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Review Essay

Phenomenology and Meaning Attribution

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by **Max van Manen**

Phenomenology is a philosophy based form of inquiry with a long tradition that may be both confusing and disorienting to academic and clinical practitioners who are interested in understanding and doing research in professional fields such as nursing, medicine, clinical psychology, pedagogy, psychotherapy and education. Increasingly, the term "phenomenology" occurs in a broad range of qualitative texts and publications. Some think that any study that deals with "experience" is, as such, therefore phenomenological. But that is, of course, misleading, many other qualitative methodologies also being concerned with human experiences. The complex calibre of phenomenological scholarship in philosophy, human science and professional fields has given rise to research practices that prompt some to ask: "But is it phenomenology?" "Is this approach still phenomenology in its original sense?" In my long university teaching career, I have found that misunderstandings and critical questions of students of phenomenology often are the most appropriate starting points for discussing, explicating and clarifying the methodological issues of phenomenological inquiry. Responding to critique is also an effective context for addressing underlying issues and controversies of method and research. With these considerations in mind, I engage here in an essay review of John Paley's recently published *Phenomenology as Qualitative Research: A Critical Analysis of Meaning Attribution* (2017). I hope that my discussion and the examples provided below assist in a proper appreciation of phenomenological thought and practice.

In his *Phenomenology as Qualitative Research* [PQR], John Paley constructs a lengthy critique of phenomenological method as practised by Amedeo Giorgi, Max van Manen, and Jonathan Smith. Paley states that the tool of his critical analysis is "meaning attribution". He says, "I will scrutinize examples of meaning attribution in the work of PQR methodologists in order to get a clearer answer to the question 'How is it done?'" (2017, p. 27). Meaning attribution is a psychological method rooted in Fritz Heider's (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. Attribution theory studies the psychological processes that influence perceptions of meaning. Paley's employment of meaning attribution, throughout his book, produces a huge heap of screeds that he accumulates in his aim to criticize what he perceives are faulty uses of phenomenological methods. For the sake of clarification, I will show that meaning attribution is an inappropriate tool for the purpose, in that it has nothing to do with phenomenological method. I will also show that John Paley misunderstands the basic philosophical nature of phenomenological meaning and inquiry, and that he not only has Edmund Husserl wrong (as demonstrated by Amedeo Giorgi, 2017), but that he also fails to read Martin Heidegger properly, and does not understand basic phenomenological concepts such as lived experience, the reduction, *eidos* or essence, phenomenological meaning, and the phenomenological notion of empathy that he claims to offer as a valid topic of his approach to phenomenology.

The Meaning of Meaning Attribution

Meaning attribution is the psychological study of the

causalities and "motives to make attributions" (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Paley's primary critique is that the methods he criticizes fail to deliver unambiguously clear meanings from texts. But even attribution theorists such as Darren Langdridge and Trevor Butt point out, in their review of attribution theories, that "the lived world is always ambiguous, open to more than one interpretation" (2004, p. 357). They discuss the problem of "attribution errors", as when meaning attribution is explained by internal psychological motives. Ironically, Paley commits several attribution errors that betray his intolerance for ambiguity, repeatedly criticizing "under-specified" methods, and constantly trying to convert phenomenological analysis of lived human experience into concept clarification and a constructivist version of meaning attribution.

In this review, I primarily discuss the assertions Paley directs towards my (van Manen's) work. Throughout his investigative meaning attribution, Paley keeps levelling the same complaint: van Manen never makes clear "how is meaning distilled from a text." But the point is that phenomenology does not "distil meaning from texts". Paley keeps asking, over and over again, "How does van Manen get from text to meaning?" when he misunderstands the basic principles of the methodology of phenomenology. Phenomenology is not the study of how or why people attribute their meanings to texts. As I will show, the focus of phenomenology is on how phenomena are given to us in consciousness and pre-reflective experience. The problem of phenomenology is not how to get from text to meaning, but how to get from meaning to text.

When critiquing my writings, Paley says that he wants to "make a stab at evaluating van Manen's work" (p. 69); and yet, from more than a hundred articles, book chapters, and seven books (van Manen, 1986/2005; 1990/ 1997; 1991; 1996, 2001; 2014; 2015) and translations of phenomenological texts from Dutch and German, he selects one early introductory text. Paley criticizes my practice of doing phenomenology solely on the basis of a few selected quotes from *Researching Lived Experience* [RLE] (1990). RLE was published more than a quarter of a century ago, when the term "phenomenology" was practically unknown in professional fields such as education and nursing in North America. I do not mean to disown this text, but since those early days, I have published numerous more detailed methodological texts that explicate the various features of the wide range of phenomenological literature and practices. I am not accusing Paley of cherry-picking, because that would presume that he has read my other work. However, many of my publications are quite frequently cited, and my *Phenomenology of Practice* (2014) was immediately a best-seller with my publisher. But, except for RLE, Paley simply ignores them all.

So, Paley evaluates "van Manen's work" on the basis of *Researching Lived Experience*. How well does he do this? In keeping with the title of my book, *Researching Lived Experience*, phenomenological research is defined as the study of lived experience – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we come to conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. Phenomenology aims at gaining an understanding of the phenomenal meaning of *experiences*, not of *texts*, as Paley wants to believe. In simple terms, phenomenology asks, "What is this or that kind of experience like?". It differs from almost every other qualitative inquiry in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, explaining, conceptualizing, abstracting, or even attributing meaning to it. Strangely, Paley never discusses these explications of the phenomenological method even with respect to this single text, from which these lines are taken, or from subsequent publications (see, for example, van Manen, 2014) in which scores of thinkers and authors have been discussed that may be of interest to researchers in the professional fields of clinical psychology, education, medicine, nursing, and so forth. "Phenomenological meaning" differs in nature from biographic, narrative, ethnographic, conceptual analytic, or psychological meaning, and so forth, aimed for by other qualitative methodologies. Rather than engage these explications seriously, however, Paley rejects them as "under-specified" and comes up with an abstract, alternate definition of "meaning" that he designates "inference marker", and which lacks the philosophical foundation, qualitative depth and richness of phenomenological meaning.

From a Husserlian point of view, phenomenological research is the explication of the essential structures of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness. Anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable, or subjectively felt. Husserl pointed out that consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world as we experience it. Or, rather, it is by virtue of being conscious that we are already related to the world. Whatever falls outside of consciousness, therefore, falls outside the bounds of our possible lived experience. In his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913/1983), Husserl is at pains to explain that phenomenology does not concern itself with facts or with realities in the way that psychology (which includes psychological attribution theory) does. Husserl says,

> Rather phenomenology wants to establish itself, not as a science of matters of fact, but as a science of essences (as an "eidetic" science); it ... exclusively seeks to ascertain "cognitions of essences" and no "matters of fact" whatever. (1913/1983, p. xx)

As discussed in RLE, the term "essence" derives from the Greek *ousia*, which means the inner essential nature of a thing, the true being of a thing. The Latin *essentia* derives from the verb *esse*, which means "is" or "to be." Essence is therefore that which makes a thing what it *is* (and without which it would not be what it is) in itself, rather than its being or becoming something else. "Phenomenology", said Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. lxxi) "is the study of essences". In other words, phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the internal meaning structures of lived experience that are intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience. RLE contains a lengthy paragraph (p. 10) discussing the methodological issues associated with "essence", and the concept of essence is also listed and explained in the glossary (p. 177). Moreover, in the 1997 reprint edition of the book, several additional pages are specifically devoted to the theme and methodological issues associated with the term "essence" (1997, pp. xiv-xvi). But, rather than engaging these discussions of essence, Paley trumps that they are not there. Paley bluntly states that "van Manen (like many other writers) never explains what he means by 'essence'" (p. 18). Next, he concludes without any evidential support that the phenomenological term "essence" means "concept", and thus, manifestly and conveniently, he sets himself up to treat phenomenological analysis as concept analysis.

Now, if Paley wished to evaluate my work, he could have critically addressed some of the features that have defined my work over several decades. For example, he could have taken issue with my insistence that phenomenological research and analysis is essentially a writing practice; he could have addressed my development of the idea that "anecdotes" and "examples" are central methodological devices of phenomenological research; he could have taken issue with my coining and discussing the role of the "vocative" in phenomenological writing; he could have discussed the basic premise of a phenomenology of practice; and he could have addressed my methodological theme of the genesis and discovery of meaning as serendipitous insights (van Manen, 2014). He also could have critically examined some of the outcomes of my funded research projects, such as pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact; writing online; the phenomenology of childhood's secrets; the tact of teaching. These, I believe, are some of the basic contributions that I have made to the theory and practice of phenomenology.

But there is none of that. And nowhere in PQR does Paley discuss in any depth phenomenological method, the application of the epoché and the reduction, which are the crucial methods of phenomenology. Indeed, it is very difficult to gauge Paley's true interest in, and understanding of phenomenology. Paley acknowledges that the methodology of phenomenology is embedded in philosophy, but then he declares that he does not want to be "distracted" by "the convolutions of the phenomenological philosophy" (p. 3) and he says that he does not want to deal with thinkers such as "Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and so on" (p. 3). But that is like saying that you want to bake a cake but not bother with the ingredients and the preparation. By focusing on some selected criticisms and issues such as Paley's treatment of the meaning of "lived experience", I propose to demonstrate that most of Paley's critical accusations evaporate into smoke for the discerning reader. Even the writings of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are generally referred to in a cursory manner or via secondary sources. But it is worth noting that, in a footnote, Paley briefly does mention the reduction in a single sentence: he declares that Husserl, when writing about the reduction, "can be almost willfully obscure" (p. 7). It is tempting to ask whether Paley's "attribution" of willful obscurity to Husserl is really just an excuse (attribution error) for choosing to ignore the basic methodological significance of the epoché and the reduction altogether.

Paley on Heidegger on Lived Experience

Paley actually says very little substantive in his PQR about phenomenology as an historical tradition and as a method. But he does reference his own recent paper, "Heidegger, Lived Experience and Method" (2013). It is one of the very few articles that he has written about phenomenological method. In it he aims to displace the phenomenological notion of "lived experience". Paley claims that, "according to Heidegger, there is no such thing as 'lived experience'" (p. 1521). Paley elaborates, "When I say that, for Heidegger, there is no such thing as 'lived experience', I mean that he disowns the concept of *Erlebnis*" (p. 1522). Is Paley's reading of Heidegger correct? In numerous texts, in fact, Heidegger discusses the relevance and centrality of the term "lived experience" in great detail (as I show below). I will show Paley that it is much easier to be critical than to be correct.

Without providing evidence, Paley furthermore claims that Heidegger's real phenomenological approach is "observation, naturalistic experiments, some forms of discourse analysis and conceptually associated lines of enquiry involving vocabularies of motive, scripts and performative aspects of language use" (p. 152). But it is not clear on what basis he attributes these judgments to Heidegger's method. Paley strongly advises nursing researchers to forget about the notion of lived experience. But I believe that Paley's reading of Heidegger is short-sighted and that his advice to nurses undermines the validity of his PQR, because it is clear that he misunderstands the experiential nature of phenomenological meaning.

Rather than disowning lived experience, Heidegger says,

> The question about the manner of the possible having of lived experiences precedes every other question containing subject matter. Only from there and *within* the method is the fundamental constitution of what is to be apprehended determined [and he continues that lived experience] can never actually objectifyingly be apprehended but only in the opposite direction of knowledge, i.e. only subjectifyingly. (Heidegger, 1920/2010, p. 88)

In *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* (1920/2010) Heidegger discusses at length "the complex of lived experience in its full concretion" (1920/2010, p. 91). It is not conceptual, objectifying, or theoretic meaning that is the aim of phenomenological understanding. Rather, phenomenological reflection is a-theoretic, concerning the living dimensions of our existence. When you try to approach lived experience theoretically (and for Heidegger reflection is already theoretic) you make this living sensibility into an object, you objectify. This is where Heidegger departed from Husserl. Heidegger attempts to avoid converting experience into a thing or an object, and so rather aims to understand a phenomenon as a living moment in its living meaningfulness. So not objectifying theoretical reflection, but reflection that ponders, contemplates, muses on, the meaning of things, is the hermeneutic of Heidegger's descriptive-interpretive phenomenology. It is hard to simplify and explicate this a-theoretic reflective method (*Besinnung* in German), because we are so used to making things into objects, or objectifying things: for, as soon as we reflect, we turn the named object of our reflection into a "thing".

For Paley, and also for others unfamiliar with the rich phenomenological literature, it is easy to misunderstand the notion of lived experience. Normally we do not think about, or phenomenologically reflect on, our experiences while we "live" them. And yet, as Heidegger elucidates, even though we are not explicitly conscious of our pre-reflective, a-theoretic everyday experiences, they carry the meaningfulness-character of the concrete context of life. In his *Freiburg Lectures*, Heidegger provides some telling portrayals of the ordinary and taken-for-granted meaningfulness of the nature of lived experience:

> In experiencing ... I am engrossed in the encounter in each case. Even if it is not explicitly conscious, I live in a context of anticipation. Unbroken, without having to surmount barriers, I slide from one encounter into another, and one sinks into the other, *and indeed in such a way that I do not bother about it*. I do not at all conceive of the idea that there is anything to notice [*beachten*] anyway. I swim along with the stream and let the water and the waves crash behind me. I do not look back, and living into the next one, I do not live in the encounter that has just been lived or know about it as having just been lived. I am engrossed in the temporally particular situation and in the unbroken succession of situations and to be sure in that which encounters me in the situations. I am engrossed in it, i.e. I do not view myself or bring myself to consciousness: now this comes along, now that. But *in that* which comes, I am *captured and arrested*, fully and actively living it. I live the context of meaningfulness, which is produced as such in and through my experiencing, insofar as I am just *swimming* here and there in this direction of expectation.
>
> The more unbroken, the more unconcerned about reflection, the more filled out each momentary phase of factual life is lived, then the more vital the flowing context of experience is going to be. The horizons change constantly, and in each case I am only open for one. (Heidegger, 1919-20/2013, p. 92)

This striking description of lived experience could have been written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schutz and many other phenomenologists. Of course, some of our experiences may be weighty, shocking, unbearable, dramatic, or tragic. Some experiences may ultimately lead to or involve us in difficult or serious predicaments. Still, from a phenomenological perspective, these lived experiences, as we live through them, are primal, raw: pre-reflective, pre-predicative, non-reflective, or a-theoretic, as Heidegger suggests.

I want to stress that researchers should exercise caution in methodologically employing the notion of lived experience in various qualitative methodologies. From the perspective of phenomenology, it does not help to speak solemnly of our "lived experiences" as if they are pregnant with meanings that will "emerge" or "spill out" as soon as we apply some analytical procedures, as some qualitative researchers seem to believe. And yet, it is true that the term "lived experience" points to a central methodological feature of phenomenology: it announces the concern of phenomenology to turn to the epoché and the reduction to investigate the primal, eidetic, originary or inceptual meanings that are passed over in everyday life. That is why it is so telling that Paley ignores and dismisses the significance of the various forms of the epoché and the reduction as obscure. (For a discussion of the various forms of the reduction see van Manen, 2014, pp. 215-239.)

Husserl pointed out that the phenomenological gesture is to lift up and bring into focus, with language, any such raw moment of lived experience and orient to the living meanings that are embedded in the experience. Any and every possible human experience (event, happening,

incident, occurrence, object, relation, situation, thought, feeling, and so on) may become a topic for phenomenological inquiry. Indeed, what makes phenomenology so fascinating is that any ordinary lived through experience tends to become quite extraordinary when we lift it up from our daily existence and hold it with our phenomenological gaze. Wondering about the meaning of a certain moment of our lived life may turn into the basic phenomenological question: "What is this experience like?"

Understanding an experience, as we live through it, is obviously very different from understanding the meaning of a text or a concept. For example, understanding the *concept* of secrecy is different from understanding its experiential meanings. A conceptual approach requires that we examine how the concept of secrecy is used in everyday language or in selected texts. Indeed, a main method of conceptual analysis is premised on the assumption that the meaning of a concept lies in its usage. But understanding the meaning of the *experience* of secrecy is a very different matter. For example, in *Childhood's Secrets* an attempt is made to explore how personal secrets are experienced in early childhood (for a free download of this book, see van Manen and Levering, 1996). A phenomenology of childhood's secrecy is pedagogically significant because, at around 5 – 7 years of age, children are beginning to live in two worlds (an inner world and an outer world) – meaning that they can keep things inside, that sharing secrets creates intimacy, that they can make themselves invisible, that they develop a sense of self-identity, that they learn to negotiate their privacy in conversations, and that they experience a sense of autonomy, and so forth. In *Childhood's Secrets*, some historical, conceptual, and etymological sources are used as auxiliary methods for phenomenology, but the main focus is always on the phenomenal meaning of lived experience: living through the experience of keeping and/or sharing secrets.

Heidegger's Method of Using Lived Experience Descriptions as Examples

Since Paley believes that Heidegger disowns the notion of lived experience, it is necessary to assure him, and provide evidence, that Heidegger uses evocative lived experience descriptions in, for example, his lengthy analysis of the phenomenological meanings of the experience of boredom (Heidegger, 1929-30/1995, pp. 59-180). I do not discuss this study by Heidegger merely to show that Paley fails to read Heidegger correctly. I want to show why Paley is wrong in using meaning attribution to study "how phenomenology is done". In the authoritative example offered by Heidegger of a phenomenological analysis of experiential meaning, the analysis is a non-objectifying, non-theorizing reflective writing. People who have read a bit of Heidegger may have concluded that his writings are too "philosophical" and that it is too difficult to follow many of his famous texts. But Heidegger also produced phenomenological studies on topics that any of us could have chosen, although we might feel challenged to come up with the same kinds of insights as Heidegger was able to offer. But that should not deter us from learning from Heidegger how to pursue a phenomenological question – such as the question of the meaning of the experience of boredom or being bored. It should be noted that these paragraphs are more detailed extensions of my more succinct discussion of the meaning of phenomenology in its original sense (van Manen, 2017).

Heidegger's exemplary phenomenological analysis of boredom is an apt focus for some reflections on phenomenological method. The phenomenological question is, "What is it like to be bored?". Heidegger appeals to our experience of boredom and, on that basis, he aims to express in language how our experience of boredom is structured. By way of concrete examples, Heidegger evokes the lived experience of being bored, ultimately distinguishing three forms or kinds of experiential meanings of boredom. When Heidegger engages in phenomenological explication, he "shows" or lets us see how various kinds of boredom appear or show themselves in our lives. Heidegger's reflections have nothing to do with the psychology of meaning attribution. The focus is not on *textual* meaning but on the meaning of the *experience* of being bored as we live through it.

In presenting the different modalities of boredom, Heidegger uses "examples" (imagined or real stories, anecdotes, fictional accounts, factual events, etc.) that we can readily, but only indirectly, grasp. Indeed, the meaning of the experience of boredom is "shown" through examples and experiential descriptions that we may have experienced ourselves. It is also possible that we may never have experienced certain dimensions or aspects of boredom. Or, perhaps, we happen to be living a very meaningful life, without any boredom. Or, in contrast, we never come to recognize how profoundly boring our life has been until we reach an age where we can no longer change ourselves, such as the character in Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. On his deathbed Ivan Ilyich finally came to the realization of how boringly wasted his life had been. It is a ghastly realization, causing him to scream, first "Oh! No!" and then just a perpetual, hollow "O" (Tolstoy, 1886/1981, p. 28). After opening the question about the significance of the question of the meaning of boredom, Heidegger starts with an anecdote that is a simple but fine example of a lived experience description:

> We are sitting, for example, in the tasteless station of some lonely minor railway. It is four hours until the next train arrives. The district is uninspiring. We do have a book in our backpack, though – shall we read? No. Or think through a problem, some question? We are unable to. We read the timetables or

> study the table giving the various distances from this station to other places we are not otherwise acquainted with at all. We look at the clock – only a quarter of an hour has gone by. Then we go out onto the local road. We walk up and down, just to have something to do. But it is no use. Then we count the trees along the road, look at our watch again – exactly five minutes since we last looked at it. Fed up with walking back and forth, we sit down on a stone, draw all kinds of figures in the sand, and in so doing catch ourselves looking at our watch yet again – half an hour – and so on. (Heidegger, 1929-30/1995, p. 93)

On first impression, this anecdote may appear to be a factual personal experiential description by Heidegger. But, actually, the tone is fictive. The account describes a singular experience, and yet it gives us an experiential sense of what the boredom of such a moment is like. Still, phenomenology is not psychology: it does not deal with your personal experience or with my personal experience. Even if the experiential account seems factual, it should be approached and analyzed as fictive, as merely plausible. It is of no consequence whether Heidegger took the lived experience from a novel or an interview, whether it is imagined or whether it had really happened to Heidegger. Phenomenologists will often, in fact, start an experiential story with, "Imagine that…" or "Suppose that …". For example, in his description of the objectifying look, Jean-Paul Sartre uses an imagined instant of spying on a couple in another room by listening at the door and looking through a keyhole: "Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole" (Sartre, 1956, p. 259). Or there is an example from Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he says, "Suppose that my friend Paul and I are looking at a landscape. What precisely happens?" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. 405, 406) (see also van Manen, 2014, pp. 243, 247; and Casey, 1981, pp. 176-201). In these examples from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre we can see how phenomenology starts with experience and subsequently aims to express meaningful reflections on experiential moments in language that is descriptive and interpretive, analytic and evocative (but not theoretic). Of course, with many authors the experiential and the reflective meanings of texts are intertwined.

Heidegger applies the eidetic reduction to study the phenomenological meaning of boredom. He uses the above anecdotal description of a lived experience of being bored while waiting. This is a phenomenological experiential "example". He then carefully explores – that is, reflectively interprets – various meaning aspects of waiting such as patience and impatient attunement. But in questioningly examining several variations (real and imagined) of kinds of experiences of boredom, he comes to conclude that there is no such thing as either patient or impatient boredom. He asks,

> What constitutes its boringness? Perhaps it is because it is a having to wait, i.e., because we are forced, coerced into a particular situation. This is why we become impatient. Thus, what really oppresses us is more this impatience. We want to escape from our impatience. Is boredom then this impatience? Is boredom therefore not some waiting, but this being impatient, not wanting or being able to wait, and for this reason being ill-humoured? Yet is boredom really an attunement of ill humour or even an impatience? Certainly, impatience can arise in connection with boredom. Nevertheless, it is neither identical with boredom, nor even a property of it. There is neither a patient nor an impatient boredom. (Heidegger, 1929-30/1995, p. 94)

After pointing out that our experience of boredom is not to be confused with impatience or other such aspects, Heidegger elevates the search for meaning by instilling (in the reader of his text) a sense of enigma about the experience of boredom and our presumptions about its meaning and existence. Yes, Heidegger's tone becomes increasingly one of wonder. He says,

> Strange: in this way we experience many kinds of things, yet it is precisely boredom itself that we cannot manage to grasp – almost as though we were looking for something that does not exist at all. It is *not* all the things we thought it was. It vanishes and flutters away from us. And yet – this impatient waiting, the walking up and down, counting trees, and all the other abandoned activities attest precisely to the fact that the boredom is there. We confirm and reinforce this evidence when we say that we are *almost dying of boredom*. (Heidegger, 1929-30/1995, p. 96)

I encourage the reader to read these reflective passages of Heidegger's original text on the meaning of boredom. Hopefully it makes clear what confuses John Paley when he keeps insisting that van Manen persists in being "under-specified" or methodologically unclear in attributing meaning to a text. How does van Manen get "from the text to the meaning?" "How is meaning distilled from a text?" (p. 5). Throughout his book, Paley's confusion is that he treats phenomenology as if it were an exercise in some kind of text or language analysis or meaning attribution to texts. It is not! Phenomenology is the analysis of lived experience or of the way that things show or give themselves in human experience or consciousness. Texts are used in the phenomenological effort to return to lived-through experience. The central effort of all phenomenology is to somehow return to the world as we originally experience it – to what is given in

lived pre-reflective experience, before we have conceptualized it, before we have even put words or names to it. It is not the mere meaning of words or concepts, but the experience itself. As Husserl himself says,

> ... we can absolutely not rest content with "mere words", i.e. with a merely symbolic understanding of words, such as we first have when we reflect on the sense of the laws for "concepts", "judgements," "truths," etc. (together with their manifold specifications) which are set up in pure logic. Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions – if by any intuitions at all – are not enough: we must go back to the "things themselves". (Husserl, 1900/1970, p. 252)

We must go back to the things themselves, to lived experience, to what and how we encounter things to be in experience. Unlike concept clarification, language analysis, or meaning attribution, the meaning of our experiences cannot be unequivocally represented by a word or a concept. While lived experience is, on first glance, shallow (because pre-reflective), it becomes increasingly enigmatic as we reflect on it. Heidegger's use of lived experience descriptions in another example of exploring the meaning of boredom makes this further manifest:

> We have been invited out somewhere for the evening. We do not need to go along. Still, we have been tense all day, and we have time in the evening. So, we go along. There we find the usual food and the usual table conversation, everything is not only very tasty, but tasteful as well. Afterward people sit together having a lively discussion, as they say, perhaps listening to music, having a chat, and things are witty and amusing. And already it is time to leave. The ladies assure us, not merely when leaving, but downstairs and outside too as we gather to leave, that it really was very nice, or that it was terribly charming. Indeed. There is nothing at all to be found that might have been boring about this evening, neither the conversation, nor the people, nor the rooms. Thus, we come home quite satisfied. We cast a quick glance at the work we interrupted that evening, make a rough assessment of things and look ahead to the next day – and then it comes: I was bored after all this evening, on the occasion of this invitation. (Heidegger, 1929-30/1995, p. 109)

While reflecting on the experiential significance of this second experiential anecdote, Heidegger wonders what this feeling of boredom consisted in. He wonders, "I was bored. But with what? With myself? Did I bore myself?". Yet he clearly recalls that not only was there nothing boring, but he was not even self-occupied, nor pensively reflective, which might have been the precondition for such boredom with self. After reflecting further on what the possible meaning of this second kind of boredom could have been, Heidegger proceeds to contrast the essences, the "essential moments", in these two experiences. He comes to an awareness that, in the first anecdote (of waiting for the train), there was the essential moment of "being held in limbo", while in the second account he was "being left empty". Heidegger states that in this way he may "discern the path leading to originary boredom" (p. 113). By the term "originary" Heidegger means the essential or inceptual meaning of the experience of boredom.

Now, I suspect, I will see the harried demeanour of John Paley: "How can Heidegger possibly come up with these meanings?" "Did he just attribute them?" "Why can he not be clearer and unequivocally tell us how exactly he arrives at the meaning of boredom?" "Why does he have to be so under-specified in his methodical determination of meaning?" "What then is boredom?" True, Heidegger's phenomenological explications turn increasingly subtle, complex, showing the rich ambiguity of lived meaning. At one point, Heidegger writes, "We know quite clearly that what bores us [in the second case] is indeed this 'I know not what', this thing that is indeterminate and unfamiliar. The question is: What does it mean to say that this thing which is indeterminate and unfamiliar bores us?" (p. 119). But, unfortunately, this is not the attributive theoretic clarity that Paley would have in mind.

Heidegger pursues the phenomenology of boredom by inducing us to wonder about its meaning. Wonder deepens the question of the meaning of boredom. Phenomenological inquiry proceeds through wonder. For Heidegger, wonder is a basic "disposition", and this disposition of wondering about the meaning of what gives itself (as boredom) is the beginning of phenomenological inquiry. This wonder leads us to the pure acknowledgment of the unusualness of the usual. It is not the unusualness, but the usualness of everyday common experience that is unusual and that brings us to wonder and stirs the desire to understand the meanings of our lived through experiences, such as boredom. Heidegger's insights into the lived meaning of boredom serve to help us reflect on the realization that many of our lives are contaminated by profound boredom. Only by realizing how all forms of boredom ultimately lead to the unsettling sense of profound boredom can we hope to turn our lives in more meaningful directions. Heidegger's insightful phenomenology of boredom is anything but boring – although I realize that Paley may become impatient with his style of thinking and writing.

Phenomenological Meaning

For the benefit of Paley, I have quoted a few opening

paragraphs from Heidegger's hundred page study of boredom in order to show that, even though Heidegger is known for his fundamental philosophical explications of the ontological conditions and possibilities of hermeneutic phenomenology, his studies of phenomena such as boredom, anxiety, technology, and wonder (even while pursued in the context of philosophical topics) actually are surprisingly recognizable instances of contemporary human science methods and the use of empirical or experiential examples. Heidegger's studies of concrete experiential topics also show that the traditional distinctions between philosophical phenomenology and human science based phenomenology are tenuous and difficult to sustain when it comes to these professional or life practice topics. Indeed, this study on boredom by Heidegger uncannily resembles the kind of research studies that now often are published under the flag of empirical phenomenology. I can imagine that phenomenological studies of boredom could be highly relevant for health care professionals working with bedridden patients. However, it should be realized that, in a phenomenological research context, "empirical" means experiential, and does not mean experimental, sample-driven, generalizing, empirical analytic in the sense that Paley suggests.

It does not matter whether lived experience descriptions are derived from factually or historically observed events, whether they are recorded accounts from reliable witnesses, or whether these are personal experiences. Once the accounts are engaged and mediated in phenomenological reflection, they are transfigured and reduced – or perhaps we should say "elevated" – to the status of "fiction" in the sense that they could have been imagined examples (van Manen, 1990, p. 248). Husserl (1913/1983, p. 160) underscored the methodological importance of fiction for phenomenological inquiry:

> Extraordinary profit can be drawn from the offerings of history, in an even more abundant measure from those of art, and especially from poetry which are, to be sure, imaginary but which, in the originality of their invention of forms [*Neugestaltungen*], the abundance of their single features and the unbrokenness of their motivation, tower high above the products of our phantasy and, in addition, when they are apprehended understandingly, become converted into perfectedly clear phantasies with particular ease owing to the suggestive power exerted by artistic means of presentation. Thus, if one is fond of paradoxical phrases, one can actually say, and if one means the ambiguous phrase in the right sense, one can say in strict truth, that "feigning" [*Fiktion*] makes up the vital element of phenomenology as of every other eidetic science, that feigning is the source from which the cognition of "eternal truths" is fed.

In RLE, I explain the methodology of using fictional experiential descriptions of human experiences. What Husserl confirms here is that essentially the data for phenomenological reflection are fictionalized or fictitious. Even so-called empirical (factual) data are treated as fiction since they are not used for the purpose of empirical generalization or for making factual claims about certain phenomena or events (Husserl, 1913/1983, p. 248).

So, it appears that Paley completely misunderstands the method of phenomenological meaning and the function of lived experience descriptions that he criticizes with his meaning attribution theory. He criticizes my pedagogical examples in RLE of gathering experiential descriptions of children's experiences of feeling left or abandoned. Lived experience descriptions of children's feeling abandoned or left are similar to Heidegger's anecdotes about being bored. These descriptions aim to capture the subjectivity of a lived experience, but, as I explain in RLE, when we try to capture a particular experience such as "being left", then one is always too late. As soon as we describe what it is we experience, the experience is no longer present. There is also the additional issue that experiential descriptions inevitably objectify the subjectivity of the lived experience. When reflecting on a description of any lived experience, the question is not what meaning can I attribute to this text, but what meaning inheres in the lived experience that this description of "being left" expresses. This reflective move (the epoché and the reduction) is from text back to experience as lived. Actually, I have never engaged in a full-fledged phenomenological study of "children being left or abandoned" as Paley implies with his misunderstood title of his van Manen chapter. I merely used some anecdotes in my introductory text RLE as teaching examples of writing and editing lived experience descriptions that might help us to retrieve the lived meaning of the experience in a phenomenologically written reflective text. But lived experience descriptions are not yet phenomenological studies – they are merely the initial data for thematic explorations and subsequent phenomenological analysis: in other words, reflective writing.

When searching for the meaning of lived experience descriptions one must constantly ask, "How does this text speak to the meaning of the experience as lived through?" It is the experience as lived that is the arbiter of the meaning of phenomenological reflection on a lived experience description, just as in the excerpts from Heidegger's reflections on his experiential accounts of being bored. Phenomenology aims to evoke the lived meaning and asks of readers to recognize this meaning in their own lives. This has nothing to do with the constructivist intent inherent in Paley's use of meaning attribution. Paley's critique of my work consists of selecting a few teaching samples of "lived experience descriptions" that are provided simply as an introductory

discussion of phenomenological inquiry. My own stated intent was to gain reflective access to the phenomenology of children feeling left or abandoned, in the same way as Heidegger's intent was to gain reflective access to the experience of being bored.

Why, in this introductory RLE, did I use the example of children's experience of being left or abandoned? The reason is that my personal and educational research interest is pedagogical. Many government bureaucrats, judges, social workers and other childcare workers who have removed children from their mothers and fathers and subjected them to attending residential schools could benefit from a better understanding of what it is like for a young child to be taken from his or her family and sometimes not being able even to visit them for many years. We also know that there are millions of young children who have been left or abandoned after their parents are lost or killed in wars and armed conflicts. In newspapers we read of children who are torn from their adoptive parents because of political and ethical issues. Britain plucked children as young as four years old from their mothers under the so-called empire plan to send cheap child labour to the colonies. Some psychiatrists say that many of these children have been traumatized in ways that may never be healed. How can we understand the childhood experience of being taken away, left or abandoned? It would have been encouraging if Paley could have taken up this phenomenological question.

Paley's Phenomenology of Empathy

In his book, PQR, Paley seems to make an important promise about doing a phenomenological study. He says, in the remainder of the last chapter, "I present an extended example, of my own" based on a published PQR study of empathy (p. 159). I was for a brief moment delighted: Paley is genuinely interested in the phenomenology of empathy! I was genuinely looking forward to reading this practical example of Paley, but soon realized that it is not Paley who gives an example of phenomenological research and taking responsibility for its method and insights. He is again playing the role of critic. This is disappointing, since I had gone to the trouble of searching in vain through some 30 journal articles by Paley in the hope of finding an actual single phenomenological research study. There is none. Not one. Astonishingly, almost all of Paley's published "work" consists of critiques of others' attempts to do various kinds of qualitative nursing research. I could not even find a dissertation that might demonstrate an effort on Paley's part to do phenomenology. Often graduate students learn to do research in their dissertation project. I do not know if Paley ever wrote a dissertation or what it might look like. But surely, in British universities, an academic without doctoral research experience would not be considered qualified to teach nursing students, and even less permitted to give research advice to graduate students?

Whatever the case, the last chapter of Paley's PQR is proclaimed to deal with the phenomenology of empathy. Since Paley seems determined to invest himself in this study, I anticipated that, finally, he would turn to the phenomenological literature. How can one possibly hope to do an explication or a critique of the phenomenology of empathy without including the phenomenological literature? Surely, Paley should know that empathy was an enduring theme in Husserl's writings (see, for example, 1913/1989). Edith Stein (1917/1989) wrote a now classic study on empathy under the tutelage of Husserl (in which, inter alia, she reviews Theodor Lipps's inceptual study about *Einfühlung,* empathy). Max Scheler (1913/1970) is well-known for his path-breaking phenomenological study on sympathy and empathy. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote extensively on the related theme of intersubjectivity. And, more recently, Dan Zahavi wrote brilliantly on the phenomenology of empathy in his *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (2014, pp. 112-152). But, rather than find an engaging contemporary study on some aspect of the phenomenology of empathy, I am sorry to say that I found only that Paley completely ignores the phenomenological question of the lived meaning of the phenomenon of empathy: how empathy is experienced.

Instead, in his chapter headed "Meaning, Models and Mechanisms", Paley turns his attention to an article by Tavakol et al. (2012), "Medical Students' Understanding of Empathy: A Phenomenological Study". Paley seems energized by the question of how a group of medical students share opinions and views on the meaning of empathy. And he is interested whether, during their studies, empathy declines in these students. However, this is entirely an empirical psychological concern. These medical students' understanding of the meaning of empathy and the possible decline of empathy in these students' attitudes is not a question that can be addressed by phenomenology. Phenomenology is, firstly, not a perception or opinion study, and, secondly, it is not a quantitative social science that can make generalizing claims regarding the increase or decrease of empathy in a particular population of students. If this Chapter 7 of Paley's PQR is therefore meant to demonstrate how phenomenology should be done, then the selected study is a disappointingly faulty example.

Being John Paley

Finally, some comment on the nature of critique and criticism that Paley practises is warranted. I have been taken aback by the negative tone that Paley employs. To be sure, my work has been subject to critique such as by Amedeo Giorgi (2006), and while we disagree on certain things, I appreciate the scholarship of Giorgi's critique. But Paley's critical approach and tone is needlessly disrespectful and uninformed. Therefore, I consider it appropriate to quote six of Paley's colleagues: Vincent Deary, Ian Deary, Hugh McKenna, Tanya McCance,

Roger Watson, and Amandah Hoogbruin, who comment on the rhetorical form of Paley's limited and limiting kind of criticism. Deary and colleagues (2002, p. 97) describe Paley's critique of research studies of caring in nursing as follows:

> Paley's (2001) critique of caring research is very much a trademark of his (Paley, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998, 2000). Paley makes no contribution to the empirical literature. Rather, he aims his criticism at those who dare to collect data and, thereby, push forward the boundaries of science. Paley's only contribution to the field of caring is to suggest that research into the phenomenon should cease.
>
> It is easy to criticize a research methodology, but Paley goes further: he criticizes the people who use this methodology, and this is not the usual way to mount a critique in science.

In the closing paragraph of their paper, Deary and his colleagues twice use the qualitative adjective "lazy" to describe Paley's critical commentary, and state roundly that "Paley's tone becomes as abusive as it is incorrect" (p. 100). Somewhat surprisingly, Paley confesses that his critiques have been described by others "variously as naïve, disrespectful, demeaning, paternalistic, arrogant, reifying, indicative of a closed mind, akin to positivism, a procrustean bed, a perpetuation of fraud, a matter of faith, an attempt to secure ideological power, and a perspective that puritanically forbids interesting philosophical topics" (Paley, 2010, p. 178). It is indeed a high horse Paley has decided to mount in his operatic Don Quixote struggle with phenomenological methodology.

For the reader interested in phenomenology, John Paley's *Phenomenology as Qualitative Research* thus offers nothing constructive about phenomenological methodology – but it does provide a lesson and reminder that it is easier to criticize than to do better.

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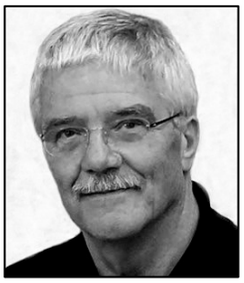

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