

THEORETICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL ARTICLE

The ethic of delicacy in phenomenological research

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Abstract

In this article, the author works out the conceptual framework of the phenomenological method. The core idea of the article is that the phenomenological method is important in human research because it avoids the logic of control of positivism and adopts a logic of delicacy towards the lived experience of the other. Indeed, it is because of this logic that the phenomenological method is particularly suited to research related to health and well-being, since whenever dealing with suffering and endeavoring to improve the quality of life, accuracy and delicacy are essential. First, the article defines the essence of the phenomenological method in the light of phenomenological philosophy; second, it identifies and investigates what mental acts must be developed in order to put into practice the essence of the phenomenological method. These include paying open attention, being-not-in-search, emptying the mind, experiencing cognitive placelessness, having empathy for the other and caring for the other. The detailed description of these cognitive postures is necessary so that the core of the phenomenological method can be clearly understood.

Key words: *Phenomenology, method, epoché, ethic, delicacy*

Introduction

The world of human experience is a complex thing, and it is an arduous task for researchers to take it on as the object of inquiry (Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2002, p. 18). The positivistic paradigm in human sciences has long prevailed; this kind of epistemological approach has allowed scholars to gain a certain degree of knowledge of the lived experience, but its essence still escapes the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bentz & Shapiro, 1988). Consequently, the pivotal question is what is the adequate research method to investigate the lived experience? In particular, which research method is appropriate to investigate cases where the lived experience involves suffering? Phenomenology affirms that the thinker must find a way to approach the object of inquiry through which its essence can be disclosed; following to this epistemological principle, a largely approved thesis claims that phenomenology constitutes the adequate method of inquiry (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994).

However, the essence of the phenomenological method does not always find adequate clarification in scientific literature, perhaps because of its abstract, stylistically dense, and tortuous language.

The key concepts of phenomenology are well-enucleated (intentionality, intuition of essence, sense-bestowing acts, lived experience, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, etc.) (Bergum, 1991; Cohen & Omery, 1994; Cohen, Kahan & Steeves, 2000; Creswell, 1998); however, one finds it difficult to elucidate just how these concepts must be elaborated in order to apply the phenomenological method. Indeed, in order for the phenomenological approach to be valid in empirical research, it has to be interpreted (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 11).

The aim of this study is to explicate the essence of phenomenological epistemology by identifying the mental acts through which it actualizes itself.

First, the study defines the essence of the phenomenological method in light of Husserlian thinking, it identifies the critical core of such a method and explicates the essential move of phenomenology. Then, on this ground, it examines the following key question: What a mental act is the researcher required to develop in order to actualize the essence of the phenomenological method? In order to answer this key question, this study analyses the phenomenological tradition, with special attention to the thought of some philosophers who are generally

overlooked in the discussion on an empirical phenomenological research method. Besides Emmanuel Lévinas and Max Scheler, the thoughts of some women philosophers are interesting: Hannah Arendt and Edith Stein, two famous German phenomenologists, but also Simone Weil (a French philosopher) and Maria Zambrano (Spanish), who have shown evident phenomenological aspects in their thinking even though they are not openly followers of this philosophy.¹

Why go back to studying phenomenological philosophy? In order to comprehend the essence of the phenomenological method, the authentic phenomenological researcher cannot rely on manuals where the method is already codified; indeed, if the watchword of phenomenology is “going to the things themselves”, then the task of the authentic phenomenologist is “going to the original texts”. Method comes from the Greek word *μέθοδος*, which means research, inquiry, or investigation; and this word includes *ὁδός*, which means way or path. Hence, learning a method does not mean applying rules, which are already pre-codified, but rather “going a long way”. A method is a way that guides us towards knowledge when it is not a well-traveled road, but a path we map ourselves. “Any method takes shape as *Incipit vita nova*” (Zambrano, 1988, p. 14), that is, any method is a new life we must begin.

Starting from this radical way of interpreting the essence of phenomenology, it is necessary to go back to the texts of phenomenological philosophy in order to construct a phenomenological method and to study some of these texts in the original language in order to be as close as possible to the original thinking of the authors. What was found is the object of this study.

The essence of the phenomenological method

Being faithful to the phenomenon

The essence of phenomenology is synthesized in the key phrase “going back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 252), in order to apprehend their “originary givenness.” According to the Husserlian concept, things are not factual or individual objects, but are immediately intuited as essential elements of consciousness, and viewed not as psychological processes, but in terms of their essential structures involved in all understandings.

The interest in phenomenology comes from the claim that the inquiring mind must address whatever appears immediately to consciousness in the manner it appears, in order to apprehend its original profile. It is necessary to have a method of inquiry, which aims at understanding phenomena in a precategorical

manner so that the access to their originary givenness is possible. As regards this purpose, Husserl indicates the proper way of grasping this givenness in the “principle of the faithfulness to the phenomenon”, also called the “principle of all principles”. Working out this principle means describing the phenomenon as it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness: “everything originally offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (Husserl, 1983, p. 44).

This phenomenological principle, which requires the forming of a detailed, conscientious description of the phenomenon—that is, of what is presented in conscious acts precisely as it is so presented—is grounded on the ontological assumption that the essence of a thing discloses itself in its manner of appearing. Thus, phenomenology places itself beyond the old metaphysical dichotomy between being and appearing, which asserted itself at the dawn of Western philosophy. This ancient dualism not only presupposes a clear-cut distinction between being and appearing, but it also introduces a radical axiological asymmetry in this scission to the detriment of appearing, because it affirms that what appears (phenomenon) is a mere appearance that conceals the truth (being) of the thing, which does not appear above the surface (Arendt, 1978, p. 25). Phenomenology dismantles this age-old and persistent metaphysical dichotomy along with the prejudice of the supremacy of being over appearing, by affirming that being and appearing coincide (Arendt, 1978, p. 19); in other words, all reality is of phenomenal nature. Based on the presupposition of the primacy of appearance, we are invited to consider that just because we are destined to live in a world that appears (that is, a world made up of things which are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled) it is reasonable to assume that what appears is considerable since it shows what it is.

Consequently, the phenomenologist does not have the task suggested by Parmenides to leave the world of appearances by releasing the thinking from the bonds of phenomena, but rather to concern himself/herself with appearances, because what appears constitutes the real matter of research (Arendt, 1978, p. 27). The phenomenon is not something incidental, but it is the being disclosing itself. Starting from this ontological assumption, phenomenology is claimed to be the science of phenomena, that is, of “what appears as such”. Phenomenology is a return to phenomena, that is, to everything that appears in the manner of its appearing. Heidegger (1996), p. 30) defines phenomenology as *ipojainesqai*

tá fainómena, which means letting what is to be seen show itself in the manner it shows itself.²

Allowing the self-manifestation of phenomena means letting phenomena reveal themselves to our consciousness and describing them as they disclose themselves in their originary givenness. Phenomenology is grounded on the assumption that everything has its own manner of appearing and therefore a way of manifesting itself to the consciousness. The essence of the phenomenological method lies in receiving this manner of appearing and in describing it in a very careful way, unsullied by assumptions. Returning to what is directly given in the manner in which it is given in experience, that is, “going to the things themselves”, requires the application of the “principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon”, which means being faithful to whatever reveals its presence and exposes its originary profile to our gaze.

In order to succeed in applying the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon, two epistemic virtues are required: respect and humility. Since each side of the phenomenon manifests something essential of reality, having respect means paying attention to the smallest detail of what is appearing. However, since not all the being appears and some mystery persists, the researcher is obliged to nourish a disposition to humility, which consists in being aware that while going beyond what is given immanently, there is the possibility of failing and consequently the necessity to monitor continually one’s own way of inquiry. What demands humility is the occurrence of revealing and concealing together (McWorther, 1992, p. 4).

The tendency to stay in a preconceived world

Applying the principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon is a difficult task due to great difficulties in having a direct experience of things. In fact, we are always in a preconceived world, in the sense that we always experience the world through filters such as webs of categories, linguistic constructs, folk assumptions, and practical concerns that make direct access to things impossible. An experience is always subject to the words that define it.

This loss of originary evidence intensifies in scientific research, since while elaborating knowledge it imposes predefined cognitive devices on phenomena; it is through such devices that phenomena are absorbed into our mental structures, where any singular and original manner of coming-into-presence dissipates. Rather than going to the things by allowing them to self-show in their essence, the scientific way of knowing imposes predefined conditions on the manner in which things appear. This

work of operationalizing phenomena into our cognitive patterns is highly evident in the processes of mathematical analysis of data and in experimental procedures, where the mind imposes the geometry of its gaze rather than let the phenomenon appear in its givenness. In scientific experiments, there is an ‘attack’ upon things (Heidegger, 1969, p. 88). In fact, in quantitative research phenomena can only be saved insofar as they are expressible in algebraic formulae (Arendt, 1958, p. 266). The purpose of this mathematical operation is not to prepare the mind to a direct experience of the phenomenon in order to gain the intuition of its essence, but it serves to reduce phenomena to the measure of the modern human’s mind (Arendt, 1958, pp. 266–267).

Every time we submit a phenomenon to our mathematical and experimental devices, we simply deal with the patterns of our mind. We are in the presence of a self-referential closing, which does not certainly question the truth of scientific research, but drives research into a vicious circle: researchers formulate their hypotheses, around which they arrange their experiments, and then they use these experiments to verify their hypotheses (Arendt, 1958, p. 287). Doing research in a preconceived world, which is concerned with the effort of overcoming the relativity of knowing, produces efficient knowledge, which gives the researcher an increasing power over things. However, at the same time it implies a loss of access to their originary givenness, as it drives the mind back into the limitations of patterns that it itself has created.

Through the principle of *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* (that is, reducing science to mathematics) the mind is removed from being in a direct relationship with what the phenomenon manifests of itself originally; it works with a set of symbols and devices where all real relations dissolve into logical ones among man-made symbols (Arendt, 1958, p. 284). Thus, it happens that the researcher, so wrapped up in his/her mental instruments, encounters nothing but himself/herself, his/her patterns and symbols.

When this cognitive imposition occurs in the field of human sciences, it implies a considerable reduction in the possibilities of authentic comprehension of the other, of his/her world of meanings, since the researcher understands only what filters through preconceived categories. Positivistic research is like a colander where the more the research is systematized in predefined categories, the more its holes get bigger, and consequently the less reality is held back by these holes.

When the process of inquiry is preconceived inside a frame of too systematized categories and procedures, then it is difficult to let the object of

research—that is, the lived experience—disclose in its essence. The singularity and uniqueness of the lifeworld remain invisible, since they are wrapped in preconceived webs of concepts that drive the research process. In this sense, knowledge gained in a preconceived way is power and imposition on the other, making his/her otherness invisible. Whoever is an object of inquiry would say, if he/she could: “You see whatever of yourself that you throw on my face and you don’t see what I really am”. This kind of imposition occurs in research that uses refined procedures and techniques, but not so refined as to be open to the other; in this kind of research the objects of inquiry remain out of focus, with no face, and consequently the findings fail to give an adequate understanding of the object of inquiry.

To metabolize phenomena into mathematical and experimental procedures submits research to the *logic of imposition*; phenomenology, instead, follows the *logic of discretion* thanks to its principle of faithfulness. The positivistic approach, which uses a framework of preconceived formulae, applies a *logic of power* over things; the phenomenological approach, which asks the researcher to deactivate his/her habitual epistemic instruments in order to situate himself/herself in a precategory hearing of the other, applies the *logic of submission* to the other, which is infused by the *ethic of delicacy*.

The fundamental epistemic move

In order to realize this direct access to things, which is the lived experience in human sciences, Husserl suggests the epistemic move of the *epoché*. Doing the *epoché* means suspending, bracketing, putting aside the natural attitude towards the mental acts that tend to give validity to our habitual knowledge and drawing back our attention to the unprejudiced sources of the experience. Doing the *epoché* means engaging oneself in ridding one’s gaze of all the filters made of both ingenuous beliefs and scientific knowledge, in which the mind is wrapped up and which hinder the phenomenon from appearing in its originary givenness.³ In Greek TMἐπέχειν means suspending, interrupting; it indicates the act of stopping and leaving off. In astronomy, it indicates the point zero from which one begins to calculate the distance between the stars. Thus, doing the TMἐποχή is finding the point of the pure beginning of cognitive activity, and we can find that pure beginning of knowing when we bracket all our habitual cognitive devices that hamper a direct access to the thing. Precisely because the *epoché* demands that we put aside all scientific, philosophical, and everyday assumptions, it is claimed to be the “principle of presuppositionlessness” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 263). Keeping the mind

free from presuppositions, unguided and unburdened of any traditions, permits the mind to be attentive only to what is given in intuition in its manners of givenness. It is from presuppositionlessness that a careful description of phenomena can be possible.

However, so conceived, the *epoché* is a mental attitude that is difficult to carry out radically and that is constantly threatened by misunderstandings, because it drives the researcher into a paradox: it compels him/her to consider what is obvious as problematic and enigmatic; that is, it requires that the natural manner of inhabiting the world should be interrupted. The *epoché* so formulated looks like an impossible mental practice. Indeed, Husserl (1970b) did not give detailed instructions on how to accomplish this reduction; he claimed not to have certainties about how to put the *epoché* into practice and not to know how one can put one’s mind in the conditions of working out the cognitive strategies required by the reduction. However, he was convinced that this epistemic move is inescapable, because it is only the act of “holding in abeyance” the natural attitude that allows the inquiring mind to apprehend the essence of phenomena.

Therefore, the researcher cannot forget that Heidegger claimed that “presuppositionlessness” is impossible because our mental acts are wrapped up in a net of pre-judgments that are tacitly present in our consciousness. There are always some preconceptions in any assertion made, which “remain mostly inconspicuous because language always already contains a developed set of concepts” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 147).⁴ For this reason, the notion of presuppositionlessness as a methodological principle is regarded as ill-educated (Ashworth, 1999, p. 707).

However, even if presuppositionlessness is impossible to put entirely into act, this mental condition should be the aim of the human sciences researcher, because it is by searching for the pure beginning of thinking that the apprehension of the essence of the lived experience can be possible. The phenomenological reduction, by contracting the excessive presence of the self, opens the place of appearing in which the phenomenon can disclose itself in its essential givenness. For this reason, phenomenological researchers must put the *epoché* at the core of their research, as the most important epistemic imperative (Husserl, 1970b). Doing the *epoché* means that “you should become mindful and be on your guard, precisely when the most familiar judgments, and even supposedly genuine experiences, unexpectedly assail you” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 12).

The *epoché* should be, above all, interpreted as a holding in abeyance of all the desires and expectations produced by imaginative activity; indeed, they

can furthermore distort and pollute the mental move aimed at going-to-the-things-themselves than cognitive preconceptions; the pivotal problem consists in regulating the imagination.

How to actualize the essence of the phenomenological method

After clarifying the essence of the phenomenological method and its critical core, and in order to find a correct way and rigorous application of this method, it is necessary to identify those mental acts able to carry out this method, that is, those acts that free the mind of the tendency to stay in a preconceived world, allowing things to disclose themselves in their essence.

Paying careful and open attention

The thesis of this study is that the basic mental act of the phenomenologist is *open attention*—the disposition to perceive clearly and distinctly how a thing manifests itself; it is the capacity to receive the phenomenon faithfully as it discloses itself. Phenomenology is a way of concentrating on how the phenomenon makes itself evident to our consciousness, and this inward observing implies opening the eyes of one's mind. Open attention is a kind of hearing, and hearing more than seeing requires the mind to assume a passive posture, wherein the subject allows the other to self-reveal in his/her original manner and time. For the attention to be an *act of self-opening that faithfully receives the other* in his/her manner of appearing, it must be a negative, passive effort. The attention, as a negative effort, consists of suspending one's thoughts; that is, letting them be available, empty, and permeable to the object (Weil, 1966, p. 92). It is a question of keeping one's thinking free from any contact with the knowledge inhabiting the mind, which is used automatically, without any critical reflection. The phenomenological method is a negative effort because it de-activates one's thoughts, making one's cognitive devices silent. Being attentive to others means keeping oneself free from the hold of habitual and structured knowledge, unbound from one's epistemic devices.

This open attention, which is passive hearing, requires the mind to assume an allocentric posture, which consists in the capacity to bracket one's own self, that is, to eclipse all the subject's thoughts and preoccupations with oneself for a full turning towards the object (Schachtel, 1959, p. 181). Allocentric attention is radically different from autocentric attention that is peculiar to the positivistic method. With autocentric attention the subject

turns to the object in an instrumental way, using it in the service of a predefined research project; allocentric attention is a receptive openness to the other, where the knower lets him/herself be driven by the signals that the other addresses to the mind.

There are two dispositions necessary to develop the allocentric attention: (i) *to perceive the object as something with intrinsic value*, and (ii) *to develop a relaxed mental disposition*.

1. The being of the other, his/her manner of appearing and getting in touch with the researcher, must be perceived as something worthy of the highest regard; any instrumental approach is banished. For the other to speak to you, you must take him/her as the only existing being, to whom devoted attention must be paid (Schachtel, 1959, p. 225). The other is not an "object" to be used in a research project, but he/she is a "being-there" to devote care to, a care that should shelter his/her original self-manifestation. Zambrano (1996, p. 17) speaks of an enchanting and loving gaze on things, which allows the mind to remain faithful to things (*fiel a las cosas*), that is, attentive to any gradation of their appearing and to any instant of their revealing.
2. Open attention requires the mind to be released from any kind of attachment to other objects and from interest in any goal, except the one allowing the thing to show its manner of coming-to-evidence. The researcher cannot turn towards an object with concentrated attentiveness while engaged in an inner conflict against some impulses or preoccupations, which consume his/her cognitive resources elsewhere (Schachtel, 1959, p. 225). When inner quietness is lacking, the mind is only capable of cramped concentration; in order to comprehend the lived experience in its original profile, it is necessary to apply relaxed attention, which allows the mind to concentrate its thinking fully on the other. Relaxed attention is an "action which does not act" (Weil, 1997, p. 368). Only in a quiet and relaxed posture, can thoughts come-into-presence as a slow wave, which does not invade the other but which leaves up to him/her the manner of self-revealing of its own accord as to what it is and how it is. The phenomenological act of knowing is an attentiveness that is concentrated fully on the thing, where the knower is wholly absorbed in the posture of eccentric contemplation.

Attention that is open and concentrated on the object fully is thus the mental act peculiar to phenomenology.

This interpretation of the phenomenological mental posture is quite close to that of Scheler (1999), who conceived phenomenology as an attitude that is a non-goal-directed manner of viewing, nourished by the disposition of non-resistance. Only those cognitive acts characterized by release can lead to understanding the other.

Being-not-in-search

Originary givenness is not something to seize through a project, because having a project is a superimposition of the self upon the other, who is thereby hampered in revealing him/herself in his/her own original manner. To receive the originary givenness of the other, the mind is required to abandon the idea of exercising any kind of control upon the coming-into-presence of the other; specifically, it must develop the posture of waiting. As Weil (1997, p. 65) claims, the attention that is grasped at an already defined project is a “bad way of going on”; it depends on that utilitarian attitude that wants to waste any cognitive efforts and considers the planning that establishes in advance what is to be searched for as a guarantee of an effective knowing process.

Nevertheless, in order to find something “it is not necessary to *want to*”, it is not necessary to search for it. The mind must develop a “non-goal orientation”. In order to attain knowledge faithful to the essence of lifeworld, it is necessary to withdraw and take a step back; that is, put yourself aside. “Only what is indirect is efficacious. We will do nothing if we don’t draw back.” (Weil, 1997, p. 236). This is one of the paradoxes of phenomenology: one can go-to-the-thing only when he/she withdraws. Lévinas (1988, pp. 174–175) speaks about ethical knowledge: knowing is encountering the other being careful to “be late” with the one’s own self; only in this way will the other have the time and manner to self-reveal his/her difference. “Being late” is not a lack of accuracy, but it is the capacity to go beyond oneself, beyond that preconceived knowledge that cancels the otherness of the other. Conceiving knowing as a “being-late” of the self when encountering the other must not be regarded negatively as “non-knowledge”, but rather as a completely different kind of knowledge which is posing an ethical question: how to safeguard the other in his/her transcendence. “Being late”, means deactivating our epistemic grammars and bracketing the expectations we carry with us, then holding back the attention upon little but meaningful things for a long time and apprehending them as much as possible (Weil, 1990, p. 204). Consequently, the posture of the phenomenologist is not that of “being in search of”, that is, the manner of moving with a

preconceived map; it is rather that of letting oneself be driven by the way the other suggests to follow.

In order to explain the significance of “being-not-in-search”, Zambrano (1988, p. 11) suggests the metaphor of “going towards the light in the wood”: the researcher comes out of the shadows of the thick wood into the clear open spaces where things disclose themselves in their essence when he/she lets himself/herself be guided by the patches of light that attract his/her gaze. This image means that the researcher leaves the shadow of his/her predefined knowledge and enters into a direct and un-precategorical relationship with things when he/she lets him/herself be guided by the ways of knowing that the things themselves suggest. The essence of the lived experience of the other is not to be searched for, but to be waited for without a predetermined project.

“You must not seek it [*No hay que buscarlo*] ... If you don’t seek it, then you will be offered a knowledge which will be unforeseeable and unlimited” (Zambrano, 1988, p. 11).

Thinking that does not seek is a passive and waiting kind of thinking, and this kind of thinking is necessary because the most valuable things must not be searched for, but waited for (Weil, 1966, p. 93).

Both Zambrano and Weil suggest an idea of inquiry that is not realized by raising questions that pressure the other to manifest him/herself, but by waiting for the other to be revealed by him/herself. Rather than stifling the mind with questions, it is better to leave it the time to receive silently the self-saying of the other (Zambrano, 1988, p.12).

Knowing always has to do with light, since light allows the mind to apprehend the shape with which a thing manifests itself (Lévinas, 1995, p. 48). Consequently, in order to understand the essence of seeing that does not seek, it is worthwhile to use the metaphor of light suggested by Stein (2001, p. 62): seeing which does not seek is a roundabout, aurean light, that does not assault things, but which caresses them. *Attention-not-in-search* is not like the sharp look of a beam that invests and almost strikes things, but it is the aurean radiance that allows the gradual self-revealing of the things’ profile. In the tender and caressing light of dawn, things disclose their essential outlines, which are difficult to perceive in the dazzling light of day. The full light of day invests things until it makes them fade; on the contrary, the gaze which does not seek is a slow unfolding, which is almost like walking slowly around things alternating the act of approaching the object with the act of keeping it at a distance, in order to leave it its manner of self-showing. The

being of the other needs to appear and it is light that allows its disclosure, that is, an oblique light that “gently bends on things” (Zambrano, 1988, p. 12).

In this roundabout oblique gaze, we can find a strong analogy with the “gaze which goes around with delicacy” that Heidegger (1992, p. 179) counters with the intrusive approach of calculative reason. Phenomenological knowing, after bracketing the ideas humming in one’s head, stops the tendency to manage things and allows them to come-in-presence by themselves; the other presents himself to me and I present myself to the other; and so I let the other stand where he/she stands (Heidegger, 1972, pp. 41–44). This kind of thinking develops an open responsiveness to the world.

Heidegger calls the attitude of quiet reflection and abandonment of any attachment “self-release”, from the German word *gelassenheit*. Self-release is the right relation of the mind with the other, because it lets his/her lived experience come-in-presence as itself. It consists of “weaning ourselves from will” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 60), or refraining oneself from imposing one’s conditions upon the other, that is, one’s way of seeing and saying upon the other’s way of seeing and saying. In order to reach the condition of release, which does not belong to the domain of will (Heidegger, 1969, p. 61), one must not seek it, but only desire it to happen: “... simply desiring it without trying to realize it; only pondering... To this purpose the self must make itself passive. We are only asked to pay attention, such intense attention, that the self disappears” (Weil, 1997, p. 252).

Heidegger affirms, “We are to do nothing but wait” (1969, p. 62)—wait for the other to present himself. When thinking is a self-release, that is an action, which is not activity but passivity, then the other can self-reveal. Waiting is the mark of phenomenological thinking. Waiting is not awaiting, for this latter is a representing; it is passive and receptive attention, and it is with this receptiveness without representing anything (Heidegger, 1969, pp. 68–69) that we let the other reveal him/herself by him/herself; the mind is so released that it is in the condition of “willing not to will”. It is very difficult to understand the meaning of this imperative rule, because like all phenomenological acts this one also implies a paradox. “Willing not to will” is not a battle against oneself; indeed, a polemical attitude does not help, but it uselessly absorbs mental energy. On the contrary, it is the quiet act of paying attention to the other by waiting for his/her disclosure. The non-willing attitude must not be an imposition on oneself, but rather an acquiescence: to free oneself from any willing.

Passivity is thus a fundamental way of being that is typical of phenomenology. Being passive is not a sign of a minor degree of existence, but it indicates a

more discreet way of staying among others; it means withdrawing oneself in order to let the other have the time and manner of disclosing his/her givenness. In the managerial and technological way of conceiving research, the responsibility of the thinker consists of controlling the thing; instead, in phenomenological research the responsibility consists of controlling one’s own tendency to manage the thing so that it can achieve full disclosure by itself.

However, the passivity of “being-not-in-search” must not be confused with a ‘non-questioning’ attitude, because the search for knowledge always feeds on questions. As Heidegger (2000, p. 23) claims, thinking is interrogative in its essence. Compared to the positivistic approach, the phenomenological one consists of letting oneself be questioned by the experience of the other; phenomenological questioning does not take shape in advance, but it emerges from hearing the other. Moreover, when questions are formulated, they must be kept as open as possible, so that each answer can be transformed into a further question. The thinking preserves itself in its interrogative essence when the answer does not eliminate the need for further questioning. The question should be raised to open the mind to other questions.

Emptying the mind

In order to activate a non-orientated attention, the act of “being-not-in-search” is not sufficient; it is necessary to keep the gaze empty. *Emptying the mind* means deactivating the habitual epistemic tools: conceptual webs, sets of theories, procedural rules. Emptying means putting aside the presuppositions the mind is imbued with as well as its expectations and desires. Emptying the self is not falling into absolute nothingness, but it is giving the mind the possibility to open itself to a new breath, which permits it to intensify the hearing of the other. Emptying oneself of the ego-self means becoming light, and lightness makes the mind permeable to the original self-saying of the other. Hence, the act of emptying is essential to actualize a pure beginning of the epistemic process.

“Loving truth means tolerating the void” (Weil, 1997, p. 207). Through the act of emptying, the phenomenologist maintains his/her thinking open to receive the essential qualities of the phenomena.⁵ Following the passive logic of phenomenology, the void is not something to seek, but rather a condition that must be waited for; emptying the mind means letting the void enter oneself.

Lightening the mind of what clutters it up means doing the *epoché*. Bracketing the validity of usual and already confirmed knowledge will consequently

depotentiate the self and make the epistemic subject shrink; weakening the subject of knowledge is an essential phenomenological move since it allows the other to self-reveal in his/her being and so to disclose his/her difference.

However, the gesture of *epoché* is not only a logical-epistemic practice, but also a life orientation. Indeed, Husserl (1970b) distinguishes two kinds of *epoché*: the professional and the radical *epoché*. The professional *epoché* consists of bracketing all the researcher's work-tools (validated theories and methodological devices). The radical *epoché* consists of continuously holding in abeyance the entire vital horizon- that set of beliefs and emotions in which the act of thinking tends to place its trust in everydayness. The radical *epoché* is the disciplined practice of keeping incessantly one's distance from those mental crystallizations which tacitly obstruct one's own cognitive tissues; it is bracketing not only ontological and epistemological presuppositions, but ethical and political presuppositions as well, and the worldviews which orientate the daily way of being. It is the ability to release oneself from any bond with both external and internal objects, that is, the ability to hold back (Lévinas, 1995, p. 50).

One could think that the professional *epoché*, which seems to be easier, can be worked out independently from one's engagement in the radical *epoché*. But the phenomenological researcher who cultivates the professional *epoché* on the basis of the radical one makes his/her act of thinking more open and fluid, and consequently more vital. If we assume that phenomenology is not only a method of inquiry but also a life orientation, then the researcher is required to avoid technicist interpretations of the *epoché* and to devote him/herself to a full self-education of thinking.

Cognitive placelessness

The act of *the epoché*, that is emptying the mind of the ego-self, results in the experience of cognitive *placelessness*. "Being rooted in the absence of a place", claims Weil (1997, p. 423), means being in the field of research without any attachment to a precoded method. Displacements are those experiences that push the mind outside customary places, forcing it to abandon the horizons of meaning and the epistemological frames where it can feel safe. Since *placelessness* pushes the mind out of the tranquil state of what is familiar, it causes anguish; indeed, leaving familiar landscapes and venturing into unfamiliar ones is distressing.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between sought placelessness, that is, a self-displacement, and unexpected placelessness. When an experience

is unexpected, it is common to feel lost and on the brink of an abyss. Perceiving oneself in the grasp of anxiety is an oppressive emotion, which can provoke the risks to immobilize the act of thinking. On the contrary, when the placelessness is a condition of mind that is searched for in order to find other ways of knowing, the anxiety coming from feeling off familiar landscapes can be tolerable, because one is aware that being the lack of points of reference is the condition for the pure beginning of inquiry.

The researcher must be aware that being capable of keeping oneself in a quiet and relaxed posture, far from any attachment, is a difficult time-consuming learning, which requires a long time, that is, the time to acquire expertise from experience. Indeed, acquiring the ability to suspend and deactivate the tendency to seek anxiously, and to wait with a released and receptive mind, requires a continuous training, which must cultivate the awareness that the disclosure of the essence of things requires a long time.

Hence, phenomenology compels the researcher to a reversal, that is, a radical change in the logic prevailing in our time and in the academic world as well- the logic of efficiency, which results in producing a large quantity of knowledge as soon as possible. It is the logic inspired by the modern cardinal virtues of "success, industry and truthfulness" (Arendt, 1958, p. 278). It is possible to accept the experience of cognitive placelessness and consequently the long time required to search for the truth, when research work is out of the logic of success and efficiency, which normally drives the researcher's activity. Rather, the research should be guided by the search for meaningfulness, which requires a very long time. The phenomenologist must free him/herself from the wish to produce reliable findings in a short time and let him/herself be driven solely by the wish for truth. Only those who are inspired by this logic, which is almost ascetic, are able to sustain the uncertainty and anxiety typical of research work, without worrying about filling the empty points, in order to remain in that emptiness of knowledge that grants the mind access to the pure beginning of knowing. Only when one is able to keep oneself free from the logic of success can he/she follow the ascetic logic of phenomenology.

An ethical epistemology

Welcoming the other

At this point, the radical difference between positivistic and phenomenological epistemology is evident. According to the positivistic approach, one acquires scientific knowledge by managing the phenomenon based on a preconceived method of

inquiry; positivistic epistemology takes possession of the other by absorbing it into the net of its devices. Compared to the logic of imposition, phenomenological epistemology makes the logic of hospitality prevail, in welcoming the other in his/her originary givenness. This welcoming of the other is possible when the mind brackets predefined categories rather than imposing them; that is, it empties itself of the habitual tools in order to welcome the other.

What is at work in the research is subjectivity, and to Lévinas subjectivity “is welcoming the other, it is hospitality” (1969, p. 27). Phenomenology is the experience of welcoming the other, of making oneself hospitable. The relaxed welcoming of the other is paradigmatic for Lévinas, in the sense that “The relation between the same and the other, the welcoming of the other, is the ultimate fact” (1969, p. 77).

For a correct interpretation of the mental attitude of hospitality, thinking can be conceived as hearkening. Harkening does not simply mean hearing and keeping one’s ears open, but it means a full and attentive relation with the other. Authentic hearkening requires the mind to develop an allocentric attention to the other (Heidegger, 2000, p. 137).

While positivistic epistemology works out the principle of the ‘prehension’ of things, phenomenological epistemology is inspired by the disposition of the ‘distension’ (Scheler, 1999, pp. 166–168). Rather than hunting (male activity), phenomenological research compares itself to fruit picking (female activity); while the hunter (the positivistic researcher) penetrates into the wood (under misleading appearances) to drive out the prey (the concealed essence), those searching for bilberries (the phenomenological researcher) must observe with patience and move with slow gestures in order to approach them with delicacy, so that the fruit (the essence of the lived experience of the other) can be gathered without altering its essence. The epistemology of delicacy asks the mind to cultivate a *receptive disposition*. The mind is receptive when it is “able to receive anything approaching it in the way the thing itself requires it and with the necessary depth” (Stein, 2001, p. 25).

According to Bacon, science must “penetrate into” the secrets of nature. This intrusive conception of research is aimed at acquiring knowledge that would allow the subject an effective use of its surrounding world; but human sciences cannot share this instrumental logic, because the human being asks to be understood, not dominated. The “face of the other” (Lévinas, 1969) forbids any kind of control and calls for radical responsibility, that is, activating a kind of cognitive process which is able to receive the other in all his/her uniqueness and oneness and to shelter his/her difference. A research working out predefined categories risks making the

other’s oneness invisible and not seeing his/her difference. When the other “falls in the web of a priori ideas we usually grasp it”, then his/herself otherness dissolves (Lévinas, 1988, p. 168). The logic of imposing a preconceived method allows for general knowledge, but it hinders the perception of the other’s original profile. “That is the beginning of any power” (Lévinas, 1988, p. 168). Allowing the other to manifest him/herself in such a way that his/her otherness is safeguarded implies the activation of the logic of welcoming: getting rid of the categories which filter the other’s act of appearing and making the mind an empty place permeable to the traces of the other’s being. Welcoming thinking conceives the other as infinity, so he/she cannot be grasped by the mind, but remains absolutely other from the knower, that is, transcendent (Lévinas, 1988, p. 172).

As regards modern Western epistemology, characterized by an attempt to control the other completely, the epistemology of hospitality implies the ethical bracketing of one’s cognitive tools and suspending one’s expertise, because through this move the epistemic subject draws back, contracts his/her power. It is the contraction of the self, which allows the other to make an adequate self-presentation and to disclose his/her profile so that the researcher can have the intuition of his/her manner of being (Scheler, 1999, p. 173). Being capable of welcoming the other is moving out of oneself (Moran, 2000, p. 347), it is almost a “disappearance of the self”.

Making oneself receptive is one and the same as the practice of the *ethic of weakening* one’s cognitive tools that is, weakening the tendency to have a prehension of the other to arrive at a *passive presence*. Passivity does not mean a lack of our own presence towards the object, but rather it is a different way of having a meaningful presence full of the absence of the ego-self.

Only if the mind makes itself passive and waiting,
if the eye drops,
and the usual word keeps silent,
then something manifests itself.

The ethic of weakening the ego-self, or “taking a step backward” (Weil, 1997, p. 236) in order to make room for the other, is the essential mark of phenomenological epistemology, because depotentiating the narcissistic attachment to the products of one’s cognitive activity is the essential condition to working out the principle of faithfulness. Only by weakening one’s cognitive devices is it possible to make the mind able to welcome the original disclosure of

the other, and thus to activate a way of knowing that is inspired by the virtues of respect and humility.

We can claim that phenomenological research is characterized by a thinking, which *affirms* the way of being of the other, in the sense that it recognizes the other in his/her oneness (Schachtel, 1959, pp. 226–227). *Thinking is thanking* (Heidegger, 1972, p. 139), that is, thinking is giving thanks to the other for his/her self-disclosing. When the other reveals his/her lived experience, then he/she exposes him/herself to my gaze and gives me the gift of his/her appearing. Whoever receives a present cannot avoid thanking, and the thinking which thanks is a mental act which approaches the other with delicacy; it suits the appearing of the other faithfully and looks for a deep comprehension of his/her worlds of meaning with the utmost respect for his/her oneness and difference.

Thinking which thanks cares for the other, and its care expresses itself in the gesture of accepting and welcoming the being of the other in its way of disclosing him/herself.

Working on language

As Parmenides formulates in fragment number 3, “thinking and being are the same” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 145). Since phenomenology is a way of thinking, then it is a way of being. However, thinking is inseparable from language, so phenomenology is also a specific way of conceiving language. In phenomenology, words are “not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 15), but rather, as Heidegger says in the *Letter on Humanism*, language is the house of the being, in the sense that it is through words that the being discloses itself. Thinking aims to allow the other to come-into-presence, so it is only in language that the being of the other discloses itself. From Heidegger’s perspective words are no longer information-ciphers, or labels separable from things, but they are “the flowering of clearing” (McWorther, 1992, p. 21). We do not come into unfiltered contact with things; we are always inside our language:

It is not so much that we see the objects and things, but rather that we first talk about them. To put it more precisely: we do not say what we see, but rather the reverse, we see what one says about matter (Heidegger, 1985, p. 56).

If one accepts this assumption, working on oneself to weaken one’s cognitive devices- to find a faithful access to the profile of the other—is one and the same with working on the language that we are.

The phenomenologist avoids mere idle talk which destroys a genuine relationship to the experience of the other and seeks the words with which the other comes-into-appearance and keeps on disclosing him/herself.

Consequently, the phenomenological method requires a change of one’s relationship with language. It is necessary to look for a word capable of expressing the essence of the phenomenon inquired in such a way that it stands-out-in-itself-from-itself (Heidegger, 2000, p. 15). The researcher should look for a way of saying to which the other gives his/her approval. Zambrano invites us to look for a word which is “close to the being” (1988, p. 89). Finding this word is a difficult task because words bring along multiple meanings that are already fixed; moreover, using words means entrapping the self-saying of the other into layers of meanings that are unsuitable to express his/her oneness and difference. In using habitual language automatically, the researcher runs the risk of not creating that open space necessary to welcome the original profile of the other.

There are two rules to observe when shaping a phenomenological language: (a) using few but essential words, because too many words may shadow the disclosure of the other; (b) freeing the words from what is obvious. The phenomenological method demands the search for a word that keeps an empty space within itself where the other can find room to allow his/her experience to manifest its essence. Practising the phenomenological method is the same with looking for a language capable of describing the experience scrupulously, that is, a word capable of expressing the manner of appearing of the grass while it is growing and that of water while it is raining. It is through the search for empty words ready to receive the saying of the other that makes “to-go-to-things-themselves” possible.

Dwelling the language phenomenologically means pondering on the use of each word thoughtfully and releasing it from what is obvious, in order to make it permeable to the meaning that the other attributes to the experience. The object of the phenomenological method is the experience of the other—his/her emotional, rational, and social life; this is a delicate matter and should be treated as such. Perhaps even when working with subatomic particles or on the lifecycle of moss, delicacy is necessary, but when the object of inquiry is the lived experience, then the *principle of delicacy* becomes an unavoidable ethical move.

Both Heidegger and Zambrano describe a way of dwelling in language phenomenologically according to the *principle of delicacy*: learning to think poetically. The disposition of the poet is the attentiveness to the

thing, which allows the poetic word to receive what is to be said (Richardson, 1974, p. 397). Therefore, the act of poetizing interprets the essence of the epistemology of hospitality. The poet teaches how to excavate words to make them able to receive the reality of the other fully. The poetic word is a light word, capable of allowing the other to find his/her own way of self-saying. "Thinking poetically", means remaining faithful to things (Zambrano, 1998, p. 17) that is, avoiding the abstractions of calculative reason and being absorbed into things. Therefore, phenomenological research has "poetic reason" as a reference point; it is essentially a "thoughtful poetizing" or "poetic thinking" (Heidegger, 2000, p. 154).

There is an instrumental and utilitarian reason: it activates a thinking that manages things and uses them in its epistemic devices; it is the reason that measures (mathematical-geometrical thought), manipulates (experimental thought), calculates (economic thought), and looks for causal explanations. There is a poetic reason: it is a thinking that listens; it is a quiet gaze, which contemplates the occurrence of phenomena; it voices thinking able to pay attention to the slightest details; in order to comprehend the essence of the other, it suits his/her way of self-saying. Authentic speech, that which welcomes the other, is not "the said" but is "the saying" (Moran, 2000, p. 341). It is an unpacked language, a liquid word that fits to the other's profile.

Heidegger (1969) distinguishes between "calculative thinking", which compels the other to manifest him/herself only through what is measurable, and "meditative thinking" which answers the call to be safeguarded in his/her original profile. Thus, on the one hand there is a "managing thinking", which acts on things by conditioning their manner of appearing; on the other there is 'receiving thinking', which is quietly waiting for the disclosure of things. Calculative thinking suits preconceived orientation; poetic thinking, on the contrary, stops and hears.

Poetry is the language of the phenomenological method because the poet speaks words that are committed to being fully faithful to the appearance of things (Zambrano, 1998, p. 20). The language of calculative reason aims at developing assertive reasonings, which impedes thinking that remains open; the language of poetic reason, that is of phenomenology, is saying that keeps itself in the openness of an unfinished discourse. This language is able to take a "step backwards" when faced with the mystery of human experience, because it is based on the awareness that there is a side of experience that is destined to remain in excess as regards the explicating power of the word. The poetic word is always surrounded by an empty space (Zambrano, 1998,

p. 22). Poetic reason is not a illogical way of thinking, but rather it can be the "way towards a new world of life and knowledge" (Zambrano, 1998, p. 14).

Empathy: thinking capable of feeling

Heidegger (1996), p. 126) says that comprehension is a fundamental mode of being, while the other originary mode is attunement or "being in a mood". Attunement is the way the human being discloses his/her essence to him/herself and, as such, "being in a mood" constitutes a way of knowing (Heidegger, 1996, pp. 128–129). Emotions are not incidental components of human experience, nor are they irrational elements; emotional tonality, in which the human being always finds him/herself, is an essential constituent of any cognitive act.

Starting from this positive consideration of emotional life that, on the contrary, Cartesian reason had underestimated, phenomenology, without surrendering cognition to feeling, sets a high value on thinking that is feeling. Stein refers to the "thoughts of the heart", which take the form of intimate perceptions. Thus, phenomenology's reason is *emotional reason*. In this post-Cartesian concept of reason, there is not a loss of rationality, because emotions are conceived not as irrational elements of life, but rather as intelligent components of the mind. Emotions help to achieve a more complex understanding of the object of knowing (Nussbaum, 2001). In Zambrano's concept of "poetic reason" (1988, p. 14), thinking and feeling identify without mingling and vanishing.

This syntony between thinking and feeling is actualized in empathy. Empathy is the translation from the German word *einführung*, which refers to a feeling from within (ein). Empathy is the capacity to live the experience of the other within oneself, thereby realizing the openness of the mind towards the other. Empathy is receiving the other's reality, that is, feeling what the other feels as much as possible; that is why it constitutes the fundamental attitude of the epistemology of welcoming.

For Stein (1989) empathy is the disposition to live the experience of what is foreign within oneself. Empathy must be understood as the capacity to live the other's experience intuitively. Within an empathical relationship, the knower can gain an authentic comprehension of the other's lived experience, because it resounds in him/herself without being mastered into his/her categories. However, empathical knowing does not pretend to gain direct access to the original lived experience of the other, because in this intrusive conception of feeling the otherness of the other would be cancelled. The other must

remain transcendent by safeguarding his/her ethical resistance, which protects him/her from the epistemic traps the knower tends to set out.

No one can gain an original access to the experience of the other; however, it is possible to gain a non-direct access, which permits a sort of profound comprehension of it. This comprehension is possible when the mind not only empties itself of the ego-self, but also activates its emotional side. This empathic openness presupposes a particular disposition of the mind, which is a *cognitive tenderness*. “Tenderness” comes from the Latin word *teneritia*, which means the condition of being soft and malleable, and the Latin adjective *tenerus*, which means the attitude of leaning forward to the other. A tender mind is able to open to the other; it softens its own cognitive tissues so the other can leave his/her footprints on them.

Authorizing a tender empathy as a modality of scientific inquiry means causing an epistemological reversal as regards the positivistic paradigm. Positivistic epistemology establishes that true and certain knowledge is objective knowledge, and it is possible to gain objectivity by working out the logic of separating—separating the subject from the object and the mind’s rational side from the emotional one. Phenomenological epistemology keeps its distance from this obsession for the logic of separating, which establishes radical scissions between the self, and the world, thinking and bodily life, the rational side of cognition, and the emotional one. This logic authorizes a different concept of objectivity, where the subject can be in relationship with the object and activate a kind of knowing which lets itself be guided by the emotional side as well. So phenomenology overcomes an intellectualistic and static concept of objectivity to adopt a dynamical and relational one (Fox Keller, 1985).

Caring

Carrying out research unavoidably raises an ethical question, because the process of research implies a relationship with others, and the others, in their appearing, present to us with an unavoidable ethical demand. The other demands to remain the other; he/she asks that his/her otherness be safeguarded against the power of the knower’s devices.

Lévinas uses the term “face” to refer to the real and concrete experience of another person who is not merely present, but who appeals to us. According to Lévinas (1988), meeting the other raises an ethical question, because the other appeals to our responsibility for him/her. Approaching the other with responsibility requires delicacy and delicacy is the relational posture of the ethic of care. Conse-

quently, caring for the other is another mental posture, which turns out to be essential in order to define the essence of the phenomenological method.

According to Heidegger (1996, pp. 184–185), care (*sorge*) is the fundamental ontological dimension of the human condition, in the sense that the whole human existence belongs to it “for its lifetime”. It is possible to distinguish two kinds of care: (a) caring as being concerned with one’s own existence, consequent upon the fact that the human being is born with the inescapable responsibility for preserving his/her life; and (b) and caring as “carefulness” and “dedication” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 185), which means being thoughtful to realize one’s existential possibilities fully and meaningfully. In the first case, care can be equated with “burden” (Noddings, 1986, p. 9), a burdened mental state, a condition of anxiety; it is the struggle to remain in the being. In the second case, care can be equated with “attention and devotion” (Noddings, 1986, p. 16), because caring for someone is feeling the desire to contribute to his/her well-being.

Caring for the other means approaching him/her with “attention and devotion” (Noddings, 1986, p. 16), because caring for someone is feeling the desire to contribute to his/her well-being. We have already said that the “gathered attentiveness” on things (Stenstad, 1992, p. 71) is the fundamental act of the phenomenologist: paying attention to the other is hearing, and hearing is at root heeding, heedfully caring for things. “Caring for” means safeguarding and preserving— that is, protecting the self-revealing of the other.

Being guided by the ethic of care when doing research is conceiving and organizing the experience of research so that it is meaningful for the other. Participating in research must be a rich experience in life, where people can grow both cognitively and emotionally. Often research is “on” participants, that is, it manages them in a preconceived project. This is a process of objectification. Instead, research that respects the participants is that in which the researcher cares for them. To care is not only “to let others reveal themselves, refraining from the violence of forced disclosure” (Stenstad, 1992, p. 72); this kind of solicitude is necessary to the act of caring, but it is not sufficient. The ethic of care implies the responsibility for guaranteeing that the activity in which the other is involved is interesting to him/her. The substance of life is time and the researcher cannot take up the time of the others, but he/she should offer research experiences in which the participants take all opportunities to enhance their human potentialities to the fullest. The researcher who “cares for” is able to displace the interest from his/her outlook towards the per-

spective of the other, in the sense that he/she must conceive the research experience as something interesting not only from an epistemological perspective but also from the participant's viewpoint.

A researcher who cares for the other is committed to giving him/her meaningful experiences, which means giving him/her a present. As Lévinas says (1969, p. 75), to respond to the other is to give something. The face of the other is a demand not a question; it is a demand for care. The face can demand because he/she has already given; the other has given his/her disclosure to our epistemic gaze. Consequently, caring is giving the other a way of thinking which is a thanks giving.

In phenomenological research, the Heideggerian principle claiming "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 30) is fundamental. However "to let it be" should not be understood as a kind of diminished responsibility for the other, but rather as solicitude to give the others the conditions in which they can manifest their originary lived experience. Indeed, the principle of faithfulness answers the purpose of respecting the other and preserving him/her from the distorting manipulations of pre-conceived methods. Thus, it is through *caring for* the other that he/she can disclose him/herself to our consciousness in his/her essential individuality. Consequently, *caring for* is a fundamental ethical gesture of the practice of research.

It is interesting to note that the ethic of care presupposes the same mental attitude required by phenomenological attentiveness: receptiveness. When the phenomenologist gives open and full attention to the other, then he/she activates a receptive disposition, that is, the readiness to welcome the reality of the other faithfully. Receptivity characterizes the ethic of care because it requires the availability and the readiness to bestow full attention on the other, and to have respect and regard for him/her. The ethic of care and the ethic of the phenomenological method presume a similar mental posture: to be committed to receiving the other and not to impose oneself, that is, to be delicate.

For Lévinas (1988), knowing can be violence and imposition, because when knowing means applying preconceived devices on the other, then his/her otherness and oneness dissolve. The struggle for knowledge is an attempt at controlling and enclosing everything within a system. On the contrary, to think as to *care for* is to work out a way of knowing which is not imposition, but welcoming; it is not seizing the other, but rather receiving him/her. The face addresses the face, and this leads to mutually respectful non-dominating recognition.

To care is to act with special regard for the particular person in his/her concrete situation and thus to be capable of activating a turn towards the other. This turn involves the move of the *epoché*: stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference in order to apprehend the other's point of view. If we do not suspend our own frameworks, then we cannot receive the other. The ethic of care as such, like the phenomenological method, requires the capacity to put oneself aside in order for the other to be received in his/her integral being. Thus, phenomenology and care are tightly intertwined.

Nevertheless, caring for others can only be fully realized if the researcher first cares for him/herself. Caring for oneself means caring for the life of the mind, because it is through an educated mental life that we meet the other authentically. What does *caring for the life of the mind* mean? In order to answer this question it is necessary to refer to the discourse Arendt (1978) develops about the concepts of mind and being born.

Arendt conceives the mind as a vital process: the mind has its own life, in the sense that it must not be conceived as a container of things-of-thought, but as a continuous becoming of the acts of thinking. This mental life can be authentic or unauthentic. The unauthentic flow of thinking is the unreflective reiteration of thoughts already thought; authentic thinking takes shape when the mind works on its thoughts reflectively to avoid being entangled in obviousness and it tries to comprehend the lived experience from the standpoint of an un-preconceived hearing of what is occurring. Caring for the life of the mind means maintaining oneself released from crystallized thoughts, because keeping one's mind free from frozen ideas allows it to be continuously born into new symbolic horizons.

Only when the researcher cares for the mind so that his/her thinking is a continuous birth into new frames, is he/she faithful to the essence of the human condition, because the human being is a native being, in the sense that he/she comes into the world in order to begin: new worlds, new ways of authenticating existence. According to St Augustine, whose thinking has been fundamental in the evolution of phenomenology, the human being was created to be a new beginning (*Initium ut esset creatus est*). Thus, being born again is the ethical move of the existence and as such, it is the fundamental ethical move of the researcher engaged in doing research in an authentic way.

A reflection

There is a risk in the practice of cognitive acts that characterizes the phenomenological method: turning

towards the object can become a kind of mental dispersion. Emptying oneself can provoke a desert inside the mind; the imperative of “being-not-in-search” can immobilize the mind and annihilate thinking. As Husserl affirms in paragraph 54 entitled “Solution of the paradox” in his “The Crisis of European Sciences”, there is a risk of weakening subjectivity as a consequence of the continuous emptying demanded of the self.

This risk is real when the phenomenological method is conceived in a technicistic way— a set of cognitive devices to be acquired. On the contrary, phenomenology is not a mere technique, but a lifestyle. Moreover, this is the way we must conceive phenomenological research if we want to develop its original epistemic possibilities.

As a lifestyle, it requires the cultivation of one’s interior life; indeed, attentiveness fully gathered on the other needs an identical and opposing move: paying attention to one’s interior life. Indeed, the researcher is capable of intelligent thinking which has a profound understanding of the lived experiences of other human beings only if he/she dedicates time to thinking over his/her interior world, that is, his/her thoughts, emotions, desires and fears.

The researcher, as a human being, is called upon to cultivate the inward life because only by caring for the intimate life of the mind can he/she find those meaningful questions which help to identify what research should look for. Only by cultivating the inward gaze aimed at gaining knowledge of self will the researcher be capable of developing the outward gaze that allows him/her to understand the experience of the other.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) contributed to the development of phenomenology in a number of decisive ways, but specifically he gave phenomenology a radically ethical orientation by developing a “phenomenology of alterity” (alterity comes from Latin *alter* meaning “the other”). While Husserl had an essentially rational approach, Max Scheler (1875–1928) took phenomenological analysis with its emotional and practical aspects; he was interested in investigating the world of values, specifically spiritual and vital values. According to Dermot Moran (2000, p. 287) phenomenology was the philosophical movement most welcoming of women scholars, including two outstanding philosophers, Hannah Arendt and Edith Stein. Arendt (1906–1975) is famous for her studies on “the life of the mind” and on “totalitarianism”; from her perspective, studying the lived experience means understanding humans living “in the midst of the world”. Stein (1891–1942) wrote an important study on empathy and, as Husserl’s assistant, transcribed, and edited Husserl’s manuscripts on time consciousness. Simone Weil (1909–1943) is interesting for her important refined reflections on the mental faculty of attention, as well as for her studies on “oppression and freedom”. Maria Zambrano (1904–1991), who studied under
2. “Phenomenology means *apophainesthai ta phenomena*, to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 58). The Greek word *phainomenon* derives from the Greek verb *phainesthai*: to show oneself. For Heidegger *phainomenon* means, “what shows itself in itself” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 25). Phenomenology has to do with self-manifestation; consequently, the researcher must study things as they appear or as they are covered up.
3. Husserl characterized the practice of the *epoché* in many different ways: abstention, dislocation from, withholding, disregarding, parenthesis, putting aside, putting out of play all judgements “present at hand”. The essential feature is to effect a “change of attitude”, to move away from naturalistic assumptions about the world.
4. It is helpful to add that even if the phenomenological move of the *epoché* were easily applied, that would not guarantee the possibility of getting to the complete knowledge of the essence of a thing, since this move must be applied without interruption, while the mind, in its way of proceeding, is inconstant: “it gets tired and it loses strength” (Zambrano, 1988, p. 15). “Even though the mind is conscient and loves knowing”, it fails to be always engaged in applying the move. From this stems that discontinuity in the access to the essence of the thing that makes knowledge something limited.
5. It is necessary to point out that the “empty mind” is a “never-reaching-idea”, that is, a guiding-idea that cannot be fully realized. The human condition is always conditioned and it is impossible to escape this boundfulness. Even the most disciplined mind fails to escape the quality of human thought, that of always being conditioned by something. Nevertheless, thanks to the humility deriving from such awareness, the search for as much void as possible to let the other reveal himself/herself is an inescapable epistemic purpose.

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