

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 32

Teaching Phenomenology in Regional Australia: Needs, Resources & Opportunities



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Introduction

This is an exciting moment for myself and for those scholars who make up the Phenomenology Research Group at Edith Cowan University's Regional Campus in Bunbury Western Australia. As their representative I bring you their greetings and best wishes.

On seeing this sophisticated audience and hearing the quality of the papers offered at this Organisation of Phenomenological Organisations Conference, one could be forgiven for assuming that behind all this there exists large, well-funded academic departments, which carry out research based in the rich tradition of phenomenology, with the full support of their Departmental Heads and Academic Deans of their Universities. Some of you who work in situations where phenomenology is accepted as part of the long and venerable tradition of Continental philosophy, may be lucky enough to have this kind of support.

Positivism Reigns Supreme in Australia

But in Australia the reality at the present time is that positivism reigns supreme in the culture of our Universities. In the context in which I and my colleagues carry out our research, the empirical natural sciences have retained their hegemony over the human or social sciences, and the transition has not yet

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been made from the exploration of the outward world, to the inward space constituted by the knowing human subject.

In his attempt to represent Australia as the 'smart' country, Brendan Nelson—the Minister for Education, Science and Training—has designated as 'priority' areas for funding and research, the fields of nano-technology, bio-materials, genome research, complex and intelligent systems, and photon science and technology. My own University has likewise designated as priority areas for research the areas of health and the environment, the service professions (nursing, teaching and policing), communication, information and micro-electric technologies (including e-commerce).

Against this kind of background, the humanities in general—those areas of intellectual endeavor which constitute the culture-building component of scholarship (history, the arts, philosophy and religion)—struggle to make their voice heard. Scholars making use of phenomenology in these areas are forced to offer an array of arguments in defense of their choice to use phenomenology as the foundational philosophy for their research.

Reaction to the Lifelessness of the Hard Sciences

This kind of imperialism by the so-called hard-sciences represents a modern-day example of the 'crisis' of the European sciences spoken of by Edmund Husserl. It sets reason to work to understand the realm of nature, without taking into account the realm of 'spirit'. In the Vienna Lecture, Husserl asserted that the realm of spirit is not merely 'parallel' to the realm of nature; it is the progenitor of the natural realm. According to Husserl therefore, nature belongs to the sphere of the spirit, and not the reverse. There are other also who hold this conviction. E.F. Schumacher, the writer of the counter-culture book *Small is Beautiful* (1974: 83) wrote:

The problems of education are merely reflections of the deepest problems of our age. They cannot be solved by organisation, administration, or the expenditure of money... We are suffering from a metaphysical disease, and the cure therefore must be metaphysical. Education which fails to clarify our central convictions is mere training for indulgence. For it is our central convictions that are in disorder, and as long as the present anti-metaphysical temper persists, the disorder will grow worse.

Education, far from ranking as man's resource, will then be an agent for destruction.

Phenomenological 'Cells' in Australia

Throughout Australia there are however a number of what I will call 'cells' which resist the encroachment of the hard sciences and make use of phenomenology in their research. We are in touch with groups in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Brisbane. Of particular interest to my paper is the Phenomenology Research Group, located at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus, Western Australia.

Over the past five years a small band of researchers has gathered around the inspirational figure of Dr. Patricia Sherwood. Her background is in Social Anthropology. Her PhD was undertaken in the early 1980s among a millenarian religious community in a remote corner of the south west of Western Australia. In the intervening years she has taught eighty separate courses at Edith Cowan University's regional campus in the social sciences, with a special focus on Buddhism and psychotherapy. Dr. Sherwood has fostered the study of phenomenology in a conscious attempt to throw off the narrow shackles of reductionist science so as to address the dimension of lived human experience in the everyday life-world.

The history and character of the group to which I refer is unique. In 1997 a fledgling group of researchers in the early part of their studies were drawn to Dr. Sherwood and to phenomenology. Students have come from various States in Australia, and such places as New Zealand, Singapore, Africa, and Hawaii to research areas of interest to them. It is of interest that an increasing number of students are willing to travel internationally to access supportive mentors providing phenomenological research capability. Three further PhDs from Singapore are enrolling in our research group in 2003. My role has been that of group member, and for two semesters while Dr. Sherwood was on leave, as convenor of the phenomenology group, teacher of phenomenology, and postgraduate supervisor.

ECU's Phenomenology Research Group and its Research

Currently students are applying phenomenology to a wide range of subject areas, such as:

1. Western tourists' experiences of Aboriginal culture and sacred sites.
2. The building of community in business, through Scott Peck's Community Building Workshop.
3. The experience of the client in psychotherapeutic interventions using action-based techniques.
4. The experience of the therapist of themselves in psychotherapeutic interventions using art as the medium.
5. The effectiveness of group art therapy for victims of Post Traumatic Stress disorder resulting from sexual abuse.
6. The effectiveness of external applications of the ginger compress in anthroposophical nursing.
7. Regional development to assist rural communities in the face of social and economic decline, using principles derived from Christian Socialism.
8. And my own research, which addressed the transformations of meaning resulting from conversion to the Christian faith.

As prospective researchers these students found that potential supervisors operating within traditional departments in established Universities were either unwilling to supervise their projects because they lay outside what was considered to be academically acceptable; or they were unable to locate a methodology capable of meeting the unique demands required by the research itself. They found a kindred spirit in Dr. Sherwood and a suitable method for their studies in phenomenology.

The Students in the Phenomenology Group

None of our students had studied phenomenology previously, either at University or through self-study. In each case they realised the need for phenomenology as a result of paying attention to the structures of their own inward experience, their own consciousness, and/or the particular needs of the research area they were seeking to explore.

All of our students have sought the resources of philosophical phenomenology only after practicing it in their own lives as a way of being and knowing for some years. Most researchers in our group have a worldview which is either consciously religious (Christian, Buddhist or humanist); or anthroposophical in orientation (founded in the writings of Rudolf Steiner).

Teaching Phenomenology in Regional Australia

There have been particular difficulties experienced by the group as we have sought to resource ourselves and arrive at a clear understanding of phenomenology as both a philosophy and as an applied methodology. As an orientation it was a brand new to us. No doubt phenomenology had been taught in obscure corners of philosophy and theology classes as an abstract science, but as a living life-force it was unknown to us.

Questions such as: What is phenomenology? Where could we locate literature related to our various disciplines, which has a phenomenological base? How was phenomenology to be defined in the broad range of research areas to which it was being applied? Could we locate uniform definitions and languages around this new field? Who can we learn from and obtain resources from?... have characterised our quest over the past four years. The 'chase' was enthralling, but it was also exhausting:

1. In terms of time and effort: as we have had to teach ourselves the essentials of phenomenology from the ground up.
2. Financially: I alone have spent AUS\$15,000 on books.
3. Philosophically: as we have learned first the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology, and then learned how to use it in the practice of research.

Particular sources which have provided most help in our journey of discovery have been:

1. Internet sites: particularly the Centre for Advanced Research in Phenomenology: www.phenomenologycenter.org.
2. Books: particularly the Encyclopedia of Phenomenology, of which we bought several copies while they were discounted by the publisher. Other sources of particular help were Max Van Manen, Moustakis, and Robert Sokolowski.
3. Significant personal contacts: if phenomenology was a new orientation for us, there were many who knew the field well and were willing to assist us: there has been a strong connection with South African scholars who are deeply schooled in

phenomenology through the Psychology Department of Rhodes University; especially Professor Steve Edwards (Head of School, Psychology Department, University of Zululand); Professor Christopher Stones (Head of School, Psychology Department, Rhodes University), Ass. Prof Robert Schweitzer (Psychology Department, Queensland University of Technology), and Dr. Paul MacDonald, (HoD Philosophy, Murdoch University).

The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology (www.ipjp.org)

But there has been a significant outcome from our efforts. In 2000, the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* was brought into existence by a core group of people who continue to serve as its Editorial Board. Its main purpose has been to act as stimulus and encouragement to southern hemisphere scholars seeking to understand phenomenology, and make use of it as a research methodology. It is intended as an expressive and educational forum for scholars in the southern hemisphere. The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, of which I am the Executive Editor, has now achieved its fourth edition, and a call for papers is now being made for edition 5, due for publication in April 2003. I have brochures available today for your information, and there you can locate the website address, and read some of our excellent articles.

In July 2003 we plan to commence a lecture series in phenomenology. Professor Embree has kindly accepted our invitation to give the inaugural lecture; an even we are eagerly looking forward to.

What Do We Want: When Do We Want It?

As I conclude my paper; I ask the question, 'What do we as the Phenomenology Research Group at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, want from the Organisation of Phenomenological Organisations Conference?' If we are to continue to teach students, none of whom have any background in phenomenology, I would like to suggest the OPO consider providing the following resources to ourselves and other small phenomenology study cells:

1. Clear statements that validate phenomenology as a philosophy in the face of the continuing challenge from positivist and quantitative science.
2. A well thought out syllabus for teaching phenomenology to undergraduate and postgraduate students, with indicators of how phenomenology as a philosophy integrates with existing disciplines.
3. More classroom texts on introductory phenomenology, such as Sokolowski's Introduction to Phenomenology, suitable for students with no previous exposure to phenomenology.
4. A glossary that provides students with an accessible, uniform language which is embedded in the tradition of phenomenology, and which aids the appropriation of the discipline itself.
5. Helps for those teaching phenomenology, such as is discussed by Scott Churchill in his article 'Considerations for Teaching a Phenomenological Approach to Psychological Research' (Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 21, 1990, 46-67).

End Statement

If these resources can be provided to research cells operating outside the existing centres of research, there will be some hope of meeting the growing demand by the upcoming generation of scholars for a meaningful qualitative research methodology. There will also be the possibility of phenomenology becoming the 'new' science that Husserl conceived it to be; as it rises to take its rightful place as the primary tool for approaching, understanding, and improving the question of what it means to be human in the world.
