (Husserl, 1965, p. 116). An essence is a set of qualities that are necessarily related to the thing (Husserl, 1982, pp. 7–8); essence can be defined as the "emerging structure of the thing" (De Monticelli & Conni, 2008, p. 10). This emerging structure exposes the essential features of an entity or of an event, mani-

[1] Husserl, 1989, p. 420.

festing its specific identity. When the essence of a thing is put into words, others who have not experienced it firsthand can nevertheless intuitively capture its essential qualities, the core qualities a reality needs in order to be what it is (De Monticelli & Conni, 2008, p. 14).

Phenomenology claims that in order to grasp the essence of a thing, it is necessary to take phenomena as the object of the analysis. This epistemological thesis is based on the ontological assumption that the essence of a thing discloses itself in its manner of appearing.

By affirming that the essence reveals itself in the appearing of the phenomenon, phenomenology places itself beyond the old metaphysical dichotomy between being and appearing, which has always been at the core of Western philosophy. This ancient dichotomy not only implies a scission between being and appearing, but also introduces a radical axiological asymmetry to the detriment of appearing, because it affirms that the phenomenon is a mere appearance that conceals the real being, which does not appear above the surface (Arendt, 1978, p. 25). Phenomenology dismantles this old metaphysical dichotomy, along with the prejudice of the supremacy of being over appearing, by affirming that being and appearing coincide (Arendt, 1978, p. 19), and therefore "nothing else stands 'behind' the phenomena of phenomenology" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 31). On the assumption of the primacy of appearance, we are invited to consider that just because we are destined to live in a world that appears—that is, a world made up of things that are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled—it is reasonable to assume that what appears is worthy of consideration, since it shows what it is.

Consequently, the phenomenologist's task is not to leave the world of appearances by releasing thinking from the bonds of phenomena, but rather to concern him/herself with appearances, because what appears constitutes the real matter of research (Arendt, 1978, p. 27). The phenomenon is not something inci-

dental, but is being disclosing itself. Starting from this ontological assumption, phenomenology claims to be the science of phenomena, that is, of what appears in its dative evidence. Phenomenology is a return to phenomena, to everything that appears in the manner of its appearing. Heidegger (1996, p. 30) captured the essence of phenomenology by defining it as the science that makes possible □ποφαίνεσθαι τὰ φαινόμενα (*apophaìnesthai tà phainòmena*), which means "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself."

Jean-Luc Marion states that the difference between phenomenology and other science is that, in general, scientific research is concerned with "proving," while phenomenology is concerned with "showing"; showing a phenomenon means "to let appearance appear in a way that manifests its most perfect appearing, so that it is possible to receive it in the exact way it gives itself" (Marion, 1997, p. 13, my translation). So the phenomenon is not something incidental, but is being coming to presence, and it is up to phenomenology to capture the essential specificity of each phenomenon.

In order to capture the emerging structure of the phenomenon, phenomenology indicates description as a fundamental cognitive act; as Merleau-Ponty explains, "it is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing" (1962, p. viii). A careful description of phenomena entails being attentive to what is given in intuition. Husserl himself, in the course of his lectures, was famous for the descriptions he developed "'with intense care and scruple," (Moran, 2000, p. 64). Since it does not focus on causal explanations, but on the description of what is evident to the eye, phenomenology is referred to as the science of description. The act of description enables the actualization of phenomenology's key imperative, which prescribes going to the "things themselves." Indeed, in the *Logical Investigations,* description is defined as the act of capturing the givenness of the phenomenon in the manner in which it is directly given in intuitive essence, without presupposing anything about it.

Since the thing itself is not objectively meant as an entity out there but as a lived experience, an act of consciousness by which the mind grasps the objects, the objects of description become "cognitive acts," or "acts of consciousness." The description must bring to the eye pure events of consciousness, clarify them completely, fixing in accurate conceptual expressions what each time is given in direct self-evidence each time (Husserl, 1982, pp. 151–152); Thus, the phenomenological method consists of describing the flow of cognitive acts (*Erkennisse*), *or mental lived experiences,* and the products of thoughts that emerge from this flow (Husserl, 1982, p. 68–69); if this description allows access to the essence of the process of knowledge, phenomenological work is at the base of every scientific investigation.

The principle of faithfulness

Description will ground the scientific method if it is rigorous, and it is rigorous when it captures evidence, because science is grounded on evidence. In order to be rigorous, it must capture the phenomenon as it appears in its original givenness, that is, in the "dative" element in the experience. To capture the phenomenon in its original givenness means to bring the object of attention to "fullest clarity" (Husserl, 1982, p. 153). But when the mind's gaze moves to the lived experiences in order to study them, they generally appear "with a low degree of clarity" (*ibid.*). The basic methodological question raised by phenomenology is how to capture the phenomenon in its original givenness, bringing it to full clarity.

As regards this issue, Husserl suggests applying a heuristic principle that defines the "principle of all principles," that is, the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon. Working out this principle means describing the phenomenon as it appears, as it manifests itself to consciousness: *"everything originally … offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there"*

(Husserl, 1982, p. 44). The principle of faithfulness should help avoid the misconstructions and impositions placed in advance on our own experience both by everyday common sense and by science itself, so as to revive our living contact with reality and remain close to the deepest experiential evidence (Moran, 2000, p. 4). According to Husserl, the mental maneuvers for gaining a faithful intuition of the phenomenon are at the center of it.

In order to activate the fidelity principle, it is necessary to take as guiding criteria for the investigation two subsidiary principles: the "principle of evidence" and the "principle of transcendency."

Any perspective of thought proceeds from assumptions; the gnosiological assumption at the base of the phenomenological method states that every phenomenon has its own manners of presenting itself to the eye of the experiencer (Husserl, 1982, p. 10). These are its *modes of givenness*. Proceeding from this assumption, the "principle of evidence" requires that the investigation process move only in the directions suggested by the phenomena in their way of appearing. The cognitive procedure adapted to the way phenomena manifest themselves finds its legitimization in the typical phenomenological ontological assumption that the other's being reveals itself in the forms of its appearing.

However, stating that no discontinuity exists between being and appearing is not the same as claiming that the whole essence of a phenomenon becomes immediately manifest. As much as a heuristic procedure can be rigorously detailed and entirely possible for a phenomenon, it is inevitable that a fuzzy area remains; this is due to the fact that the being of one thing does not make itself completely transparent to our gaze, since each entity has its own specific mode of transcending appearance. The manifestation of a phenomenon entails at the same time the revealing and the concealing of its essence. It seems that in the way phenomena are revealed, a concealing, too, is always involved, and the search for valid knowledge cannot do without considering it; the search for the phenomenon's hidden side needs the application of the "transcendency principle,"

which requires us to "go beyond what at any time is *truly given,* beyond what can be *directly 'seen'* and *apprehended"* (Husserl, 1964, p. 28). Reaching what is not immediately apparent may be a hard and tricky task, but is nevertheless possible, since the hidden profile of a phenomenon is suggested by the apparent one.

While the "principle of evidence" requires sticking to what is revealed in the shape of the offering givenness, the "transcendency principle" suggests looking for the invisible profile of the phenomena, following the traces left by the evident profile. The establishing of heuristics capable of gathering data that are faithful to the phenomenon means, therefore, simultaneously cultivating a tension that keeps the gaze rooted on evidences and a disposition to let them guide us beyond what is immediately manifest in order to have access to what our gaze in its natural attitude cannot see, remaining faithful to the clues suggested by the apparent profile. Whereas it is an undoubtedly complicated heuristic practice to try to apply both principles in phenomenological investigation, it is likewise true that this is the necessary condition for engaging in the search for the widest and deepest knowledge possible.

Epochē

The epochē, as the epistemological device that allows us to fulfill a phenomenological way of knowing, is necessary to put into effect the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon.

There is no space here to discuss all of the various aspects of the phenomenological approach as these aspects are related to our research practices. However, in the present introduction, one basic device of the phenomenological method, should at least be mentioned.[1]

Epochē can be understood in two senses. One is broader and trivial, referring to the general bracketing attitude of the re-

[1] For further discussion of the phenomenological notion of epochē see Tarozzi, 2006

searcher who suspends his/her experiences, as much as possible, in order to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon to be investigated. The other, more specific, is the "fundamental phenomenological consideration," which is the premise of the phenomenological reduction. The two levels are closely related, but here we shall emphasize the latter.

"Suspending judgment" and "bracketing" are expressions that have been becoming more and more common in social psychology, communication, social research, and education, and often in ordinary discourse as well. However, beyond their simplistic meaning, generically indicating a non-conditioned attitude that is sufficiently open, available to listen, unbiased, and non-judging, here we are interested in the phenomenological roots of this attitude that is *theoretical* before being methodological. For phenomenologists, the epochē not only reminds us that we are always embedded in our prejudices and pre-comprehensions, so that we should distance ourselves from them and suspend judgment about them, but represents first and foremost a transition that introduces us to a cognitive and heuristic path of reduction. The reduction, which is first "phenomenological" and then "transcendental," is supposed to transform our *natural attitude,* modifying our naive experience of things and allowing us to accomplish a cognitive act toward the world, to keep ourselves faithful to the phenomenon, and (at the end of the reduction process) to recall and evaluate the same prejudices and precomprehensions that we had frozen at the beginning with the epochē. According to Husserl's Introduction to *Ideas I,* phenomenology invites us to bracket all previous habits of thinking overcoming the walls built by these habits while wewere looking at reality with a "natural" attitude—and in so doing, learning to see authentically. In this way the German philosopher not only discusses the bias that distorts the possibility of scientific research itself, but questions the same legitimacy of our knowledge of a world where things (and the data that should represent

them) are supposed to lie: he brings up for discussion the natural world, *at hand,* existing here, for us.

Epochē, to which Husserl refers from 1913 onward (see Husserl, 1982), is an ancient notion. It date back to the Hellenistic philosophies, and in particular to Skepticism. Among ancient and modern skeptics, it was (and is) the attitude of those who neither accept nor refuse, neither assert nor deny. Epochē means denying assent to non-manifest things, trusting neither the senses nor reason, and so remaining without opinions. To refuse in that way any dogmatic attitude would lead to ἀταρξία, to imperturbability, so actively sought by Hellenistic schools. Therefore, according to skeptics (and for ancient skeptics, like Pyrrho in particular), the epochē has to do with the search for true happiness beyond the material world, so it is an attitude that can be chiefly located on the ethical level.

However, the skeptical, relativistic, or nihilist attitude is not the attitude proper to phenomenology. Thus epochē should be redefined and located in a broader semantic and theoretical context. From the time of the *Ideas,* Husserl drew on the Greek term ἐποχή by recalling the etymological roots of the Greek verb □πέχω (to suspend, to interrupt), which indicates the act of stopping, of ceasing. Therefore performing the epochē is like finding the primary point from which to begin every cognitive and epistemic activity.

The epochē is not just a form of doubting, but the beginning of a process of authentic knowledge. We do not doubt about things we bracket; we just avoid using them, we do not put them at the basis of our reading of the world, we refrain from assigning them a value. It helps us to unmask and disclose things, to interrogate ourselves about the meaning that the world assumes for us (and for all those intentional subjects with whom I am intersubjectively interconnected).

The phenomenological epochē is similar to Descartes' methodical doubt since it rises from a analogous need, but does not

coincide with it. The methodical doubt already introduced in the First precept presented in the *Discourse on Method,* and further developed in the profound *Meditations on First Philosophy* so appreciated by Husserl, is very far from being a denial of knowledge: instead, it is a means (never an end in itself) of reaching certainty.

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* Husserl recalls the meaning of the Cartesian epochē starting from Descartes' *Meditations*. Since he wanted to establish philosophical knowledge in an absolute way, Descartes begins with "a sort of *radical, skeptical epochē"* (Husserl, 1970b, p. 76). A skeptical epochē is an act "which places in question all his hitherto existing convictions, which forbids in advance any judgmental use of them, forbids taking any position as to their validity or invalidity. Once in his life every philosopher must proceed in this way; if he has not done it, and even already had 'his philosophy,' he must still do it. Prior to the epochē 'his philosophy' is to be treated like any other prejudice" (*ibid.*).

Within the *Crisis* at least two levels of epochē are identified. One referring to the suspension of assent to the enunciations of objective sciences (this is combined with the suspension of judgment concerning the naive experience of the world), to their criteria for truth, and to the very idea of objective knowledge of the world.

The other introduces the reduction to the "absolutely unique, ultimately functioning ego" (Husserl, 1970b, §55, p. 186), i.e., to an analysis leading toward the absolute ego, the ego as an ultimate functional center of all constitution. This is the *transcendental reduction,* which is aimed at revealing the transcendental subject, the intentional consciousness that represents the phenomenological residuum (everything that is left after the epochē) of the transcendental reduction. This second level, where the epochē would be the means required to reach transcendental subjectivity and the absolute ego, is less interesting for our

purposes, and we cannot share with Husserl the idealistic turn behind this position, evident since the *Ideas*. Instead, we are interested in the epochē as a way to modify the obvious and ordinary experience of things, a way that leads not to the absolute self, the ego cogito, as its phenomenological residuum, but to a pre-predicative experience of the world (experience as an object of empirical inquiry, lived by an intentional consciousness).

In the second section of the first book of the *Ideas,* Husserl clearly outlines the move carried out to neutralize the natural attitude toward the world. With this, "I am *not negating* this 'world' as though I were a sophist; I am *not doubting its factual beings* as though I were a skeptic; rather I am exercising the 'phenomenological' ἐποχή which also *completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being"* (Husserl, 1982, p. 61).

In doing so, one should suspend, neutralize every cognitive position assumed before the world—mainly, the idea of reality as belief in an already given world. This is not merely a skeptical doubt or a nihilist negation of reality, but the cessation of an ingenuous belief regarded as "natural."

Husserl is not concerned if our ethical and social behaviors presuppose and accept the unquestioned assumption of the existence of a natural world, in natural, practical life. He is more interested in the challenge of establishing a rigorous knowledge than in the existential implications of living following a natural attitude toward things.

We should not forget that in the first decade of the 20th century, Husserl was seeing the first acknowledgments of his phenomenology, and he was well aware of the need to explain the basis of the phenomenological approach, and its specific differences, to the broader philosophical. and psychological community. In particular, being as far from experimental psychologism as from positivism and from skepticism, Husserl wanted to stress that phenomenologically oriented philosophical thinking is still a Kantian rigorous way of thinking, different from

common thinking. It is a form of knowledge aspiring to scientific validity, in the sense of the Greek *epistēmē* (even if it is not equal to the empiricist model of science).

Husserl thus assigns an epochal task to phenomenology: namely, the revolution of philosophical thinking, which requires the adoption of a rigorous habit animated by the intent of rebuilding philosophy as "rigorous science" (Husserl, 1965). And according to Husserl's intentions, the notion of the epochē can still enlighten the possibility of constructing a scientific and empirical knowledge of human experience. Obviously "scientific" and "empirical" have a substantially different meaning from the analytic and neo-positivist signification, which claims an undisputed correspondence between things and their scientific description.

But how does the epochē take shape within a rigorous theory of knowledge? What is its theoretical space within the investigation, beyond the self-reflective attitude of the researcher?

The phenomenological suspension of assent is not the simple positivist attention toward avoiding polluting the research setting with the researcher's bias. As Husserl himself observed: "The ἐποχή in question here is not to be mistaken for the one which positivism requires, but which indeed, as we had to persuade ourselves, is itself violated by such positivism. It is not now a matter of excluding all prejudices that cloud the pure objectivity of research, not a matter of constituting a science 'free of theories,' 'free of metaphysics,' by groundings all of which go back to the immediate findings, nor a matter of means for attaining such ends, about the value of which there is, indeed, no question" (Husserl, 1982, p. 62).

As mentioned above, in the Anglo-Saxon social sciences research, many simplistic views of the phenomenological approach are circulating. These views tend to oversimplify the theoretical moment of the epochē by narrowing it to a simple *bracketing* act that suspends every evaluating attitude toward the facts and subjects involved. But the Husserlian epochē is more than this: it is a matter of suspending ingenuous assumptions about the phenom-

enon under inquiry, and so of exhibiting a self-reflective stance that allows the phenomenologist to recognize, and to make explicit, his/her prejudiced assumptions in order to gain access to an eidetic knowledge of the phenomenon. And from here, it is possible for the researcher to describe a lived experience or to build a theory grounded in the experience.

However, there are some practical as well as methodological problems: theoretically, the epochē tends to put the subject who is bracketing the world outside the reality upon which s/he is supposed to suspend judgment; so, thus as Spiegelberg pointed out, the epochē would cut the subject off from the reality of other people (Spiegelberg, 1969, pp. 157–159; cf. Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 139), which is obviously impossible in the investigation.

The impossibility of putting the epochē into practice is one of the reasons behind the hermeneutical turn in phenomenology, back to Heidegger, who denied the same theoretical possibility of the epochē.

Actually, many researchers have observed that is very hard to bracket empirical reality in carrying out research. How can it be possible? How can a researcher step aside from him/herself and from his/her ways of giving meaning to the reality experienced?

According to Merleau-Ponty, we believe that transcendental epochē is only a Kantian regulative idea—one that cannot be completely accomplished but, at the same time cannot be avoided. And this is because, ignoring the dimension of the epochē runs the risk of taking things and their perceptions for granted, implicitly assuming some prejudices and pre-comprehensions about the phenomenon we wish to explore. What is important, however, is to mark the detachment intentionally. This can only be done using some expedients such as, for instance, a research journal and a research team as means to realize the epochē in the research activity.

By the way, the epochē does not eliminate anything, does not cancel the experience of the world, nor the assumption of it or

assumptions about it—even those based on naive beliefs or prejudiced knowledge of it. Our scientific and pre-scientific knowledge is not denied. We only refrain from confering validity on such knowledge. Everything that was obvious becomes a phenomenon, a meaning for someone's consciousness. But our precomprehensions and anticipated knowledge have to be appropriately registered and documented in order to be recalled when, after a careful description of the phenomenon, we recover what we put into brackets.

In some sense, we can say that basically, the epochē attitude is the research itself. The phenomenologically oriented researcher is seeking those data that can resist the reiterated attacks of the epochē, and this is one of the main research devices. It is through this device that we can profess our respect for the fundamental principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon, as we showed earlier. This principle requires the researcher to describe the phenomenon as it appears to the consciousness that intends to study it, by respecting its boundaries and the limits through which it appears to consciousness. The faithfulness to the phenomenon allowed by the epochē is a principle particularly important in human science research, where the phenomena to be explored are embedded in complex networks of meanings and can be only described by heuristic devices that researchers spread out on the reality under examination. Without the epochē, the researcher's "natural" attitude, which is always extremely prejudiced, primarily becomes evident in statistical elaborations of isolable and controllable variables, which unavoidably tend to anticipate the direct experience of the phenomenon. These techniques and their underlying habits produce a prejudiced description through the use of codified and rigid languages and procedures. To mathematize reality (seen as social facts) means to betray it, being constitutively unfaithful to the phenomena in order to utilize a tool that allows us to scrape some scanty and impoverished information (numbers and measures) about the reality that one

wanted to explore. But qualitative research too sometimes risks betraying the phenomenon, seeking data as facts, isolating variables, looking for linear causes behind the phenomena. Without the epochē as the basic epistemological attitude, there is the actual risk, in whatever qualitative methods as well, of taking an anticipated knowledge of phenomena for granted by imposing observation grids, coding systems, and analytic categories defined a priori and based on pre-comprehensions or drawn from literature.

The epochē is not an end; it is neither an ethical principle nor an existential attitude (even if it is correct to think so). Instead in human science research it is a cognitive device, and as a typical feature of an empirical investigation within a phenomenological approach, it allows the researcher to bracket the natural world—as well as the naive thoughts produced about it and contained within it—in order to build rigorous knowledge. Then a phenomenology intended in this manner, introduced by an epochē that is likewise intended in this manner, can also be interpreted as an epistemology: a reflection about what makes knowledge into a science, a thinking that addresses the scientific nature of the science.

Both the epochē as a basic cognitive and heuristic act and the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon introduce a dialectical play between evidence and transcendentality, between an empirical and an eidetic approach, between the search for "truths" and the awareness of the impossibility of succeeding. Thus phenomenology is a troublesome path between the clear awareness of the senseless belief in an objective reality and the tireless research of the hidden profile of things—a never-ending exploration, dramatically adventurous, always open, and extremely complex.

Phenomenology as a modeling work on oneself

If we assume that the epochē is a cognitive device, and that this device is the essential tool for gaining rigorous access to the essence of the phenomena, then in order to develop a scientific posture, the researcher must work on him/herself and model his/her mental stance in order to allow the possibility of a good way of encountering the world of experience. In other words, acquiring a scientific method does not mean learning mere techniques of inquiry, understood as tools which are objectively available, but shaping or modeling oneself in order to turn oneself into a heuristic tool (Mortari, 2007). "Phenomenology cannot be reduced to a set of procedures" (Benner, 1994, p. xvii), it is a way of entering into a relationship with things.

In order to outline what it means for a researcher to become a phenomenological heuristic tool, it is necessary to identify the mental stances that characterize the phenomenological gaze. An analysis of Husserlian writings shows that these phenomenological stances are the following: a passive-receptive way of being, an open attention; a hospitality toward the phenomena and a reflective discipline.

A passive-receptive way of being

Knowledge is valid if the researcher succeeds in capturing evident data from the phenomenon, i.e., data that accurately reveal the essence of the phenomenon. "Data," in French, is *"donné,"* which means "given," or "gift," what the phenomenon gives about itself. If the data is a gift, it is necessary to understand the specific quality of the cognitive act that is able to receive the gift.

A cognitive act that is true to the essence of what is given as a gift is not an act that grasps the datum and forces it into its conceptual grid, but an act that receives, that accepts the datum precisely as it is given (d. Husserl, 82, §24, p. 44). It is a receiv-

ing act. To receive, or accept the datum in its original profile, without further manipulation, is a fundamental dynamic stance of phenomenological epistemology. By accepting the original givenness, phenomenology becomes a science that is able to bring about an absolute beginning, and to be a principium (Husserl, 82, § 24, p. 44). According to Stein (1991, p. 25, my translation), the mind is receptive when "anything that approaches it is received in the corresponding manner and with the depth due to it."

The problem emerging at this point is to understand how to prepare the mind to receive the datum, how to be receptive. What makes the act of receiving so difficult is the fact that our mind tends to live in a preconceived world, in the sense that we always experience the world through filters such as systems of categories, linguistic constructs, folk assumptions, and practical concerns, which make direct access to things impossible. An experience is always subjected to the words that define it.

This original loss of evidence is typical of ordinary attitudes, as well as scientific research, since in order to build knowledge about phenomena, the mind subjects the experience to specific epistemic procedures through which phenomena are absorbed into our mental schemes. Instead of going to the things, allowing them to manifest themselves in their essence, scientific thought imposes specific conditions on their appearing, dissolving any other alterity they may have. This process of the operationalization of phenomena with our epistemic devices is evident in the processes of the mathematicization of reality and experimental procedures, where instead of letting the phenomenon appear in its givenness, the cognitive act imposes the geometry of its gaze. If in quantitative research phenomena can only be saved inasmuch as they can be elaborated through algebraic formulas (Arendt, 1958), in a scientific experiment an "attack" on things takes place (Heidegger, 1966, p. 88). With this kind of operationalization, the mind, rather than preparing itself

to capture the phenomenon in its originally offered givenness, reduces it to the measure imposed by human reason through its epistemic devices.

When instead of letting the phenomenon appear in its givenness, the mind's eye imposes the geometry of its gaze, the possibility of faithful knowledge vanishes. To take on a receptive attitude means to create a void in the mind, an empty space where the datum can be received without being grasped beforehand within our own conceptual grids. However, to empty our mind does not mean erasing all the ideas that we routinely use, because this cognitive move is impossible; instead, it means weakening pregiven theories, silencing our expectations and our desires, and deactivating the epistemic obsessions that tacitly act within ourselves.

This is one of the paradoxes of phenomenology: a faithful knowledge of the essential qualities of a phenomenon can only be attained when the researcher downsizes the power exerted by the theories at hand (Scheler, 1999, pp. 166–168). Scheler teaches us how to d-activate the logic of tension, a logic of acquisition that interprets knowledge as grasping data within the conceptual toolbox available—how to adopt a logic of relaxation by which the mind grants the phenomenon the possibility of meeting our thoughts starting from the self, or in the words of Levinas *kath'auto*. This is ethical knowledge, for it leaves the phenomenon in its transcendency.

This receptive attitude of the mind is well expressed by Heidegger when he speaks of a "gaze that surrounds [the object] with delicacy" (1992, p. 79, my translation), pitting this attitude against the intruding gesture of strong reason, a positivist gesture that grasps things by absorbing them within the grip of its conceptual grids. Phenomenological knowledge, on the other hand, after bracketing previous validated knowledge, shuts off the tendency to seize things, and lets the thing present itself to us as we present ourselves to the thing (Heidegger, 1968, p. 41).

According to a Heideggerian perspective to be receptive, means waiting, not awaiting: "in waiting we leave open what we are waiting for" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 68). Nothing must be done except to wait—to wait for the other to present itself. We can go to the things themselves if we wait for something without representing anything (Heidegger, 1969, p. 69). When thinking happens in the form of a waiting free from the habit of wanting, when it is thus an action without activity, when it is passivity, the phenomenon can reveal itself in its essence. Waiting is thus the distinctive feature of phenomenological thinking. Waiting does not entail expecting, because expecting already foresees something, by entering the field of representation and of its represented object; rather, waiting consists in "weaning ourselves from will" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 60) and in this releasement there is a higher mental activity. To "keep waiting" is an empty orientation, a passive, non-oriented attention, and this openness-without-representation is the way left to the other to reveal itself from itself.

Passivity is therefore an essential mode of phenomenological being. To be passive is not the sign of a lesser degree of existence, but rather indicates a more discreet way of relating to others: it means retreating in order to let the phenomenon find its own way to reveal itself in its givenness. In a managerial and technical approach to research, the researcher has the responsibility of exerting control over the thing; in the phenomenological approach, the responsibility is to deactivate one's tendency to exert any form of control. The responsibility of the phenomenologist is to let the other be, to come to presence in its own way.

The passivity of "not-being-in-search-of" must not be confused with a sort of withdrawing from posing other questions, because the search for knowledge feeds on such questions. The essence of thinking is interrogative. The qualifying feature of the phenomenological approach is to be open to the other's questioning: raising questions, in phenomenology, does not develop

beforehand, ignoring the lived experience, but emerges from listening to the other. Furthermore, when the questions have been formulated, they must be kept as open as possible, so that every answer can be transformed into a further question. Thinking preserves itself in its interrogative essence when the answer it obtains does not suppress the need to raise new questions.

Open attention

The receptive attitude manifests itself in the capacity to *pay attention* to the object; therefore attention is another fundamental stance of the phenomenological researcher. To pay attention is to devote one's thinking to the things themselves "surrendering to them in a totally disinterested way" (Stein, 1991, p. 37, my translation). In order to express the quality of attention, Stein uses the metaphor of "keeping one's eyes wide open."

Attention is the capacity to direct one's gaze to a phenomenon, remaining focused on in; it is an uninterrupted tension toward the intentional object in its changing modes of givenness (Husserl, 1973, p. 80). If attention is the "disposition to receive the datum distinctly" (De Monticelli, 2000, p. xxi) by which the other shows its reality, the knowledge attained will be true and valid in proportion to the attention the researcher is capable of devoting to the other. For the other to feel invited to manifest itself authentically in its essential qualities, the researcher must devote as much as possible of his/her attention. Moreover, in order for attention to predispose the mind to capture the phenomenon in its offering givenness, it needs to be *open* and *continuous* in time.

Attention is open when it is not pre-oriented to look for something specific; it implies a receptive posture of the gaze, where the subject grants the other its way and time to come to presence, which is the only possibility for an adequate self-presentation. In order to be *openness that faithfully receives* the

phenomenon in its original way of appearing, attention needs to be actuated as a negative, passive effort that leaves the mind available and permeable to the encounter with the phenomenon. It is a matter of maintaining the heuristic act free from any available references, either ordinary or scientific. Performing an open attention that is not oriented beforehand means keeping thought as untied as possible from the grip of conceptual and procedural tools ordinarily used. The open mind is a mind that approaches the phenomenon "in absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of knowledge" (Husserl, 1960, p. 2), with a gaze that explores experience in a manner unsullied by assumptions. It is open attention that allows the researcher to be a radical empiricist who only counts what is given in experience.

An open or allocentric disposition is therefore nourished by the disciplined exercise of the epochē, which works toward silencing any knowledge at hand. Through the epochē, one tries to realize the retreat of the subject from him/herself that allows reality to manifest itself. Attention is thus called to clear the mind, cleaning it and relieving it from the mind load that—like a thick blanket—will not allow this reality to manifest itself. When the mind is able to produce an open, non-oriented attention, it becomes like a crystal that in its transparency lets itself be traversed by the oncoming reality.

Attention is continuous when the subject works toward maintaining a gaze that is concentrated for as long as possible on the phenomenon. This is a difficult task, in that attention tends to be intermittent, due both to environmental noise and the inner cognitive flow, since while the subject is focused on observing, nothing can stop imagination, desires, epistemic obsessions, and more from infiltrating the cognitive act of observation, distracting the subject from his/her task. However, since an act of knowledge inspired by the principle of faithfulness requires going all around the phenomenon, assuming a continuous presence of the gaze, the researcher is supposed to cultivate a form of

"attention insomnia, symbolized by the eyes of Athena's owl" (Zambrano, 2003, p. 50, my translation). Only a continuous attention can capture things as they happen, capturing the other in his/her existence.

The fluid and constantly changing reality of a stream of consciousness would require an unlimited attention, a sustained gaze that does not yield to digression—a stubborn, persistent look. To define attention as a mental act that should be "stubborn and persistent" should not, however, lead us to consider it a violent imposition of the gaze; the gaze of open attention is not similar to a ray of light that strikes things but, in the words of the phenomenologist Edith Stein, is more like an auroral ray, which approaches things delicately. The moment we look at ourselves in the act of observing, we realize that paying attention often takes the shape of an imposition of our logics, of our linguistic devices onto the other's being: imposition of interpretations, of beliefs that come to our mind independently from an act of will, of theories that the mind of the researcher tends to produce uninterruptedly. On the contrary, when attention moves in accordance with the principle of respect for reality, it must be fed by the precise posture of the gaze that expresses itself in its ability to remain free from the grip of conceptualizing thought and the pressure to systematize.

However, attention is not only supposed to be continuous, but must also be passionate, nurtured by feeling, because feeling strengthens thinking. As Dante puts it, love "moves the sun and all the other stars." It is the capacity to feel the quality of reality that mobilizes attention and intention. It is the sincere passion for truth, the hope of attaining useful knowledge, and the confidence that a meaningful outcome will be achieved that infuses energy to the work required in the search for rigorous knowledge.

When the hope of attaining valid knowledge falters, together with the confidence in the other and in the ability to enlighten the gaze, one can either give up the search, or the search becomes

a form of obstinacy about things, which does not leave room for the mind to breathe. It is a feeling positively oriented toward reality that lets the research breathe. For this reason, Zambrano recognizes the love for things as an essential posture, a passion for reality that allows research to find the right direction.

There is a condition that is necessary to the development of this type of attention: namely, one must *cultivate a mental posture which is at the same time tensive and distensive.* A continuous attention focused on the other requires the mind to activate all its resources and to be able to produce a fertile tension toward the other. Attention is a deliberate concentration of energy; it is therefore a tension, an effort, a source of remarkable stress. If we want to avoid this tension being translated into an attitude of domination over the other, it has to be reconciled with the capacity of distension, which consists of approaching the other after suspending—and keeping in suspension—any personal interest, any expectation, any attachment to one's own theories. When this inner distension is fully present, the mind is capable of producing a focused and relaxed attention, which disposes the mind to receptivity. This is because attention is nothing but receptivity taken to extremes.

To allow the gaze to be relaxed and receptive, the mind's task is to remove, to relieve the mind's substance to the point of making it as transparent as possible. It is not possible to turn one's full attention toward an object if at the same time the mind is busy considering other contents of consciousness, because in this case the cognitive energies are consumed in other directions. Only when attention is capable of focusing intensely on the object, can the latter offer itself in its givenness. Having attention focused on the object is thus the necessary condition for carrying out a cognitive act that is put into play in accordance with the principle of respect for the other's way of appearing. In this sense, phenomenological attention is radically different from mere curiosity or interest in the other, a form of mental dispersion that keeps us distracted and far

from the essence of things; the phenomenological gaze is an orderly way of looking at things by letting ourselves be absorbed in the changing modes of the phenomenon's givenness.

Open attention focused on the object, a non-oriented way of relating to things nourished by a disposition toward nonresistance (Scheler, 1999) is therefore a cognitive act that characterizes the phenomenological method. Only cognitive acts that are at the same time capable of concentrating on the datum and receiving the phenomenon in its way of appearing, without any attachment to the world of ideas, desires, and expectations we identify with, can enable the mind to capture the other's original quality.

Phenomenology as hospitality toward the phenomena

The difference existing between positivist and phenomenological epistemology is now evident. According to the positivist approach, in order to acquire certain and evident knowledge, it is necessary to control the phenomenon studied by employing a preestablished method of research; in this way, positivist epistemelogy takes possession of the other, absorbing it into the network of its devices. Against this logic of imposition, phenomenological epistemology applies the logic of *reception,* that is of receptivity and response to the way in which the other manifests itself. To receive phenomenal reality in its unique way of coming to presence is only possible when the mind suspends its habit of resorting to predefined categories in order to allow appropriate categories to arise from the actual experience. Phenomenology is the experience of receiving, leaving room to the other, making oneself hospitable toward its difference.

For a correct interpretation of the mental attitude of hospitability, knowledge should be conceived as listening. Listening does not simply mean hearing or eavesdroping, but entails an attention intensively focused on the other. Heidegger defines listening as pledging obedience to the logos of things.

Authentic listening requires from the mind the development of an allocentric attention directed toward the other, an "external concentration" (De Monticelli, 2000) that makes us really present to the other. Whenever, instead of working on ourselves in order to become as receptive as possible to the unveiling of the other, we let ourselves be taken in by the technical obsession that entrusts the validation of research to tested techniques and devices, we find ourselves in a state of absent-presence where the other remains alien to us. In other words, while positivist epistemology activates the principle of "prehension" over things, phenomenological epistemology is guided by the principle of "distension" (Scheler, 1999, pp. 166–168). Phenomenological knowledge does not grasp the other, but rather follows the traces of its appearing.

According to a Baconian perspective, science must "penetrate inside" nature's secrets. This intrusive idea of research is functional for the acquisition of knowledge that allows the subject to exert his/her dominion over the surrounding world; however, the human sciences cannot share this instrumental logic, because the human being must be understood, and not dominated. The "face of the other" forbids any sort of control and calls us to a radical responsibility, one that consists of activating a method capable of receiving the other in his/her uniqueness and of preserving his/her difference. An investigation that applies predefined categories to the specificity of each experience risks making the other's uniqueness invisible and to miss its difference. When the other falls into the a priori net that I carry with me in order to catch it, its being gets objectified, and consequently its alterity falters (Levinas, 1969). The imposition logic of a preconceived method allows us to attain general knowledge, but hinders the perception of the other's original profile, where all powers originate (*ibid.*). Granting the other the possibility of manifesting itself, so that its alterity is preserved, implies activating of a logic of reception: stifling the categories that filter the other's act of appearing and turning the mind into a void that is

permeable to the traces of its coming to presence. A *thinking that receives* conceives the other as infinite, and while thinking it infinite, one becomes clearly aware of the impossibility of capturing it within the epistemic nets of the mind and the need is therefore felt for an ethical imperative to leave it absolutely other, that is, transcendent (Levinas, 1969).

Compared to the epistemology of modernity, characterized by the logic of control, the epistemology of receptiveness implies the ethical move of bracketing one's epistemic tools and suspending the automatic recourse to one's competence, thus activating a contraction of the epistemological imperialism of the knowing subject. The contraction of the ego allows the other to manifest itself in its original profile, so that the researcher can sense its manner of being (Scheler, 1999, p. 173). Being capable of receiving the other implies a sort of "disappearing of the self" (Moran, 2000, p. 347).

To make the mind receptive to the essence of things is at one with the practice of an *ethic of a weakening of the ego,* the weakening of the tendency of a knowing subject to exercise prehension of the other in order to achieve, on the contrary, a *passive presence*. Passivity is not a lack of respect for the object; rather, it can be defined as a different way of remaining in a meaningful presence: a presence replete with the absence of the self.

The ethic of a weakening of the ego, which asks the mind to withdraw from the object pursued (Weil, 1997) in order to leave room for the other, is one of the essential features of phenomenological epistemology, because weakening the narcissistic attachment to the products of one's own cognitive activity is an essential condition for making the "principle of fidelity" workable, in accordance with the phenomenological virtues of respect and humility: it is only by weakening the capacity of prehension at work in habitual epistemic devices that it is possible to enable the mind to receive the other's original appearing. Research always needs ethics; the ethics of phenomenology finds expression in two ethical virtues, respect and humility.

Having respect and humility means to be able to open up to the maximum reality that can meet us, receiving it in the way it lets itself be known, and avoiding the imposition of pre-consumed interpretation schemes that cannot reveal the essential individuality of that thing. The ethic of respect and humility is the essential element of a research practice that can part company from the arrogance typical of a certain type of science. Knowledge that relies upon the principle of fidelity to the phenomenon preserves the other's transcendency and irreducible difference.

A radical difference can thus be found between positivist and phenomenological research: while the former considers knowledge as a mental act that "uses" the object by governmentalizing it within a predefined research project, the latter "follows" the traces left by the other's appearing. A full attention concentrated on the other presupposes that it is available to meet it without relying on the devices that the researcher finds readily accessible. It can be said that phenomenological research is characterized by a thinking that "asserts" the other's way of being, in the sense that it recognizes the other in its uniqueness. To think is *to thank* (Heidegger, 1969): to thank the other for its revealing, which allows the epistemic relation to be established. When the other is revealed in its manner of being and recounts its lived experience, it exposes itself to my gaze and gives its appearing to me. Whoever receives a gift cannot abstain from thanking, and a thanking thinking is a mode of cognition that approaches the other with delicacy. It faithfully follows the other's appearing and searches for a deep comprehension of its worlds of meaning, with the utmost respect for its uniqueness and its difference.

The reflective act

For the act ofinvestigation to be scientifically grounded, however, it is not sufficient to apply the heuristic actions typical of phenomenology—seeing, clarifying, analyzing, conceptualizing

in a faithful manner—to the data that offer themselves. It is also necessary to accompany the act of searching for knowledge with a "scientific reflection on the essence of the procedure itself" (Husserl, 1982, p. 151), in order to understand how "perfect clarity and insight" have been reached, how the essence of the phenomena has been outlined, how conceptual expressions have been formulated to be fully faithful to the profile of the appearance of the phenomenon. In other words, it is not simply by enacting the research acts that one can generate scientific knowledge of things; one must also reflect on such acts in order to ground the method logically and rigorously (*ibid.*).

There is a difference between thought and reflection: they both are *cogitationes,* or acts of the mind, but whereas thought looks at something alien to itself, reflection ponders thoughts and is therefore a cognitive act of the same quality as the object it approaches. And as Husserl reminds us, "the phenomenological method operates exclusively in acts of reflections" (*ibid.*, p. 174). Through continuous reflections on the methodical procedure actuated, one ought to be able to verify that the methodological propositions name with "perfect clarity" the heuristic acts actually carried out and that the concepts used can really adapt in a faithful manner to the datum.

Reflection is an act of thought that conceives thoughts as acts and becomes aware of them (Levinas, 1969). Reflection can have as its object not only present experiences, which are currently happening as reflection unfolds, but also past events, which the act of recalling brings to the evidence of the gaze of consciousness. Husserl also discusses a reflection on anticipated experiences, which attests a move forward of the gaze of consciousness (Husserl, 1982, p. 175). The subject who reflects listens to his/her own thinking and listens to his/her own hearing. Reflection means "adverting" to the flowing thought and paying attention to it (*ibid.*, p. 176); it means that the I "directs itself" toward its own lived experiences (*ibid.*, p. 180). It is only through an act of reflection

that the mind can become aware of the quality of its lived experiences. The entire stream of experiences lived in the mode of unreflected consciousness "can thus be submitted to a scientific eidetic study (*ibid.*, p. 176). Husserl explains that each subject lives its experiences, which actually and intentionally include a variety of things. The fact that the subject lives them does not entail that they are present to its gaze. But each experience missing from the gaze can, according to an ideal possibility, be "seen" in so far as a reflection is focused on it, making it an object for the subject. The same is true for the possible gazes of the subject that are directed to the components of the lived experiences and their intentional objects (what they eventually become consciousness "of"). Reflections, too, are lived experiences, and as such can become the substratum for new reflections, ad infinitum, according to a general principle (*ibid.*, pp. 178–179). Lived experiences that are actually lived, and later exposed to the gaze of reflection, are given *as* really lived (*ibid.*, p. 175).

It is not easy to perform reflection, because it requires stopping, interrupting the free flow of being and thinking; this is because reflection originates from a change of one's position toward the world. However, this decision made by the mind is a difficult one, because it appears to lead in a direction that is opposite to the free flow of being, which earns the subject a conscious gaze, the only one where a perception is held of one's own continuity.

It is not only the case that the decision to reflect, to stop and think, is not an easy one to make, but it is also rather difficult to maintain this decision because of the effects it produces, since reflection always produces a modification of consciousness so as to make the freedom of the cognitive process suffer from it (*ibid.*, pp. 176–177). The flow of consciousness is modified when, for instance, joy becomes the object of reflection and the inner quality of this positive feeling ends up being compromised; the lived experience "fades away" under the reflective gaze (*ibid.*, p. 176). In a few cases, this modification of the quality of the lived experi-

ence can be perceived problematically, but this impression of loss of intensity in the lived experience can disappear if one persists in the reflection, because by bringing its object to clarity, reflection allows the subject to reach a lived experience that, having been modified by the reflective act, acquires a different quality.

Two sorts of reflections are possible: not only one that we can define as first-level reflection, focused on the cognitive and emotional experiences, but also a second-level reflection that thinks about the acts of reflection themselves: "But also, with respect to the rejoicing which has subsequently become an object, we have the possibility of effecting a reflection on the reflection which objectivates the latter and thus making even more effectively clear the difference between a rejoicing which is *lived*, but not regarded, and a *regarded* rejoicing; likewise, the modifications which are introduced by the acts of seizing upon, explicating, etc., which start with the advertence of regard (*ibid*.).

Reflective acts can, therefore, become the object of phenomenological analysis through "reflections at a higher level" (*ibid*., 177). If, in reflecting, the gaze shiftsfrom an element given to conscience to the very act of intending the datum, then in a higher-order reflection the object of givenness has the same quality of the reflective act.

It can be said that by the term reflection, one indicates the acts by which the stream of lived experiences is analyzed in all its possible aspects (cf. *ibid*.); in other words, it is "the name of the method of consciousness leading to the cognition ofany consciousness whatever" (*ibid*.). "here the phenomenological task is to investigate systematically all the modifications of mental processes falling under the heading of reflection …" (*ibid*., p. 179).

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