

Manchester Lit & Phil

Philosophy Forum



Phenomenology and female philosophers

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Focus paper

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This focus paper provides us with Sue's perspective on Phenomenology and her thoughts on its influences today based on her own experiences as a writer. The great 20th century Modernist tradition ignored consciousness and the immediate experience of being in the world, pretending that knowledge was a 'view from nowhere and no-one'. Phenomenology was the major countervailing 20th century philosophical stance which regarded first-person subjective experience as paramount and the basis of new knowledge. It is sometimes difficult for many in Anglophone cultures, wedded to Modernism, to intellectually grasp Phenomenology. Here Sue helps us to do that.



1 Introduction

- 1.1 In the early sixties I was an eager philosophy student at Leeds university. My enthusiasm faded as **the big questions of metaphysics like ‘How are we to be in the world?’ seemed to be bypassed** and philosophical endeavour funnelled into a narrower and narrower activity of linguistic analysis. Bertrand Russell, A J Ayer, Austin, Wittgenstein and Frege were all required study. Seemingly to me back then, their philosophical endeavours were centred on the idea that truth, conceptualised as certain knowledge, could be found in an objective analysis of the use of language. I experienced this endeavour as devoid of human value, arid and impersonal.
- 1.2 The philosophers I was studying had emerged out of the horrors of both world wars, and yet personal experience and emotion weren't available for philosophical discourse: this was banished into the realms of literature, art and music. **Not one female philosopher was on the reading list** and even 35 years later in the pantheon of the greats listed in *the Oxford Companion to philosophy* (ed Ted Honderich) – an authoritative thousand page text aiming at a comprehensive survey of philosophy – no woman is listed in the chronology of major contributors, save for Simone de Beauvoir for her book *The Second Sex*. However she was and remains often only visible as Jean-Paul Sartre's companion and given value only by association with him.
- 1.3 Unavailable to me during my studies at the time was a body of philosophical thought loosely named Phenomenology, which emerged from continental ideas that tried to **link philosophical endeavour to a way of ‘being in the world’ with all its messy contradictions**. What counted as Knowledge became upended as Phenomenology fractured existing philosophical concepts of knowledge by trusting experience over theory.
- 1.4 Phenomenology is a philosophy which posits experience as the source of understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. Its mission became and becomes the attempt to forge a method of looking at the world. This was more than just a new challenge to existing philosophical theory and tradition ... it actually sidestepped it all! **Phenomenology challenges Empiricism by theorising that the reality of things can't be found by being reduced to facts external to ourselves**. It also challenges the notion of Kantian Idealism: the idea that *a priori* reality can emerge out of a special kind of reordering of language. In opposition **it places human consciousness as the overarching valid centre for investigation of the human condition**.

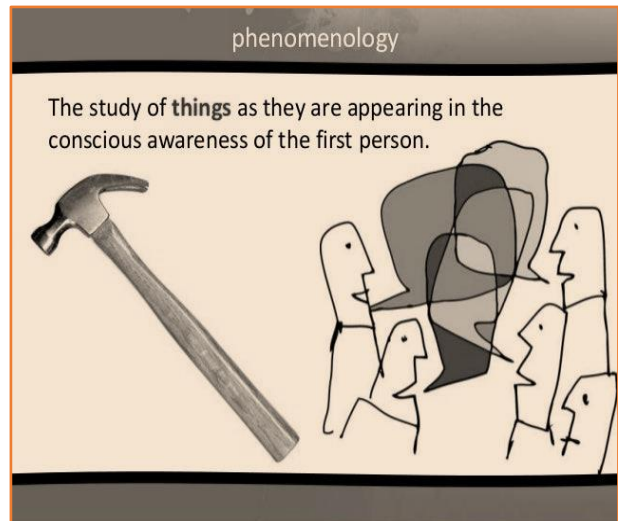
Phenomenology

“The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience.

Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view.”

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

- 1.5 Phenomenology was thus a call to stop business as usual and try to reflect and think in a new way. It became not so much a theory but a method, a way of doing philosophy. So Phenomenological thinking created a specialist language of its own through which philosophers could interrogate their experience. Much of it reads at first glance as obscurantism devoid of common sense interpretation. Nevertheless **the concepts involved managed to have a galvanising effect on women philosophers and thence to the theorising of Feminists.**



- 1.6 Some examples of this I see in the work of **Eleanor Godway**, emerita professor of philosophy at Central Connecticut State University. Godway has been a philosopher for the last 50 years and is known in particular for analysing and developing the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61). Her work was honed in collaboration with others and in numerous papers and presentations. **She situates Phenomenology as a crucial underpinning in the politics of privilege, gender, diversity and identity.** Still a practising philosopher: her latest paper on the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray develops a value sorely needed today. Incidentally when I asked an AI platform for information about her work as a phenomenologist, I got the answer that no such philosopher exists! .. a reminder of the existence of data bias (cf Caroline Criado Perez (2019), which exposes data bias in a world designed for men).

2 Some key concepts involved in phenomenological thinking

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), then Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Merleau-Ponty, all developed Phenomenology as a way of making sense of being in the world. Below are some of the key concepts Husserl introduced.

Essence

Husserl asks us to break our 'taken for granted' assumptions about the world and to use our **conscious present experience** to determine the 'essence' of things, by which I think he meant the all-encompassing reality of our immediate consciousness which are the only phenomena we can have direct and total access to. All other phenomena he saw as indirect and second-hand, in which only a partial aspect can ever be available.

Natural attitude

Taken for granted states of consciousness Husserl called the 'natural attitude'. This is **the traditional common-sense assumption that the world is the way it looks**

to us. It is the taken for granted norms and orthodoxy we automatically use to understand ourselves and the world.

Bracketing

The process of **casting the natural attitude aside** is named 'bracketing', and for phenomenologists is an essential precursor to the task of the development of fresh meaning.

Epoché or phenomenological reduction

This refers to the method by which the essential task of Phenomenology can be carried out, which is **obtaining direct access to the essence of immediate experience**. In his early writings Husserl thought this was possible and that once we have cast aside the natural attitude this then allows us to have direct access to this essence. He later saw it as an impossible task. Nevertheless current Phenomenologists after Husserl apply the method but don't expect universal essence to emerge. Godway explains this process as:

"The point of the Epoché is to develop a perspective from which to take account of ourselves and what we are doing. As we practice the Epoché and keep the Reduction going we will become more and more aware of how the contingencies about our situation have contributed to how we think about ourselves. Phenomenology does not remove us from the world, it makes clear the ways in which we are in the world and how our world is constituted." (Godway, 1994)

Transcendence

This is the name given to the experience that comes from having achieved a disruption in received knowledge: the aha! moment when new meaning is born. In her book *Who Is This We?* (1994) – a collection of essays about the concept and reality of community that attempts to combine theory and analysis with lived experience – Godway describes that process (in this case applied to the notion of community):

"One point of our writing is ... putting the received version of 'community' into question, disrupting the taken for granted knowledges of its realisation and value, so a gap can appear, an abyss ... where certitudes must be abandoned and creativity and change (ie transcendence) are possible."

3 Godway's use of these concepts

- 3.1 Following on from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty was interested in the way meaning, when using these Phenomenological concepts, emerges as **a disruption**, a dislocation of what has become routine and thus enabling a new form to emerge against a background of what itself was once new meaning. He states that:

"Phenomenology is neither a materialism, nor a philosophy of mind. Its proper work is to unveil the pre-theoretical layer in which both of these idealisations find their relative justification and are gone beyond."

Unveiling this layer of immediate experience is the *phenomenological reduction*.

- 3.2 In Godway's writings, I see an attempt to locate phenomenological method into the world of her own lived experience. She makes the point that **it's hard to just**

define Phenomenology because it actually needs to be experienced. She says:

“When I refer to Phenomenology as a movement, I mean to distinguish it from a theory. It is a matter of experience, of a shift of focus, which we have to accomplish somehow for ourselves..... and so does not offer yet another ‘*garb of ideas*’ but a way to try to set such garbs aside.”

3.3 In Godway (1994) she expands Merleau-Ponty’s idea that **meaning emerges through the actual experience of perception**, what he calls *parole originaire* ... the coming to be of new absolute unmediated meaning. She posits a further process of perception which she calls *politique originaire*. This she describes as a

“... transformation in which people find themselves moving in a new direction. There emerges, a new gestalt, a wider meaning, in terms of which their Individual sufferings and previous conflicts of interest even mutual enmity and ill-usage, can all be understood in a different way.”

3.4 In the same chapter she describes such transformation in herself relating to class and gender when she was a student at Cambridge (1958-61) at a time when women were a mere 10% of the student population. By casting aside her own ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, she managed to contrast her experience with those of her two brothers. This led to the realisation that while **men had a class identity, women, who were relatively scarce, were treated as classless and simply took on the status of the men they were with.**

“This revelation of my marginality opened up for me, a new dimension in the class-gender dynamic, a new sense of sisterhood, and of the bad faith implicit in identifying with men whose status I could thereby reflect.”

3.5 She sees this experience of *politique originaire* as **an imperative for action:**

“We are born into this race, this class, this nation, this family, this body of this sex, and the circumstances set problems for us, whether or not we face them, or are forced to face them. The tensions they generate are not going to go away, but to respond to them creatively to transform the meaning, is going to cost us something whether we see ourselves as privileged or as oppressed.”

3.6 In her 2010 paper *The Crisis of the Personal: Macmurray, Postmodernism, and the Challenge of Philosophy Today*, she takes this further, outlining **the challenge:**

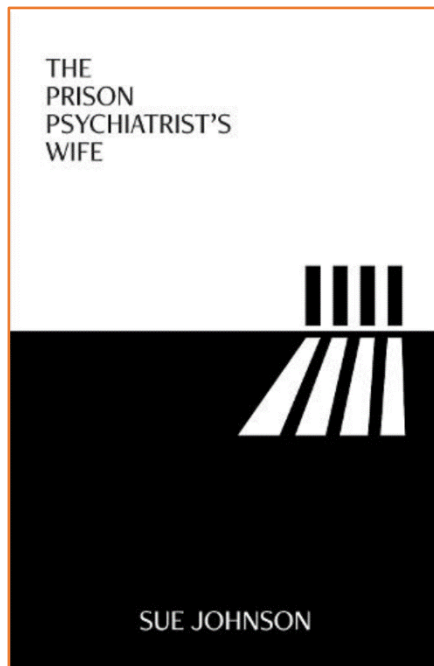
“Philosophical reflection must now address the crisis our culture is facing, which requires action.”

She recognises Macmurray as a significant figure who develops the primacy of immediate experience into the realm of human relationships.

“All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, all meaningful action for the sake of friendship.”

4 On writing *The Prison Psychiatrist's Wife* (2023) from a phenomenological perspective

4.1



My book is an account of how I experienced myself through what I saw and thought when my husband worked as a psychiatrist on a special unit at Parkhurst Prison for men deemed too dangerous for Broadmoor. **I hoped to explore and rethink the 'taken for granted' assumptions about prisons, prisoners, psychiatrists, therapy, wives and the men called psychopaths.** I wanted new meaning, new ways of envisaging to emerge from my writing both for myself and for my reader which could create the possibility of new thoughts and actions.

4.2

Merleau-Ponty said **"to content oneself with readymade speech is to remain silent"**. By 'readymade' I think he meant the accepted ways of seeing, writing and talking about events (phenomena). By 'remaining silent' he seems to infer that no fresh meaning or understanding can emerge.

4.3

In writing the book I tried to cast aside the accepted ways (readymade) of writing a record of true events such as diaries, memoirs, case studies, reports along with the validity which comes from orthodoxy. Instead I concentrated on my actual experience of the events. The process of writing therefore meant bringing into my immediate consciousness past sights, sounds, bodily sensations, thoughts and their feelings, feelings and their thoughts. I tried to capture the immediacy of my experiences. In approaching my writing in this consciously immersive way I found myself discarding old habits of thought, particularly the idea that thinking and feeling exist in separate silos and that thought is the privileged creator of meaning. What emerged in their place was the experience that **there was no thought without feeling and no feeling without thought.**

5 Two examples from the book of the natural attitude fracturing

5.1 Meeting some of the men within the prison

I'd made the mistake of reading some of the true crime literature. I instantly recognise the man who is approaching and swallowed down a moment of gruesome nerves. I shook his hand. It was limp, and a bit damp. I recognised how hard he was trying. With an effort of unfamiliar, correct formality, he offered me a cup of tea and engaged in the strangest of conversations. ... I listened with a pang to this solitary

being, carefully educating himself in his cell, and now practising for the first time words he had never heard spoken.

Quite suddenly he moved over into a smaller section of the room, a kind of annex framed by a wide archway. I followed, holding my tea. He was tapping his foot on the floor.

“Do you know what was under here?” he said with a curious expression, which to this day, still haunts me. “It’s the gallows. They used to hang us down there.”

I looked down at the comfortless institutional floor and twitched a bit. “Oh dear” I said limply...

The party over, we returned home. I was exhausted.

“Well, did you get to see the whites of their eyes?” Bob [my husband the prison psychiatrist] joked seriously.

“Yes, yes I did.” I said irritably.

“What do you think then?”

“I think they are all feral, adult kids who never grew up. Peter Pans in gruesome land!” I said angrily. The truth hurt and as I spoke I could see those tiny, tiny needy, oh so needy little kids, but in huge, grown dangerous bodies and knew I wanted to give them a chance with Bob. I knew too, that I had been somewhat reassured that this whole mad quest might just be possible. Was I deluded? I finally didn't want to be. Bob knew that too.

5.2 Observing Therapy

He was ... was he almost confiding? A huge sense of loss seems to drown me in an inexplicable wave of feeling. My mind, my brain, sparks back, I am looking through hard glass, gazing, clutching a connection with my just born premature son, he is encased in a plastic box, wired up to tubes, providing all the necessities, it is thought for his tiny life. I am not allowed to touch him, whisper to him, feed him, stroke him. Indeed, my silent tears are upsetting all the nurses, so an hour a day of gazing was deemed my limit. A few hard weeks later I left him from his plastic box. He takes as many gulps from my eager, waiting breast as his tiny frame can manage, and sinks into contentment. Trust is returning for him. We take him home. And now, so many years later, it hits me, this connection to the terrifying howl of an abandoned baby, who might just be learning to trust his adulthood and ask for help.

“Until I came here, I knew I’d kill again. Glad I didn’t!”

“You’d rather not?”

“Yes ... now I’m here ...a load off my back!”

“You can see me like this once a week and we’ll sort it all out.”

“Thanks.”

A familiar hand, long and shapely fills the screen, offering an invitation. H stands somewhat awkwardly, unused to respect and civility, and surprised he grasps the proffered hand and “nice to sort things out like this with you.”

The session is over.

6 Thoughts on Phenomenology's influence

6.1 In Feminism and diversity politics

Trusting experience over theory (readymade assumptions) by the early Phenomenologists was a truly seismic shift. It became a liberation philosophy where the possibility of new insights and moments of recognition were birthed. **It opened the way towards examinations of emotion and relationship.** Later female Philosophers came to extend it into considerations of community and politics.

Privileging meaning derived from immediate conscious experience defines the self as agent and came to be used to dignify the meaning of personal experience as irrefutable. Thus actions and beliefs springing from phenomenological experienced truths come to be in opposition to actions and beliefs derived from (taken for granted) empirical truths.

I see the present hot topic of gender and diversity politics as framed within this context. Certainties about the existence of privilege, unconscious bias, identity, racism, gender, free speech, etc are very differently owned.

6.2 In Research

Phenomenology dignifies 'lived experience' as a proper focus for attention and exploration. Thus it provides essential underpinnings for research aiming at uncovering the layers of meaning within personal narratives.

Autoethnography is a powerful research method which aims to do this, as it opens up personal experience to the exploration of new concepts ideas and thinking. Alec Grant defines it as:

“a form of narrative qualitative enquiry which values subjectivity, emotions, relationships with others, and epiphany and other personal experiences as research resources. The approach connects the autobiographical with the socio-cultural.”

7 Questions and Queries

Q1 Does the focus of Phenomenology on revealing the essences of the objects of our mental acts allow the question of whether they **exist externally** to be bypassed?

Q2 Does Phenomenology take it for granted that **subjectivity is universal** in the sense that what is experienced will be the same for all knowers (i.e. generalisable)?



- Q3 Can we indeed **describe in words** the thing (essence) as it represents itself?
- Q4 Is phenomenological enquiry more **akin to therapy**? Or psychoanalysis?
- Q5 Can individual experience be an **irrefutable truth**?
- Q6 Is Phenomenology intrinsically **value free** or can it provide an answer to what we *ought* to do?

8 Further reading and references

I am currently reading these three recent biographies of some remarkable women. They are fascinating and gripping accounts, showing how their philosophy was inextricably woven into and came out of their lives.

- **Wolfram Eilenberger (2023) *The Visionaries***
About Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil and Any Rand. They were women who lived with and through the challenges and despair of being in societies at war developing their philosophy in relation to the world around them the world they saw in occupied France.
- **Clare Mac Cumhaill, Rachael Wiseman (2022) *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life***
Mary Midgely, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe and Iris Murdoch were students and friends at Oxford during the war years. Together they vigorously questioned and challenged the influential philosophy that was declaring metaphysics dead and post war forged a new path for moral and analytic philosophy.
- **Sarah Bakewell (2016) *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails***
This is a gripping story that immerses the reader in the life and thoughts of the early existentialists and how they reacted to the challenge of Phenomenology 'what is it to be'. Starting in the early 1930s and continuing into their postwar influences it shows how Simone de Beauvoir forged her own path of knowing in relation to the philosophers around.

Mary Field Belenky et al (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing*

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) *The Second Sex*

Like Godway, De Beauvoir examined her own experience to create new meaning about what it was to be a woman in the world.

Simone de Beauvoir (1964) *A Very Easy Death*

A book about her experience of her mother's death and dying.

Carol Gilligan (1982) *In A Different Voice*

Eleanor [M] Godway (1993) Phenomenology and the Frontiers of Experience:

Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray, in *Historical Reflections*, Vol19, No1

Eleanor Godway (1994) *Who Is This We?*

Merleau-Ponty, hermeneutics and Postmodernism.

Eleanor Godway (1996) *Deconstruction and Wild Being: Merleau-Ponty's interrogative and 'wild feminism'* (Connecticut University paper)

Eleanor Godway (2018) John Macmurray on the “Personal” as Involving a “Practical Contradiction” and Why It Matters, *Eidos journal for Philosophy and Culture* 1(3)

Alec Grant (2019) Dare to be a Wolf: Embracing Autoethnography in Nurse Educational Research, *Education Today*

Alec Grant, ed (2023) *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*

Virginia Held (1985) Feminism and Epistemology, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol14, no3

Edmund Husserl (1931/2012) *Ideas*
General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology

Audre Lorde (1984) *Sister Outsider*

John Macmurray (1991) *The Self as Agent*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) *Phenomenology of Perception*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) *The Visible and the Invisible*

Carolyn Criado Perez (2019) *Invisible Women*

Kathleen Stock (2021), *Material Girls*
A philosopher sheds clarity on the idealism realism debate.

Margaret Whitford (1991) *Luce Irigaray - Philosophy in the Feminine*





Your notes