

What is Phenomenology? And why do we need to know?

Fiona Campbell, Australia

It will become of special importance in Spiritual Science that we should bear in mind not only the 'What' (the matter) but the 'How' (the manner): that we should really bestir ourselves gradually to acquire ideas of a world quite different from the ordinary physical world, and thus gradually to accustom ourselves to form conceptions different from those we can build so comfortably in the physical world.

Rudolf Steiner¹

The Stream of Life Research Studio is a collective that investigates the dynamic activity of the formative forces in cosmos, nature, and human being. The collective has a special interest in the application of phenomenology that extends beyond the world of the natural science into the arts and human sciences. As a follow-up to our article *Reading the World Script: A Threefold Research Process* (Pacifica Journal no. 62, Vol. 1), we submit this report on our recent activities.

There is something of a tradition in anthroposophical circles to see Anthroposophy as content, as a body of knowledge to be studied, pondered, and collected. But knowledge is something other than the sum of what is known. Knowledge is action, is “an event, a mental occurrence”, states Zajonc² and thinking is a “productive act”³ and we should approach anthroposophic-based investigations in this light. *How* we conduct our research is as important as *what* we research. Indeed, the process can be more important than the end result, for this gives us the possibility for growth beyond ourselves.

Considering this, *Stream of Life* recently facilitated an online dialogue on the nature of phenomenology with its many faces. After presenting a successful series of *World Script* webinars that culminated in a conference on *The Effect of Thinking on the Health of Our Ecosystems* in March 2022, we saw the need to go ‘back upstream’, so to speak, to unpack this methodology central to our collective purpose. Although phenomenology may be familiar to many as the method used in Goethean Science, a wider application beyond the natural sciences is becoming increasingly popular in anthroposophic-based research. Yet there are many different understandings of what phenomenology is, and how to apply it.

This confusion may be due to several reasons. Phenomenology can be regarded as a philosophy, as a research methodology, as a practice, or all three. But a fundamental level, the different philosophical frameworks of Goethe, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, to name a few, have different ontological and epistemological foundations which have a profound influence on how the world is perceived and understood. For example, Heidegger

and Merleau-Ponty are sometimes both classified as existential phenomenologists, but one is concerned with meaning and interpretation, and the other privileges perception and description (as does Goethe). These disparities in turn generate methods specifically shaped to embody these worldviews. Even within one philosophical stream, there can be quite diverse approaches. And then there are the needs of each discipline. Fields such as nursing and education have established the interview as the prime method for eliciting patient or pupil lived experiences, but other fields find observation of plants or textual hermeneutics more suited to their purposes.

So, our dialogue aimed to explore the *what* and *how* of phenomenology in the context of different disciplines and their accompanying practices. By viewing phenomenology through the eyes of researchers and practitioners from different fields, we believed we might approach a collective understanding of what the essence of phenomenology truly is, for all forms and approaches. To enable this process, we invited a range of researchers and practitioners to share their research and research process with us, in the context of these four criteria,⁴ posed as questions:

- *Openness*: how do I see with “new eyes?” How do I overcome my existing preconceptions and bias? How do I put aside my existing knowledge when encountering the Other?
- *Dwelling*: how do I immerse myself into the Other? How do I engage with the experience? Do I have a structured process when I engage, and what is it?
- *Disclosure*: how do I reveal the essence of the phenomenon in question, the phenomenon hidden in the experience? What is my mode of disclosure?
- *Description*: How do I communicate my experiences of working phenomenologically? What language do I use? And how do I write up others’ experiences so that they are true to what was experienced without my assumptions?

What follows is a brief digest of four presenters’ responses to these questions, shared in the company of 30 participants (please note the responses are based on notes taken during spoken presentations and therefore take an unstructured form.)

Fiona Campbell (Human Sciences)

I study the way we think and our relationship to consciousness, both now and in the past. The phenomenological approach is core to my method, whether I am concerned with investigating the formative forces in nature, in art or in how we think. For me, then, phenomenology must be a flexible tool and though I am fascinated by all the different philosophical approaches, phenomenology for me is a way of seeing the world, one which can return us to the timeless *now*, before concepts and categorisation impose structure on our experiences.

I am deeply influenced by the work of Theodor Schwenk, Henri Bortoft, Arthur Zajonc, and Merleau-Ponty. Both Zajonc and Bortoft opened me to a new way of understanding *how* we generate new ideas.

Openness: I try to see the world as strange and paradoxical by cultivating wonder, but also by corralling my existing biases and assumptions by writing them down. Cultivating wonder brings about inner preparation for opening myself to the Other. For example, ‘wonder’ is a state of awe that requires you to change something within yourself, to change your state of consciousness.

Dwelling: I step towards the phenomenon and into it. Repeatedly living into it and immersing myself in the data, to feel ‘at home’ with the phenomenon. I often use an observational process I developed called *beholding* (borrowing Goethe’s use of the word), which has iterative steps that allow for both repeatedly surveying the phenomenal field, *actively* and *receptively*, and for exploring the phenomenon through my “hand-eye” in an embodied manner. This process can also be adapted for listening and perceiving human speech and text.

Disclosure: The essence of a phenomenon is its essential core, that which it cannot be without, to be itself; that which is always hidden from everyday perception. This means the phenomenologist is always reaching towards something ineffable, ungraspable, making the reveal almost impossible. Yet this accommodates my way of seeing the world as something that is in a process of always becoming.

How do I do disclose the phenomenon? It requires practice yet cannot be directed; rather, it arises from developing an intimacy with the object or experience that combines perception

with imagination yet does not wander into fantasy. It is like a refining of perception that points towards developing new faculties, or new ways of enhancing our existing faculties. For example, I watch a video of people speaking and listen to what they say but also what they didn't say, what their gestures say, etc. and how they spoke and gestured. *How* people are speaking, and their gestures as they spoke said as much about their experiences as *what* they say. In this way, the phenomenon can reveal itself, coming out from behind the experience, so to speak.

Description: I share my disclosure primarily through writing (though also through verbal presentation), but it is a complex business, a kind of 'tell me without telling me' process. And there is always the question of how to communicate without fixing an experience when naming it. The problem with writing is that you are fixing words into time and space, making it static. Yet you are trying to convey something to the reader that is anything but static and fixed by nature. It is the paradox we must work with.

Teresa Carapeto (Education)

I am currently completing my PhD in Education and Pedagogy at Southern Cross University. My research subject is environmental education in Steiner Pedagogy, especially teachers' nature conceptions, to see how Steiner educators experience nature. My approach uses both Goethean phenomenology and art-based reflection (I also am strongly influenced by Arthur Zajonc's contemplative practices).

Openness: For me, harmonising the senses is important as a researcher/scientist and I refer to Steiner's twelve senses to guide me and ensure, especially before I begin, that all my senses are in harmony through balanced sleeping habits, nutrition, etc.

Dwelling: I make sure I sit in stillness and silence. My data collection method takes the form of visual journals and interviews, through which I immerse myself in the stories embodied in these texts.

Disclosure: Art-based reflection reveals what the phenomenon is speaking to me. To do this, I keep a researcher's visual journal with poetic reflections, diary entries and drawings about the responses in my fieldwork participants' visual journals.

Description: I document my findings, my ‘explication’ through storytelling, which is used for publication, sharing and creating awareness.

Peter Stewart (Goethean Science)

I have a background in architecture and became interested in Goethean Science through this. I then spent some time with Goethean scientists, such as Dr Margaret Colquhoun in Scotland and developed my practice from there.

For me, it’s always a question of how do you actually *do* it (phenomenology)? And where does that doing come from?

Openness: Firstly, there needs to be an acknowledgement that there are different ways of seeing, different modes of seeing. You must bring other people to this through giving them an experience of their own. Seeing is a cognitive act (uniting perception and concept), one that we usually do unconsciously. For example, can I show the moment your idea organises a sense perception into a ‘that’? (I am influenced by the work of Georg Kühlewind here.) You can experience cognition as not being a passive process, that is, you can bring your conscious intention to it. To do this, you need to learn to apply it consciously and be consciously aware of what you are doing at any moment. Like moving from the stage of fact-finding - looking at things - but then switching to a different mode of seeing - living into the phenomenon as a process. For example, with plant metamorphosis, you move from focussing on the parts of the plant to the growth movement while practicing *intentional* seeing. You must give up a naive approach to cognition. Then you can have one eye on yourself as the observer and one eye on the plant. Your seeing/knowing then is part of the World process.

Dwelling: I live into the phenomenon through participatory observation, using artistic faculties, such as ‘sculptural feeling’. It is a ‘cognitive feeling’ that tells me about the thing I am observing, rather than a subjective feeling. You must re-experience the feelings and live with them, again and again. Again, you must always have one eye on yourself. Rudolf Steiner suggests living into your observation with ‘inner heart’s involvement’, that is, to follow it with your ‘cognitive feeling’. Recognise that in this participatory seeing I am active – but there are also some moments where, because I have become aware of my own activity, I know that it is not me. Then you realise that something can speak through you and to you, and this has the potential to change you.

Revealing/disclosure: I do the *dwelling* stage as preparation, and then allow the phenomenon to reveal itself to me. For example, I try to capture the taste of a rosemary leaf by drawing the *cognitive feeling* that accompanies it, to capture the colour tones. Words are very flat, and it is hard to capture the experience with words. And you need to order the experience (as a process) so that someone else can replicate the same experience so that others can have a similar experience.

Description: I communicate through writing articles and giving workshops, where I reflect on my own experiences and then invent situations where others can have the possibility of having the same experience.

Such insights happen far more rarely than it is supposed. And when they do happen, it is like the flash, but to have such flashes of insight, you must do all the preparatory work. I find that many, including myself, use the language of a Goethean scientist to describe their experiences, but in my experience, true insights happen very rarely. So often what they are describing is subjective experience. You really need time to let the phenomenon really speak. You can also move beyond Goethe to what Steiner also gave as directions or you can use things such as ‘sculptural feeling’, e.g., as in a leaf sequence or in a bone sequence, as they change up the spine - there you can experience the form through sculptural feelings. You then live into that experience feeling and then use that to guide you.

Martin Samson (Theology)

I will soon be completing a PhD in Christology, and, during this work, I have developed an approach that I call ‘contemplative phenomenology’. Part of the difficulty I experience is trying to explain that Steiner used a phenomenological approach but also, that in French, the term ‘phenomenology’ and ‘theology’ are the same.

According to Rudolf Steiner, you can perceive the Spirit, but you need to develop certain senses, ‘soul senses’ first before you can develop the spiritual senses required to do this. How does Steiner go about this? Theology has lost its capacity to read the texts, what is called *hermeneutical theology*, which is a fusion of horizons between the author, reader and interpreter. Hermeneutical theology is reclaimed through the early gnostic texts, but they can be also taken as metaphors. For example, if we immerse ourselves in a text through

contemplation, we can have the same experiences as the early Gnostics. We can give people both the method and the historical context to carry this out. But with Theology, you need to suspend your own knowledge first.

Openness: Faith is like a seeing with open eyes with open-mindedness. Cognitive seeing is like a faculty of perception and cognition that leads us towards a new way of seeing. We have to ask ourselves: Is it possible for us to experience Christ directly? Without a liturgy or a gospel to guide us? We need a *theosis*⁶ in Christ to approach the non-physical Christ. Here Faith acts as a cognitive faculty, a seeing afresh, a very different approach to that espoused by Kantian histology. To recognise the difference between a doctrine and what an experience is, we must raise reason to faith.

Dwelling: Dwelling is a kind of pondering for a theological audience, such as Mary did when she ‘took all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (Luke 2:19).

Disclosure: Disclosure allows for the *explication*⁷, a letting go of the object of our *beholding* and allowing new spiritual concepts to be revealed. For example, in Steiner’s meditation on the Rose Cross, we let go of the image and only allow the actual work we have done to live in our soul. Through this process, we can allow something new to enter in, a new idea to emerge.

Description: When working with art, Steiner speaks in *imaginations*, by painting pictures with his words. Imaginations give a phenomenon a body/expression, and the heart can say ‘yes’ to that. Theology in the future needs to become art, and not a doctrine. The use of imaginations in theology will lead to this. We have to remember that the Book of Nature is symbolic in that it is imaginations of the beings that are at work in Nature, and out of this, we can develop a feeling for the language of Nature.

Conclusion

The researcher presentations were followed by some lively discussion with the audience, with questions such as how each presenter related their process to Steiner’s exercises of inner and outer observation, and how might reflective practice differ from going ‘back upstream’ to capture something of the original direct experience. Many participants shared that, listening to the presentations, they found resonance with aspects of their own research practices,

clarifying for them how they might take their work further and there was great interest to learn more about the relevant processes and methods. Many participants could conceive phenomenology as a way to explore their professional practice and personal experiences with spiritual exercises within a structured framework with particular signposts to guide them during their process.

But perhaps the idea that received the most appreciation was phenomenology's potential for engendering inner mobility and change through its continual practice. As Goethe noted, the process of being a researcher is not just about finding new knowledge, but about transforming yourself, and phenomenology is a path for initiating new ways of seeing, of developing new organs of perception. It is not only a methodology for investigating the lived experience as it is lived, but a way of seeing the world that can shift our very being away from "I have become" to 'I am becoming'.

This brief encapsulation of our online dialogue in no way answered the question, what is phenomenology? Rather, it marked the beginning of a conversation that we anticipate will extend beyond disciplinary and philosophical boundaries to a place where we can take part in rigorous, respectful, critical enquiry in the company of like-minded researchers, whether they be formally-trained academics or practitioners seeking, not answers, but a form of investigation that sees knowledge as a verb, not a noun.

For those who are interested to learn more about phenomenology in its various forms, the *Stream of Life Research Studio* is hosting a further two dialogues early in 2023, the first one on 1st February at 6.00 pm AEDT. If you would like to take part in these dialogues or offer a short informal presentation on how you understand and apply phenomenology, please [register here](#) and we will send you information about the event.

The core members of the Stream of Life Research Studio are [Fiona Campbell](#) PhD, whose research centres on cognition and creativity, and [Martin Samson](#) who is currently completing a PhD in Christology.

Endnotes

1. Steiner, R. (1925), 'The Connection Between the Spiritual and the Physical Worlds, and How They Are Experienced After Death' in *The Forming of Destiny and Life after Death*, GA 157a
2. Zajonc, A., (2000), 'Molding the self and the common cognitive sources of science and religion', in *Education as transformation: Religious pluralism, spirituality, & a new vision for higher education in America*, p.60.
3. Bortoft, H., (1996), *The wholeness of nature*. Steiner Books, p. 134
4. Finlay, L. (2014), 'Engaging Phenomenological Analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol 11, No. 2, pp.121-141
5. Bortoft, H., 2012. *Taking appearance seriously: The dynamic way of seeing in Goethe and European thought*. Floris Books.
6. *Theosis*: a transformative process of coming into union with God, as taught by the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. As a process of transformation, *theosis* is brought about by the effects of *catharsis* and *theoria*.
7. *Explication*: the process of revealing or drawing out the meaning of something which is not clearly defined, to make explicit what is implicit.