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Nothing but Phenomenology…

Tone Saevi, NLA University-College, School of Education, Bergen, Norway
Email: ts@nla.no

But is this phenomenology?

In *Phenomenology & Practice* (P&P) the editors always become entwined with our phenomenological authors and, frequently, with phenomenologists belonging to one of the many existing phenomenological genres different from the one we prefer in P&P.

Although an author may not claim affiliation with a particular school of phenomenological practice, or even speak clearly of this orientation, his or her text almost always does. When reading and reflecting on the submitted papers, the author's phenomenological intention and insights are opened up to us; thus, his or her personal qualifications as a phenomenologist become almost tangible. A phenomenological text speaks about the phenomenon and the theoretical, reflective and experiential qualities of the inquiry. But, the text also speaks with a voice that belongs to the author; we learn to recognize the multitude of voices – the voice of the text, the personal voice of the author, and the voice of the phenomenological tradition to which the author orients him or herself. In encountering the authors and the entwined voices of their text, every now and then we read phenomenological texts that are simply excellent in experiential analyses. They have rich phenomenal insights, demonstrate a talent for phenomenological writing, and open the readers up to the phenomenon stunningly and, often, provocatively. We are thankful that the author chose P&P. But, we also sometimes wonder if and how a phenomenological work like this is read, discussed, respected, and academically valued in the authors' respective universities, among their collegium? How is the academic life for the most devoted and steadfast of the phenomenologists?

And are you a phenomenologist?

Contemporary phenomenologists, like you and I, often hope to achieve academic distinction, or to be designated for a fast promotion through the professorial steps. Yet, we ask: Are doing phenomenology and working for academic advancement natural companions, or are they incommensurable in such a way that we as phenomenologists achieve university positions, advancements and degrees, not by *doing* phenomenology, but rather, *not* doing it? In other words, do phenomenologists have to do something else in the realm of publications, something more acceptable in order to advance quicker, or to advance at all? I know of cases where competent phenomenological researchers decided to earn a professorship by following a different research track, dismissing phenomenological publications and teaching, as a mainstream way to advancement. Furthermore, many of us practicing phenomenologists know of cases where good phenomenologists, tenure notwithstanding, practice phenomenology as method. My lot is not to judge, but to recognize one of the numerous touchstones on which a phenomenologist is tested, and the sacrifices made to pursue quality phenomenological writing and research.

Independent of academic status, the most crucial issue for a phenomenologist is the writing itself. From van Manen we learn that *writing* phenomenology and writing *about* phenomenology are two distinctly different activities. But what does it mean to write *about*

phenomenology? And what does it mean to *write* phenomenology? At the heart of this question is a difference in practice. Therefore, we must ask: How do we phenomenologically express the distinction? Could we, through distinctive examples of each, as well as examples from the grey area of the outskirts of phenomenological writings, make sense of some prime qualities of both? This is a core concern for the P&P editorial team when we consider and try to decide which of the submissions we should send for review; publications that promise the reflective qualities of the journal.

The editorial team of P&P consists of hermeneutic phenomenologists approaching the "fine human science" of the Dutch School orientation. However, there are other schools and movements, some of which are represented in our editorial board. P&P has always maintained an open and inclusive philosophy when accepting submissions. Hence, the decisive factor is whether the papers are well written and argued. As the scope statement for our journal indicates, we encourage and give preference to experiential papers with *pathic* linguistic qualities in form and content. While this is the case, we would like also to be a journal for the many good phenomenological papers that might evolve from or "belong to" other phenomenological traditions, as long as they have qualities that can be called phenomenological. But, what do phenomenological qualities actually mean? How can we distinguish a good phenomenological paper from a not-so-good reflection?

P&P is a phenomenological, methodological peer-reviewed journal with the purpose of helping the authors find and keep their own phenomenological voice. We constantly discuss how to review tactfully, edit respectfully, gently advise in order to strengthen the language, and simultaneously *listen* for the voice of the author. But, how can we edify our strenuous awareness of the unique personal expression and at the same time learn to listen to new voices and expressions… voices we, until now, have been more or less unfamiliar with?

As one of the few phenomenological journals in the field of methodology and professional practice – phenomenology of practice – P&P holds a niche in publication world. We receive submissions from various phenomenological movements, methodologies, perspectives and angles – approaches that represent a plurality of writing styles, preferences of linguistics, methods, and degrees of phenomenological attentiveness. As a hermeneutic phenom-enological journal we have our preference, and so, we presume, have you. Our task as editorial team is to draw the line between what is what in methodology, and make a decision about what good phenomenological writing is independent of phenomenological methodologies.

This is not …?

Occasionally we read papers that claim to be phenomenological, but after considerable editorial effort, still cannot find phenomenological qualities distinct from other qualities relevant to qualitative research. You might ask: What, in fact, are the crucial differences? Are they *more than* the rigorous method of the reduction or *epoche*? Are they *more than* a felt sense of what good phenomenology is? Is a phenomenological reflection hermeneutical or not? And, if it is, in what ways and to what degree? What does it mean to give preference to the *experiential* in phenomenology? What is a compelling description of a phenomenon and what do I do with this description as means in order to explore it? This is an ongoing debate, recognizable in conference themes, in other journals' considerations and decisions within the publication process, and as a personal worry for the individual who is the new emerging phenomenologist. Still, somehow, the debate seems to be restrained and kept as a personal preference based on evasive phenomenological criteria preferred by the various phenomenological genres, styles, and traditions—either you fit the tradition or not!

To anchor this reflection, one might ask if it really is attainable for human science researchers to do genuine phenomenological writing today. We, as academics, are often caught in the time-trap of documentation and production. Is there a possibility that this is why we accept imitations holding the brand of phenomenology (lightweights, texts that 'work')? We know that being a phenomenologist is hard work; seeing, reflecting, and writing from a perspective of lived human experience is a daunting task. As a phenomenologist, and the editor of a phenomenological journal, I am acutely aware of the problems, publication challenges, and of the dilemmas in phenomenological writing and reflection. I am constantly tested in my own seeing and writing to truly reflect on how I see in order to see the world, and how I "let" the world speak to me.

Recently, in the review process of a phenomenological journal for one of my own texts, one of the reviewers converted the questions I had posed in the paper into distinct statements, because, as s/he said, I made use of too many "rhetorical questions, and rhetorical questions are usually not considered appropriate for academic writing." However, the questions were not rhetorical, but genuine and insoluble questions (questions to which I did not know the answer) to help me maneuver my thinking through the complex and insecure textual exploration. In short, there are no answers in lifeworld phenomena, only questions to draw one into reflection. Poignant and open phenomenological questions were mistaken for being rhetorical, the eloquent art of a debater, and subsequently replaced by a series of irreproachable statements—as the mind of the empirical thinker or the erroneous practice of structure/rigor in the guise of qualitative research. A view of phenomenology was somehow refused as a style unacceptable in academic writing. Paradoxically, though, the word *academic,* used in the argument, indicates ways of researching that *do not lead to a decision.* Academic writing and publishing at its roots is open to questioning, rather than to a conclusive certitude. In academia, where many scholars reside, one might think that there is a connection between the name of the place and the persons inhabiting the place. And there is. The term 'scholar,' which has a connection to the educational institution called school, the latter originally referring to a place where one might spend one's *leisure time,* have connotations like *holding back* or *keeping clear.* In academia, scholars usually do hold back and try to refrain from statements and certainty, just like in phenomenology. We have an obligation to be honest in how we represent the world of human phenomena—honest reflections of lived experience.

Nothing but …?

I think, as editors of P&P, we deal with double or even triple layers of ethical questioning when publishing: First, we are responsible for phenomenology as discipline, practical and theoretical, experiential and existential; second, we are responsible for publishing insightful papers in ways that do justice to the various fields in which the author has interest; and third, we are responsible for encountering the author as a person, thus we care for them as a person and a phenomenologist, and if needed, teach or guide to the best possible insightful text.

To me, there is nothing but phenomenology. Phenomenology, to me, ties things together and makes sense of the world in life and research. Phenomenology is inventive, unruly and spontaneous—it does not *make sense* in conventional terms. But, to my sense of life as felt-sensed-reflected, phenomenology makes sense at a level of *living* it rather than thinking of it—living through the experience—*doing* phenomenology. This, I think, is the key when it comes to the difference between writing phenomenology and writing about phenomenology. This also has to do with my wish to do phenomenology, alongside what happens in my academic life. Phenomenological writing takes me not only to places I never

thought of going, but it catches me, and at times takes me hostage to my own reflecting of the human condition. I cannot go back to where I was before I began to see what I did not see before. As a kind of captive to a lived moment, I think I'm left to be here and to follow phenomenology's lead.

This August, a hermeneutic phenomenological society will see the light of day, and P&P is intended to be its spin axis. A number of practicing phenomenologists have been planning the creation of an association with the mission of plurality, inclusiveness and flexibly. Our only dependence will be on a variety of enthusiastic persons from diverse continents and with good and fruitful phenomenological intents. We will, with this association, try to form structures to support current and new phenomenologists as they encounter new and unknown phenomena. As phenomenologists, we share a constant doubtful hesitation as well as an inquisitive eagerness, and we believe that a society is a good way to take care of both—by constantly questioning our world, knowing we can never attain the answers—only glimpses of what it means to be a human being.