Chapter 14
The Horizons of Experience:
The Limits of Rational Thought
upon Irrational Phenomena

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ABSTRACT
Social researchers consciously and intentionally set out to understand the life-world (Lebenswelt). It is different than knowing the inanimate world of objects. Social study is systematic and as rigorous as natural science but focuses on human experience. The social world we inhabit cradles all human experience. It is the context for meaning, for all being and becoming. Life is a temporal stream of experience that, if we are to understand it, needs to be kept at bay ( bracketing it). In doing so, it is as Husserl said at the ‘horizon of experience,’ pre-theoretical. It is only through critical reflection that we understand our lived experience in relation to others, present and past. This chapter reflects on Husserl’s notion of ‘horizon of experience’ to intentionally understand the limits of rational thought on irrational objects. It offers insights through these reflections and possibilities for researching information systems applying phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time


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It often appears to social researchers that we begin to explore ontological and epistemological questions by drawing on our historical biographies and philosophical repositories to make sense of who we are, only to find that after we have done so, we arrive at the place we started from. Our intention is to understand our subjective selves in relation to our objective world. This somewhat crude duality distinguishing between subject and
object situates our arguments of existence in space and time in relation to agents and structures, individualism and holism, reason and unreason, the variant and invariant nature of things. However, what is different about this becoming, is that we begin to understand ourselves (who we are), and where we are, for the first time. Thus, we make sense of everyday lives through the lived experience. This is a point made well by T.S. Eliot in the extract above from his poem ‘Little Gidding.’ It is the reflexive interest in knowing ourselves and our place in the world that concerns each of us in our attempts to understand the phenomenon of human existence. To understand the phenomenon of human existence through human endeavour and human organization we address our questions to philosophy, science, and sociology.

The phenomenon appearing within my horizon placed under scrutiny here is phenomenology itself. In this quest I want to particularly focus attention upon meanings attributed to the notion of ‘horizon’ and its correlates: epoché, intentionality, objects of consciousness, and meaning-making. The motivation is to demonstrate that a phenomenological approach offers researchers’ a repertoire of possibilities with potential to understand information systems. Conceptualising this phenomenological approach draws inspiration from the past and traces the correlates in other strands of interpretive social research.

Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit is foundational to phenomenology. Adorno said in relation to phenomenology that Husserl “discovered the North Pole for the second time” (Hyppolite, 1974, p. vii). This is somewhat ungenerous given Husserl’s immense contribution and yet, it confirms Hegel’s foundational dialectic phenomenology. Hegel’s approach in phenomenology had much in common with his own German idealism. Characteristics of phenomenology are also shared with ‘radical empiricism’ discussed by William James and his discussions of a ‘world of pure experience.’ However, phenomenology in its motivation for Husserl and in its early conception owed a debt to the descriptive psychology of consciousness of Brentano (Moran, 2000). There are three distinct developments of approach influential to my own understanding: 1) Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit setting an agenda of dialectic phenomenology; 2) Husserl and his followers, particularly Schütz, Merleau-Ponty, and Scheler, amongst others, developing transcendental phenomenology; and 3) Heidegger’s focus on being and time leading to the development of Dasein drawing a line under Cartesian duality. It is from these voices of the past, and from, past experience as well as from contemporary social researchers and my own lived experience [Erfahrung] that I draw inspiration for this chapter examining the horizons of experience.

It is worth prefacing the unfolding discussion with a caveat that phenomenology is not a unified doctrine but rather that each of the foundational writers brought their distinct interpretation to the meaning of phenomenology. It is a movement, a method, and a methodology offering understanding and meta-theoretical insights into our everyday lived experiences. This chapter sketches the ways our everyday life experience shape action and thought, through a symbiotic process called, nominally, living, or human-being. It begins by examining reason and perception before examining what Husserl and others said in relation to horizons of experience and how this has shaped phenomenology. It traces later developments releasing phenomenology from its Cartesian chains of cognition, conceptualising the essence of phenomenology as a movement and a means of studying social situations. Thus, allowing everyday experience to contribute understanding without recourse to Cartesian dualisms [cogito ergo sum] and recognises that the subject-object duality is of greater concern. The embodied mind becomes a part of lived experience rather than separated from it, contrary to the way Descartes puts it describing his res cogitans (mindful thinking) as primary to his secondary res extensa (bodily doing).

What we are able to know given the nature of reality (ontology) and how we know, given
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