



Disciplinarity in Phenomenological Perspective

by Lester Embree

Abstract

This essay starts by outlining what the author considers to be the three general properties of the phenomenological approach. This approach is then taken to the question of what an academic discipline is and how one becomes a member of a discipline, with some positive and negative aspects that can develop considered. Demonstrating how phenomenological questions can be asked and answered, this approach invites attempts to confirm, correct and extend the account through more reflective analysis.

Introduction

This essay has two parts. In the first I describe what I consider to be the three general properties of the phenomenological approach, and in the second I take this approach to the question of what an academic discipline is and how one becomes a member of a discipline, with some positive and negative aspects that can develop then considered. In the process, what is presented serves as a demonstration of how phenomenological questions can be asked and answered. And this approach invites attempts to confirm, correct and extend the account through more reflective analysis.

Generic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is usually encountered with disciplinary specification and, although there is phenomenology in some three dozen other disciplines, this specification is still often that of the discipline of philosophy, so that probably most colleagues simply understand phenomenology to be a type of philosophy, a philosophical school of thought. Given the phenomenological tendencies in many other disciplines, however, it would seem proper always to express the entire specification, and thus to

speaking specifically of “philosophical phenomenology”, “communicological phenomenology”, “sociological phenomenology”, “psychological phenomenology”, and so forth. Alternatively, if one’s concern is more specifically with the proliferation of schools of thought within disciplines, one can speak of “phenomenological philosophy”, “phenomenological sociology”, and so on.

To grasp the genus of the phenomenological approach, one needs to abstract from whatever disciplinary specification one begins from. Having pondered this matter awhile, I have come to believe that “generic phenomenology”, as it may then be called, has three properties, so that it can be said to be reflective, descriptive and culture appreciative. I will now take these properties up in this order.

(1) In being *reflective*, phenomenology is conducted in a theoretical attitude in which one is no longer – as is usual – unreflective or straightforward and thus oblivious of how things are given, appear, and are believed in, valued, and willed, and in which one also does one not thematize one’s own mental life, although the mental lives of Others are regularly encountered. When one then reflects, however, one can observe oneself as an I with attitudes including

the reflective and straightforward attitudes, one can observe components within how one encounters things (taking “things” so broadly that anything is a “thing”), and one can observe how there are various types of experiencing and, in broad significations, various modes of believing, valuing and willing, as well as, correlatively, in things-as-encountered, specifically things-as-experienced, as-believed-in, as-valued and as-willed in manifold ways. And what I have just said amounts to an initial reflective analysis and description.

Most accounts of reflection fail to recognize that it takes two major forms. What has been sketched in the previous paragraph can be said to be based on the type of reflection best called “self-observation”. But there can also be “reflection on others”. Sitting on a bench in the park, I can encounter another person seated on a bench across the walk from me whom I notice watching a frisky puppy being walked on a leash between us. In this case I can focus on how this Other is not only perceiving in a predominantly visual way, but also note how she is at least mildly enjoying the sight, as well as that she perceives the dog through the side opposite that through which I perceive the dog. Already I somehow have access to the mental life of the other and her predominantly visual and affective encountering, and to the thing encountered by her as-encountered. In saying “predominantly” I intend that auditory and tactual as well as volitional and belief aspects are subordinate or latent in what I reflectively observe in this Other.

Then, again, this Other across the walk might have a friend seated with her Other, and her comment, or perhaps her noticed amused watching, motivates her friend to watch the playful puppy too. In this slightly more complex case, I can reflect on a minimal group to which the two Others belong. Similarly, I might also be with a friend, and we form a We opposite the You of two and are thereby able to engage in a more complicated collective self-observation as well as a more complicated collective reflection on Others. If all four of us notice what we are enjoying and how, then there is a reflectively observable group of four that may be articulated into two groups of two. And for all of these humans there is one thing reflectively observable as-encountered in four slightly different ways. Phenomenology is thus more than individual self-observation and description.

(2) On the basis of reflection and analysis, one can produce *descriptions*. Usually because we have practical purposes, we often engage in explanation hastily, with trying to say why something happens, for that can be a basis for affecting outcomes through manipulating causal circumstances. But one needs to know what things are before one can specify the circumstances under which they arise, change, or are

eliminated. Descriptions are of what things are. They can be of particular things, such as “The cow is in the barn”, but they can also be in universal or eidetic terms, for instance “Cows are mammals”. We seem to describe in universal terms more than we do in particular terms. Some thinkers contrast interpretation, which strictly speaking relates to linguistic expressions, with description, but both have in common the determination of what things are before relating to other things, their causes and effects first of all. The question of *what* best comes before the question of *why*.

Being descriptive is also opposed to being argumentative. Phenomenologists do sometimes offer arguments, just as they do sometimes offer explanations, but these are not predominant in the accounting for things in the reflective-analytic approach. What is typical in phenomenology is instead the procedure of beginning from something that is somewhat familiar, reflectively analyzing how it is encountered, and then expressing a richer comprehension of the thing in question. For example, one might begin with how the encountering of things includes the components of believing, valuing and willing, and then go on to distinguish the modalities of positive, negative and neutral in each of them. Then, again, one can describe how there can be intrinsic/extrinsic differences in things-as-positing in the three ways, a distinction that is probably most familiar in the relation of ends and means.

Finally, phenomenological descriptions are most effective if related to carefully chosen examples, which I have attempted to do with the watching of the amusing puppy walk by in the park.

(3) My claim that phenomenology is *culture appreciative* will be novel for some readers of this exposition, but most phenomenologists know that the *Lebenswelt*, which is the foundation of science and philosophy, is originally and concretely social and cultural. Ignorance of this may ultimately be due to the naturalism in Western thought that goes back to pre-Socratic philosophy, because naturalism tends to exclude the values and uses of things along with alleged supernatural causes. But, just as there always are believing, valuing and willing in mental life concretely considered, there are always also belief characteristics, values and uses to the things that are concretely encountered. And this is so even if such characteristics are either overlooked or deliberately disregarded.

When the mentioned characteristics of things-as-encountered are not only learned but also shared in groups, they are most appropriately called “basic cultural characteristics”. Most technical terms in the cultural disciplines, for example sociology or nursing,

such as “mother” or “patient”, include reference to cultural characteristics – that is, values and uses – in their adequate definitions. And better recognized than this “basic culture” that is always already there, is the additional culture of common-sense interpretation in terms of ideal types that Alfred Schutz emphasized, so that there are then two especially important types of culture. In addition, the so-called “high culture” of fine art and classical music and the “popular culture” of fashion and advertising need also to be recognized. Under the influence of naturalism, the cultural can be overlooked or disregarded, but it is always already there and needs to be recognized for theoretical and practical purposes in phenomenology. Can there be a mother without value, and is a patient’s health not that to which care is a means?

Reflection, description and culture appreciation are the three generic properties of the phenomenological approach in general, after which this approach can be specified by the discipline, given that, as already suggested, phenomenology is typically encountered in disciplinary forms.

What Is Disciplinarity?

“Disciplinarity” is the distinctive property that the groups called disciplines and also their members have. The likely reader of this presentation might be said then to be, in an odd usage, “disciplined”, but, in order to avoid the connotation of children being punished, the ugly neologism “disciplinizing” and derivatives will be used here. This seems best clarified beginning with a crude description of how individual disciplinarity is developed, with a more refined analysis attempted thereafter.

Humans are born into pre-existing societies and acquire culture from those around them as they grow up. By going to school they become somewhat educated. As college undergraduates they begin to be disciplined in the disciplines that they major in, and this can be continued more intensively in subsequent graduate or professional schooling. What they learn is a field-specific jargon – “deducible”, for example, being probably less used in history than in philosophy. One also learns what counts and does not count as a theoretical or practical problem in the particular disciplinary perspective. Then, again, there are the types of texts that one ought to try to write and publish, and there are the best outlets through which to do so, and the same goes for speaking at professional societies. Most disciplines have their own distinctive citation forms by which outsiders can recognize authors as different and by which insiders can recognize one another. Furthermore, there is an ever-changing hierarchy of institutions in each discipline at which to study and work that the disciplined member needs to keep up with.

Another thing members of disciplines learn about is founding figures and texts. They do not always know these well, but they are expected to express at least conventional interpretations when necessary. Even outsiders can connect disciplines and even famous books with figures such as Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, Emil Durkheim, David Hume, John Maynard Keynes and Niccolò Machiavelli. Disciplines also typically have conventional histories, which are often rather simplistic and mythological.

Within disciplines there are, furthermore, specialties, such as theory of logic, which some seem to think is the whole of philosophy, and then there are schools of thought, such as Straussianism in political science, which members within a discipline may either support and belong to or oppose. Marxism, phenomenology and positivism are schools of thought found opposed to one another in many cultural-scientific disciplines. Even within the various schools of thought there are professionally more and less powerful positions that one learns to be aware of. Finally, there is variation within disciplines due to nationality and language that the disciplined professional needs to know something about. French phenomenology, for instance, is different from German.

A colleague once challenged my interest, following Alfred Schutz, in disciplinary definitions on the ground that I was fostering orthodoxy. To the degree that I succeed in calling attention to disciplinarity, however, I hope to get orthodoxy, which is usually subtle and implicit, to be explicitly confronted. Possibly the biggest problem with unexposed orthodoxy is that excessive narrowness works against learning from convergent research in other disciplines. Good fences make good neighbours only if they are not so high that one cannot look and talk over them.

Let me now attempt reflectively to analyze the thing, disciplinarity, that has just been crudely described, and to do so let me look for the components of experience, belief, valuation, but still try not to get too technical in my descriptions. I begin with the probably typical high-school student’s perspective. Such a student regularly recognizes who is an English teacher, a Chemistry teacher, and so on, and it is not unusual for one teacher to teach several subjects. Thus I learned geometry with great pleasure and insight from a gym teacher who was best known around my high school as the basketball coach. If such high-school teachers consider themselves members of disciplines, it seems unlikely that their disciplinarity will be recognized in the descriptions of them by students. I did not think of my geometry teacher as a mathematician, and it never occurred to me that any of my teachers engaged in research, were awarded grants, published, or went to conferences.

In college this typically begins to change. Teachers are in disciplinarily identified departments, such as sociology, and are then believed by themselves and fellow sociologists, as well as by members of other disciplinarily identified departments, to be sociologists. This is something students learn from early on and begin to appreciate more deeply, especially if they become majors, and this is so even if the teachers are still called “professors” when they have forgotten that they need to conduct research so that they have original or at least well-founded opinions to profess. And the college student not only begins to learn discipline-specific terminologies and titles, but also learns to believe in the sources of her professors’ “professions”, with these encompassing not only where the professors studied, but also their various subsequent experiences, including research projects and special workshops.

Besides learning both generally academic and disciplinarily specific language and coming to believe many things that are important in a discipline, the student comes to value and will with respect to disciplines encountered in college, indirectly as well as directly. Disciplinarity is directly encountered when the undergraduate student takes a class in a discipline, but before that the decision about whether to take a class is influenced by what friends as well as advisors say, among other things. One can dislike, for instance, economics, on the basis of what one hears about it. In that case, one decides not to take a course and does not begin to become disciplined in that discipline. Phenomenologically speaking, economics thus acquires negative value and negative use for the student in question. Clearly this is irrational to some degree, but it does seem how things happen

The contrary can occur, however. The student accepts advice about trying a course in a discipline, enjoys it, her positive valuing is then intensified, she takes additional courses, and eventually she decides to become, for instance, an economics major, no doubt in part because she has also come to believe that there are opportunities for employment that she would enjoy and for which a degree in the discipline would qualify her. The positive valuing is intensified, and positive willing of outcomes from the acquisition of disciplinary preparation is motivated by that valuing. The student can, however, be subject to disapproval and worse by her peers as well as by her professors – for example, if a student in a positivistic school of thought within a social science were to disparage mathematization, it would be unconscionable, and even to mention the existence of interpretive and qualitative approaches might not be tolerated.

This process of social approval and disapproval can lead to and then continue with more intensity in graduate school, where the sense of belonging to a

disciplinary in-group grows stronger along with how often stereotypical belief, valuing and willing attitudes toward other disciplines are encouraged – for example, how sociology is superior to all the other social sciences, not to speak of naturalistic scientists who scoff at the notion that social sciences are anything more than social studies disciplines that develop stories and not genuine knowledge. As previously mentioned, members of disciplines tend also to join various tendencies and schools of thought within them; these can be competitive and even antagonistic, but within them there is again mutual approval and assistance against the background of discipline-wide mutual approval and assistance. Tendencies, schools of thought and disciplines are continued only if their members work together. This even holds on the interdisciplinary level.

These processes continue beyond graduate school into the professions. “Disciplinizing”, as it might be called, is a type of enculturation by which much that is specific about language, experiencing, believing, valuing and willing is learned, belongs to members of groups, and is thus cultural. It does not stop; as one advances in one’s career, however, one tends to become more active in disciplinizing others than in passively being disciplined by them. Also, one can tend to become more conscious of disciplinarity and disciplinizing. Finally, it needs to be clearly recognized that disciplines are historical and change over time and that a good professional constantly seeks not to fall too far behind.

What I have said is familiar to the likely reader of the present exposition, but if some aspects of my analysis of the disciplinarity that all professionals participate in throughout their careers are novel, then I will have made a contribution. Moreover, the emphasis on experiencing, believing, valuing and willing, and on things as-experienced, as-believed in, as-valued and as-willed, makes this sketch phenomenological in a rudimentary way that leaves it obvious that investigation can go deeper. In this respect I would be grateful for corrections and additions.

Disciplines are good things inasmuch as research and improvements in practice benefit from being distinctly focused, with matters that are not relevant to the tasks at hand excluded, and this requires not only study and experience, but what amounts to indoctrination, as I have attempted to sketch above. But disciplinarity can be a bad thing. Being too narrow and focused to appreciate convergent thought in other disciplines has been alluded to above. Effective interdisciplinarity presupposes on all sides good preparation in the interacting disciplines and serious respect between them as well.

Interestingly, disciplined professionals tend to have

and enjoy what can be considered “superiority complexes”. Some sociologists believe in their heart of hearts that theirs is the master social science, while some historians can be sure that deeper understanding of how things have come to be and changed over time is the most important form of understanding; yet ethnologists question the objectivity of results from focusing on a single culture, while economists are convinced that they are the ones who investigate what is really fundamental, and so forth.

Wise professionals are acquainted with the conceits of members of other disciplines as well as their own.

Smart professionals do not express such high appreciations of their own disciplinarizations that they can be seen to manifest “disciplinary arrogance”. That is counter-productive in many ways, above all in its effect on interdisciplinary projects, but also in its impact on politics within academic and professional institutions. “Disciplinary modesty”, even if feigned – as modesty often is – is more effective, especially when one encounters how very strange the foreign cultures of other disciplines can be. And tolerance must always be cultivated if maximum interdisciplinary benefits are to be reaped by the disciplined.

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Professor Embree has produced over 200 publications in the areas of modern philosophy, the theory of science, and constitutive phenomenology, including three books: *Reflective Analysis* (2006 in English; also in Castilian, Chinese, Japanese, Polish, Romanian and Russian, with translations into Czech, French, German, Korean and Portuguese in various stages), *Fenomenologia Continuada* (2007) and *Environment, Technology, and Justification* (2009). Currently he is in the process of completing a text on Alfred Schütz’s theory of the cultural sciences. He has also edited, translated and co-edited several dozen collective volumes, and served as General Editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Phenomenology* (1997).

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