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## FIRST PERSON RESEARCH

# Everyday Phenomenology and an Exploration of “the Transcendental Attitude”

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“We can only know phenomenology by doing it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this first person essay, Thomas A. Conklin follows Merleau-Ponty’s advice by modeling phenomenological reflexivity as he aims to make phenomenology accessible and relevant for daily life. We learn that phenomenology is both a set of principles and a mindset about one’s research. Conklin outlines the major assumptions and tenets of the theory, explaining that phenomenology is not so much a process with proscribed steps or a recipe, but a set of ideas with various interpretations available for practice. In it, the researcher is a participant in the inquiry and should be studied along with the subject at hand. Phenomenological inquiry asks the participant to bracket his/her interpretations from presuppositions and the preconceived notions that comprise the “natural order”—that is, one’s regular quality of consciousness that seems to run on autopilot. This bracketed state is referred to as the transcendental attitude, “the suspension of the natural frame,” which allows one to see the essence of things.

Phenomenology is a reflexive practice, asking us to look deeper at the “more delicate structures of experience” than can be perceived through the senses. Further, our personal understandings are not the only factor, as other participants will inevitably have their own understandings which may or may not align with our own. This point is highlighted in the author’s personal examples in which others necessarily have different interpretations of reality that the actor (in this case the author) must reconcile.

Conklin’s example of his classroom practice shows the phenomenological attitude in action. He asks his students to co-create the final exam by asking them what concepts they feel are worth knowing from his organizational behavior class. After group discussion to narrow the questions to a set of six, students are then required to answer three of them on their

final exam. Such an approach gives students some control and partially honors their individual phenomenology. The example helps the reader see how one might apply phenomenology in the “everyday” sense that Conklin proposes.

In several ways, Conklin’s approach illustrates the reflexivity required to practice phenomenology. First, the author is returning to a subject he wrote about in earlier work (Conklin, 2007), and how he has developed a deeper understanding of the topic. Second, he reflects on the tension between knowing and doubt that we as academics necessarily maintain. We are supposed to be trained experts, but the repetitive nature of our teaching practice can lead to rote and unreflective practice. He notes: “I must wear lightly what knowledge I believe I have and maintain my commitment to deeper knowing with no attachment to what is current” (Conklin, 2014, p. 124). In the epilogue the reader sees the challenges of self-exploration and self-doubt. Getting “free of oneself” is a constant and difficult task.

Third, he applies the core concepts to two personal examples—one from his prior role as a manager in a hospital, and the other as teacher grading a student’s essay (a situation which should resonate with many *OMJ* readers). These personal examples help the reader envision the kind of analysis one undertakes to grasp the transcendental attitude—the suspension of the natural frame which we so often take for granted. The first-person voice of personal examples, a hallmark of first-person essays, makes it easier to connect to Conklin’s ideas and consider what one might do in his shoes.

Conklin’s work underscores the subjective nature of reality, and the belief that a person’s experience stands as only one facet of a phenomenon, subject to one’s personal goals, assumptions, and limitations. Phenomenology aims to find the essence of things by stripping away the observer’s preconceived notions, but at the same time it acknowledges that any one person’s interpretations are necessarily localized and incomplete.

He encourages the reader to take a phenomenological approach to teaching, to be mindful and seek the transcendental attitude that allows us to remain open to doubt.

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