
Reviewed by Danielle Meijer

All too often, both philosophers and scientists fail to address how their work can reflect and inform people’s “real” lives. Phenomenology, famously, is an approach that operates within the realms of theory and practice, coming back, as Edmund Husserl claimed, “to the things themselves”—which is to say, phenomenology allows our actual experience of the world to found our theoretical constructs of what it is like to experience that world. Steen Halling, in his book *Intimacy, Transcendence, and Psychology*, seeks to use this dynamic aspect of phenomenology to address how we come to see someone “as if for the first time” through novel experiences that result in either greater intimacy or disillusionment, and how forgiveness, openness, and transcendence are related to these experiences.

In the first chapter, Halling describes the ways in which context is capable of positively altering our perception of someone we know well, creating the possibility of greater intimacy. The second chapter then takes on the problem of seeing someone as if for the first time, but in a negative way (i.e., one that leads to disillusionment). Chapter three focuses on forgiveness, defining “forgiveness” as understanding the other person’s point of view, seeing him or her as a human being like oneself, and then allowing that person to be who he or she truly is, rather than who we wish him or her to be. Chapter four deals with the problem of understanding those who are mentally ill, and how a phenomenologically-informed psychology might help us get past the illness to see the individual underneath. Finally, the last three chapters take up more theoretical issues surrounding psychological phenomenology by providing an overview of phenomenology and discussing its relationship with science, analyzing how concepts of openness and transcendence allow us to express fully our humanity, and reviewing the psychological literature on relationships while discussing the possible limitations of such an approach.

Judging from the careful descriptions of phenomenology and level of discussion, the tone of the book strikes one as being geared more toward students rather than professionals. For anyone with a solid understanding of phenomenology (psychological or philosophical), there is not much new ground covered or any radical approaches to dispute here. That being said, one could see this book being a welcome addition to the classroom of anyone teaching a course in which psychology and phenomenology are brought together. And there surely are moments of insight that make the work worth reading by anyone interested in these issues.
It is the second half of the book, though, that provides the reader with most of the challenging ideas. What one might immediately notice is that Halling’s description of the nature of phenomenology is somewhat different than what Husserl himself had planned. As my own graduate education in psychology was focused on cognition and critical thinking, and my knowledge in psychological phenomenology is relegated to sensation and perception (James Gibson being a notable researcher in this area), my approach to and understanding of this book may differ from that of the typical reader. Furthermore, my own background in phenomenology is largely founded on Husserl, and so I bring to the text a somewhat specific expectation of how one must go about “doing” phenomenology.

Husserl was disappointed that the generation following him was more interested in applying phenomenological “attitudes” and insights to diverse topics rather than going about the somewhat dry business of rigorously describing the necessary structures of consciousness themselves. Halling, it is clear, has read existential and phenomenological philosophy and brings a wide array of intellectual wealth to his project, but perhaps it might make sense to address at the start the ways in which philosophical phenomenology and psychological phenomenology are—sometimes deeply antagonistically—different. Indeed, such a worry, I think, must be addressed if there is to be any discussion of philosophy at all—especially if the book is to be read primarily by students unfamiliar with the philosophical tradition from which this psychological movement has arisen. Quite simply, Husserl wanted to uncover the universal, necessary structures of consciousness. Phenomenology was not meant simply to be a discussion of how experiences are felt and shared. Husserl’s lifelong enemy was, arguably, the tendency toward psychologism and those that wanted to turn phenomenology into a narrative-log of experiences. A quick glance at a text such as the *Cartesian Meditations*, for instance, shows Husserl arguing at length how phenomenology is nothing at all like psychology. The risk with using the term “phenomenology,” then, in psychological pursuits is that it loses its force and makes of the phenomenological project a mere description of subjective experience rather than a philosophically intricate theory of mind that takes subjective experience to be the foundation of such theory.

In spite such general worries, one can appreciate Halling’s insistence that theory does not always trump personal experience in terms of understanding; and while theory can guide us in determining the nature of forgiveness, for instance, there will certainly be instances when that theory may not be applicable and it is more helpful to turn elsewhere in one’s investigation. What is overlooked, however, is a wonderful opportunity to bring the technical apparatus of true Husserlian phenomenology to bear on the psychological topics at hand.

In order to understand what a thing is, argues Husserl, one must uncover its *eidos* or “essence.” Rather than seeing this essence in some Platonic metaphysical