



Philosophy – Read, Write, Laugh, and Learn: A Student’s Perspective

by Dana E. Brackney

Abstract

In the United States, many doctoral students in nursing have not had the grounding in philosophy that other educational traditions require. The introduction of philosophical thought, both historical and current, is often unwelcome and uncomfortable for the novice who is accustomed to a pragmatic discipline. Educational methods that allow for exploration of a kind that engages the student are therefore essential to facilitate the formation of a philosophical foundation for the education and future research endeavours of the doctoral student in nursing. This paper documents one student’s experience of that process and what she found to be useful in her own first attempts at understanding.

Introduction

As a student new to the study of philosophy, I found the reading of writings such as those by Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Heidegger to be complex. Fortunately, through narrative writings, I was able to explore these ways of thinking, being and knowing in my doctoral programme. Our Philosophy of Nursing Science course was structured with a robust reading list, Socratic discussion of philosophical turns, and the weekly sharing of written student narratives.

As we explored philosophical thought in nursing science, I related these philosophical writings to experiences that were familiar to me. In this way, I reflected on my experience of observing the O. J. Simpson trial in 1994 and related this to contemporary empiricism. Later, I investigated the relationship between Nightingale’s realism and a patient’s obsession with food. The following week, I considered the distinctive heat-tolerant characteristics of Pyrex and CorningWare as a metaphor for my struggle to relate my Christian faith to postmodern thought. Perhaps the most enjoyable and versatile sojourn was made with the Sunday comics, as I

explored the thinking of Husserl and Heidegger using a *Dilbert*[®] cartoon as an avenue for deeper understanding of their distinct assumptions in phenomenology.

I enjoyed this exercise of writing reflectively and integrating readings with the world at hand. In this course, a student may spend twenty or more hours a week reading around a theme such as phenomenology and then write a paper in response. These papers were not necessarily carefully crafted or an end in themselves. Instead, we read our writings aloud and used them to continue the conversation, identify areas for further exploration, and stimulate class discussion. In this instance, I found using a cartoon to expand my novice experience with philosophy to be most beneficial.

A revised version of a paper written for the Philosophy of Nursing Science course, and suggestions for the educational use of everyday media to explore philosophy and promote discussion, follows.

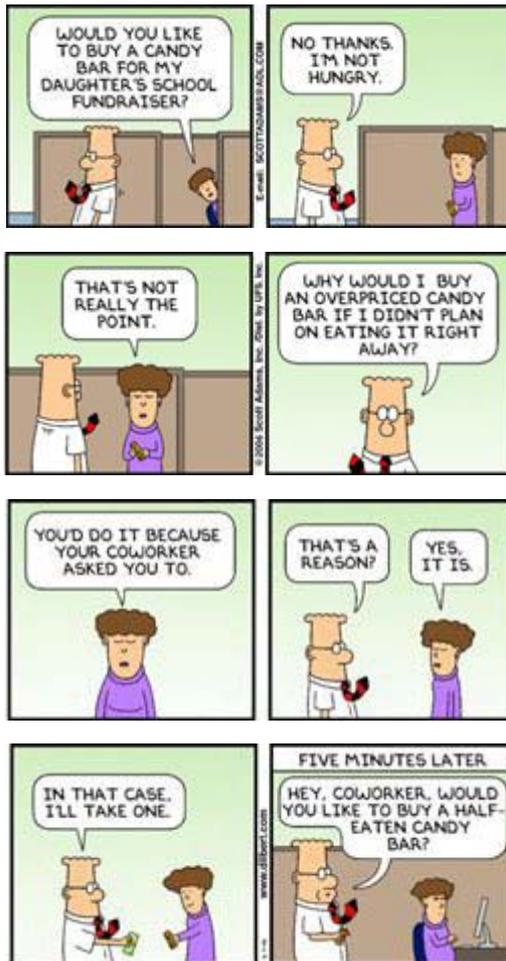
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The Paper

Husserl or Heidegger? That is the question.

Assumptions about our world – the nature of our existence (ontology) and the way we know (epistemology) – influence the way we do (methodology) science. Husserl and Heidegger are phenomenological philosophers with distinct philosophical assumptions. This paper explores the perspectives of Husserl and Heidegger in relation to the following *Dilbert*[®] cartoon.



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In this a satirical cartoon about office life, Dilbert is approached by a co-worker in the office. She asks,

“Would you like to buy a candy bar for my daughter’s school fundraiser?”

He answers, “No thanks. I’m not hungry.”

She continues, “That’s not really the point.”

Dilbert asks, “Why would I buy an overpriced candy bar if I didn’t plan on

eating it right away?”

She says, “You’d do it because your co-worker asked you to.”

Dilbert: “That’s a reason?”

Co-worker: “Yes, it is.”

Dilbert responds, “In that case, I’ll take one.”

Five minutes later, Dilbert asks, “Hey co-worker, would you like to buy a half-eaten candy bar?”

How would Heidegger and Husserl think about this exchange? In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the question is asked, “To be or not to be?” Shakespeare explored this central ontological question of humanity and the way we choose to live (to bear our troubles or to battle/succumb to them). As I thought about the assumptions of each philosopher, I found it helpful to understand one distinction between them as “To-Be”: Heidegger, and “Not-To-Be”: Husserl. Heidegger (to-be) assumed relationship and believed that meaning could be known through “attuning”. Husserl (not-to-be) assumed that the scientist could find new meaning by “bracketing” that which is known. This framing of their assumptions in relation to how a scientist can know about the world further aided my discovery process.

Husserl: “Not to Be” Beyond Existence to Meaning (Battling the Known)

In his “Phenomenology and Anthropology”, Husserl (1941/1981), as “not to be”, describes a method of philosophical thinking that involves the transcendental ego’s setting aside that which s/he has experienced in order to obtain a purity of scientific thought. Husserl founded his philosophical science on imagination (p. 320). He attempted to set aside prejudice in order to know the world. Husserl asked the epistemological question, “How do we know about man?” Although both Husserl and Heidegger examined people’s lived experience, Husserl sought to describe the world with a subjective conscious understanding using a transcendental philosophical method (p. 317). Husserl’s goal was a new and profound description of human phenomena.

Husserl’s (1941/1981) first step to philosophical cognition was the development of a universal ontology without which no world, possible or actual, could be conceived as existing (p. 316). He began with the phenomenon and the problems it presented and, through reflection (p. 322), moved outward from the self to the transcendental, intersubjective realm. He recognized that the scientist/philosopher has beliefs, supposed knowledge about the world, and suggested that s/he could “bracket” those beliefs in

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order to ask new questions of the phenomenon and renounce the world as previously known (p. 320). In this way, Husserl battled the ego and its pre-supposition of knowledge in order to arrive at a new, profound and transcending meaning.

Dilbert[®] is probably too simplistic an example for much insight into a lived experience. However, if one used Husserl's assumptions to study Dilbert's interaction, one would first attempt to set aside one's own pre-understandings of office life and observe this interaction expecting meaning to emerge. Reflecting on the transaction between two co-workers, Dilbert is perceived as a person that is not hungry. An opportunity to purchase overpriced candy presents itself. The co-worker is observed to have a belief in the right to receive funding based on association. An observation of shared practices and common meanings in the office world would probably emerge as embedded cultural meanings.

Husserl's thinking unfolds Dilbert's experience on an idealized level of meaning. The structure of this cartoon can be expressed as Dilbert not understanding the difference between the purchase of candy for eating and the purchase for helping. In the end, he chooses to 'do what he is asked' and purchase the overpriced candy. Next, Dilbert tests his "knowledge" of the rights of being a co-worker. He had learned that co-workers 'do what they are asked' to do. However, when Dilbert asks his co-worker to buy his half-eaten candy, the reader assumes that this request will be denied. In fact, that presupposition makes Dilbert funny. But why is helping by buying half-eaten candy funnier than helping by buying candy you do not want? The phenomenologist must set aside the pre-supposition of "funny" and "normal" to ask this question. In this way, bracketing may further understanding of the limits to, or the structure of, reciprocal relationships. Perhaps she will help ... ? Principles of exchange, relatedness, reciprocity, needs, peer relationships and consumption may not be visible to Dilbert; however, the researcher may elucidate these structures from the transcendental phenomenological perspective. A phenomenologist like Husserl would go beyond the existence of phenomena in search of a new "unknown" meaning by separating himself from assumptions and prior knowledge.

Heidegger: "To Be" (Bearing Our Troubles)

In contrast, Heidegger (1955/1958) in *What is Philosophy?* focuses on the "correspondence of the Being of being", the 'to be' that is "placed in relationship with what is" (pp. 75-77). His assumption is that the philosopher/scientist cannot remove

him/herself from history. In order to know the world, s/he must exchange understandings to achieve a mutual understanding that he called "attuning". A hermeneutic phenomenologist like Heidegger would find meaning in the context of the relationship between the object of study, the phenomenon, and the scientist.

In *On Time and Being*, Heidegger (1927/1962) states that the interrogation of the "Dasein" (being-there) is the central task required to "interpret the meaning of Being" (p. 35). He interpreted human experience from the historical and personal perspective. He sought to gain understanding and discover the meaning of man's everyday lived experiences as a whole. He used reflection or focused thinking and sensitivity to a "correspondence which is attuned to the voice of the Being of being" in order to come to know (Heidegger, 1955/1958, p. 93).

Using Heidegger's (1955/1958) assumptions about the inability to separate the individual from his or her background meanings, Dilbert's lived experience may be known differently than when proceeding from Husserl's perspective. Heidegger's philosophical path would involve reflection on one's own experience in relation to this encounter. However, instead of bracketing these understandings, one would engage Dilbert and ask him: What does it mean to be a co-worker in an office? Tell me about being a woman selling candy at an office to finance education? What does it mean to argue in an office setting? Using these methods may lead to an exploration of societal forces that fund education through sales. Today, many companies profit from the sale of goods through social networks. How does Dilbert's co-worker perceive this experience? What does it mean to one's freedom to be engaged in groups (school and work) with conflicting ends?

Reflection

Both Husserlian transcendental phenomenologists and Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenologists ask questions related to meaning. However, their assumptions – and, therefore, their conclusions – are quite different. Until I took this rather simplistic situation and applied these presuppositions, I was having difficulty understanding what distinguished the two approaches. I had hoped that I could bracket my own beliefs in order to examine the meaning of lived experience. One can see how Husserl's approach appears more scientific and amenable to various forms of scientific application than Heidegger's approach. Yet, after this process of reading and reflecting on the *Dilbert*[®] cartoon, I believe that Heidegger's assumptions and his

suspicion of bracketing may contain a stronger truth claim than the rather mechanistic approach Husserl's assumptions necessitate. "To be or not to be?": that is the question.

Discussion

This class paper and others allowed me, as a student, to play with various worldviews. The course culminated in the writing of a personal philosophy of nursing science. The ability to engage in philosophical debate benefits the nurse scientist by providing insight into the explicit and implicit foundations of research writings. In addition, this debate and consideration of other paradigms may function as a catalyst for creative approaches to unresolved problems. The assumptions and truth claims of philosophers inform the nurse researcher's selection of research questions and methods, and ultimately the practice of nursing itself (see Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Newman, 1992).

Initially, my immersion into the literature with a strong reading list was like diving into a very deep pool. The readings provided an exposure to the language of philosophy, as well as examples of diverse ways of thinking and knowing. Next, narrative writing provided a flotation device that prevented drowning and provided relaxation. Narrative writing allowed me the opportunity to use the familiar to explore the unfamiliar. Finally, the Socratic method of discussion created challenge and allowed for stroke development. Dialogue challenges thinking, and students learn from each other and their professor. This course structure allowed for the exploration of philosophical writings. To the novice, these writings seem at best challenging, and at worst irrelevant. In time, this initial impression drifts away as one becomes more accustomed to swimming in these deep waters.

Beyond the course structure, I believe that further

reflection on philosophical writings through the medium of cartoons could provide an excellent vehicle for the exploration of philosophical thought for several reasons. Firstly, cartoons may express either universal experiences or context-specific experience. Both settings are useful for examining the foundations of philosophical thought. Baggini (2006) proposes that comic cartoons such as *The Simpsons*® are "the form best suited to illuminate our age" (§ 3), arguing that "Cartoons abstract from real life in much the same way philosophers do" (§ 26). Secondly, cartoons are necessarily a snapshot of an experience and they offer plenty of ambiguity. This ambiguity enables the reader to explore many possible expressions of meaning in any given situation. Cartoons, with their pithy statements, stand in stark contrast to lengthy philosophical writings; and yet, both elucidate essential meaning. Baggini (2006) believes that "The satirical cartoon world is essentially a philosophical one because to work it needs to reflect reality accurately by abstracting it, distilling it and then presenting it back to us" (§ 27). Finally, most cartoons are not threatening, and, for the novice, they can provide a bridge between the robust world of philosophy and the common existence of humanity. The opportunity to inject a philosophical approach into thinking about a cartoon allows another avenue for students to explore their new elementary understanding.

In the United States, many doctoral students in nursing have not had the grounding in philosophy that other educational traditions require. The introduction of philosophical thought, both historical and current, is often unwelcome and uncomfortable for the novice who is accustomed to a pragmatic discipline. Educational methods that allow for exploration of a kind that engages the student are therefore essential to facilitate the formation of a philosophical foundation for the education and future research endeavours of the doctoral student in nursing.

About the Author



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