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The Meaning of “Phenomenology”: Qualitative and Philosophical Phenomenological Research Methods

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Abstract

I show some problems with recent discussions within qualitative research that centre around the “authenticity” of phenomenological research methods. I argue that attempts to restrict the scope of the term “phenomenology” via reference to the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl are misguided, because the meaning of the term “phenomenology” is only broadly restricted by etymology. My argument has two prongs: first, via a discussion of Husserl, I show that the canonical phenomenological tradition gives rise to many traits of contemporary qualitative phenomenological theory that are purportedly insufficiently genuine (such as characterisations of phenomenology as “what-its-likeness” and presuppositionless description). Second, I argue that it is not adherence to the theories and methods of prior practitioners such as Husserl that justifies the moniker “phenomenology” anyway. Thus, I show that the extent to which qualitative researchers ought to engage with the theory of philosophical phenomenology or adhere to a particular edict of Husserlian methodology ought to be determined by the fit between subject matter and methodology and conclude that qualitative research methods still qualify as phenomenological if they develop their own set of theoretical terms, traditions, and methods instead of importing them from philosophical phenomenology.

Keywords

phenomenology, qualitative research, philosophical phenomenology, qualitative phenomenological methods, what-its-like, description, presuppositions, bias, phenomenological interview, open or semi-structured interview

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The Meaning of “Phenomenology”: Qualitative and Philosophical Phenomenological Research Methods

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I show some problems with recent discussions within qualitative research that centre around the “authenticity” of phenomenological research methods. I argue that attempts to restrict the scope of the term “phenomenology” via reference to the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl are misguided, because the meaning of the term “phenomenology” is only broadly restricted by etymology. My argument has two prongs: first, via a discussion of Husserl, I show that the canonical phenomenological tradition gives rise to many traits of contemporary qualitative phenomenological theory that are purportedly insufficiently genuine (such as characterisations of phenomenology as “what-its-likeness” and presuppositionless description). Second, I argue that it is not adherence to the theories and methods of prior practitioners such as Husserl that justifies the moniker “phenomenology” anyway. Thus, I show that the extent to which qualitative researchers ought to engage with the theory of philosophical phenomenology or adhere to a particular edict of Husserlian methodology ought to be determined by the fit between subject matter and methodology and conclude that qualitative research methods still qualify as phenomenological if they develop their own set of theoretical terms, traditions, and methods instead of importing them from philosophical phenomenology.

Keywords: phenomenology, qualitative research, philosophical phenomenology, qualitative phenomenological methods, what-its-like, description, presuppositions, bias, phenomenological interview, open or semi-structured interview

§1 Introduction

The present article is motivated by discussions concerning the meaning of the term “phenomenology.” What all these discussions have in common is that they assume a univocal or essentialist perspective on meaning: there must be some distinguishing trait, or some necessary and sufficient conditions, which regulates when we should and shouldn’t apply the term “phenomenology.”

The thesis I will put forward in this article is that there is only an extremely broad univocal meaning of the term “phenomenology,” and then a series of family resemblances. Some ways the term is used resemble others. Just as there are patterns and distinguishing traits of the family members yet no one precise or exact distinguishing quality. Moreover, this situation is quite unproblematic. The biggest threat comes not from the fact that there is divergence in definitions but from arguments which trade on equivocality. The important project is thus not to prove that one sense is more authentic than the others, but to clearly distinguish these different senses so we can avoid ambiguity.

Some (perhaps not all) words take on different senses because they are used by a community in a certain way. A class of terms for which this definitely applies is cultural products, of which academic disciplines are a type. Other nonessential meanings are terms which denote aesthetic trends, like “baroque” or “postmodern.” Admittedly, we cannot just begin to use a word in a completely unconnected and foreign way, but the only regulation is that our emergent meaning falls under a broad umbrella and shares some sort of genetic heritage with prior use. In this way, there will be some often-vague connection amongst meanings that preserves the coherence of language. Some traits must be shared between members of a family, but with cultural products in particular, there can be no regulating *which* traits are the “essential” ones, because meaning in this case is a hermeneutic activity, and the most we can establish is that a current sense has shifted from an original one. Meaning is here loosely regulated.

The purposes of this article are threefold. Firstly, it will interrogate some of the current proposals that there is some particular trait or condition which is the one which ought to distinguish the real sense of the term “phenomenology” and dismiss them. In particular I will critique the proposal that a discipline must draw on certain traits of Husserlian or philosophical phenomenology in order to qualify as phenomenological. Secondly, to make explicit some of the genetic traits which qualitative phenomenologies are drawing on and, finally, evaluate these traits.

Section 2 shows that an etymological approach to the meaning of the term “phenomenology” leaves us with a very wide definition, but the only one I think we ought to accept. Section 3 raises the objection that it is adherence to philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl which defines when one ought to deem a discipline “phenomenological.” This section also outlines the approach I will employ throughout this article to refuting this objection. The remaining sections delve into and analyze the spots within contemporary qualitative research that the meaning of the term “phenomenology” has become of critical importance.

§2 Etymology

A common approach to defining the meaning of a word is to look at its etymology. An etymological approach to meaning, outlined below, suggests that “phenomenology” is the study of that which can be experienced. If one is looking for a definition, I would settle for this one, and I think all the different meanings of the term “phenomenology” must cohere with this one. However, this definition is so wide it does not rule out any of the various uses of the term we find in the current literature, because the meaning of the root terms “phenomena” and “logos” are vague.

The word “phenomenon” derives from the Greek words “phainein” meaning “bring to light” and “phainesthai” meaning “to appear.” It also directly derives from the late Latin word “phænomenon,” which is also from the Greek “phainomenon” meaning “that which appears.” Generally, a phenomenon is anything that can be experienced in some sort of way. “Logos” too, has an ancient Greek origin. Its ancient formulation is one of the most notoriously ambiguous words, meaning potentially “correspondence,” “proportion,” “explanation,” “law,” “rule of conduct,” “thesis,” “hypothesis,” “reason,” “ground,” “inward debate of the soul,” “narrative,” “oration,” and “verbal expression or utterance” (Liddell & Scott, 1940).

“Logos” means thought or discourse about a subject. It could be descriptive, natural scientific, dialectic, analytic, or aesthetic. All of these have been considered types of “study” or “science.” One might think of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* as a logos of memory, of the sketches an artist makes as a logos of their subject, of Hegel’s philosophy as a logos of spirit, or of quantum physics as a logos of matter. If you want to define “phenomenology” as any sort

of logos about any sort of phenomena, then you have a very wide definition indeed. And this is as far as the etymological approach will get you.

It might of course be argued that the *founders* of phenomenology had a very specific type of logos about a very specific type of phenomena in mind, and I would agree. However, this is a different, non-etymological criterion for regulating when a term applies, and one which I spend the rest of this article arguing against.

§3 Coining terms

The other common approach is to turn to the definition of the term provided by the person who coined it. It is difficult to determine who coined the term “phenomenology”; the earliest recorded usage of the German term *Phänomenologie* is by Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764. In the philosophical context, the earliest usage of the term is not Husserl, of course, but Hegel. I suspect that if we took Hegel’s definition as the one true meaning, then *all* the canonical phenomenologies (including Husserl’s) would be off the table. Charitably urges one to leave this small problem to the side. Perhaps, instead, it would be more appropriate to look to the work of the person whose influential work established the currently dominant tradition of phenomenology, and of course in this case we mean Husserl.

As I will show, a common tactic amongst Husserlian phenomenological theorists (even those in the field of qualitative research) is to argue that their opponents do not stay faithful to the spirit of Husserl’s phenomenology. I have two main responses to this tactic. The first is to point out that we can find *prima facie* evidence for the validity of many approaches to phenomenology within the primary Husserlian literature. Husserl was a very exploratory author, and his corpus gives rise to more of the genetic traits of his descendants than other members of the family are often willing to admit.

My second response is to point out that, even Husserl has no propriety right over the meaning of the term “phenomenology.” My argument here is one of analogy—we do not look to the foundational fathers of a discipline to regulate the meaning of a term and provide a definition of a field of study. To show that one is not doing phenomenology as Husserl conceived it is analogous to showing that one is not doing natural science as Newton conceived it, sociology as Durkheim conceived it, or psychology as Wundt conceived it. Adherence to any single author’s ideas or method is not what licenses one to use any academic label. I will employ both types of response throughout this article.

§4 The minimal conditions of genuine phenomenology

There is an ongoing controversy concerning the authenticity of qualitative research methods which claim to be phenomenological (in order, the series of recent exchanges have been between van Manen 2017; Smith 2018; van Manen 2018; Zahavi 2018; van Manen 2019; Zahavi 2019b; Zahavi & Martiny 2019a; Zahavi 2019a; Morley 2019; Zahavi & Martiny 2019b). A small sample of earlier exchanges include Giorgi 2008; Morley 2010). The key claim under dispute is that:

...not all qualitative research inspired by phenomenology is phenomenology... It should be acknowledged that the various qualitative research methods that are inspired by phenomenology may be undeniably important and relevant and yet are not to be confused with *genuine* phenomenological methods and phenomenological research approaches. (van Manen, 2017, p. 777, my italics)

This debate has brought to light two criteria that, some contend, fail to satisfy the minimal conditions of phenomenology. Firstly, the characterisation of phenomenology as “what-it’s-likeness” and, secondly, singular and simple descriptions of lived experience. These two criteria are very much interrelated. As I shall now explain, when we attempt to describe what an experience is like, what results is a simple description of lived experience.

§4.1 The origin of the association between “what experience is like” and phenomenology, and the connection with simple descriptions of experience

I will begin with a very brief discussion of the origin of the connection between the phrase “what-it’s-like” and “phenomenology.” It is mostly authors in the so-called “analytic tradition” of philosophy that define phenomenology as “what-it’s-likeness” (often to the general annoyance of everyone working in the Continental tradition). Thomas Nagel coined the phrase “what-it’s-like” in an influential article termed *What Is It Like To Be A Bat?* and he explicitly draws a connection between what it is like to undergo experiences and “phenomenology” (Nagel, 1974, p. 220). A recent, explicit example is when self-professed analytic philosopher Michelle Montague writes that phenomenology “can be characterized in a familiar way as the phenomenon of there being ‘something it is like’ experientially, to be in a mental state, something it is like, experientially, for the creature who is in the state” (Montague, 2016, p. 8). Such examples are rife within analytic philosophy of mind.

So, what does it mean to say that phenomenology is concerned with questions about “what-it-is-like”? David Chalmers, in perhaps the most influential book on consciousness in the Anglophone world in the twentieth century, states that “phenomenology” is synonymous with “experience” and “what-it-is-likeness” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 6), and then provides an example of an experience that there is something like to have: “In my environment now, there is a particularly rich shade of deep purple from a book upon my shelf” (*ibid*). Thus, *when we verbalize what an experience is like, we get a simple and singular first-person description, paradigmatically (but not necessarily) of a qualitative state of sensation.*

4.2 Qualitative research, the characterisation of phenomenology as what-it’s-like, and simple descriptions of lived experience

Within qualitative research, there are a variety of understandings of the term “phenomenology.” As Crotty discusses, there is a critical epistemological interpretation that engages in the reevaluation of conceptual frameworks; or there are more non-critical understandings of phenomenology (Crotty, 1998). Crotty’s introduction also denotes that “phenomenology” can be understood as both a theoretical perspective and a research methodology. Another distinction is that between descriptive and interpretive varieties of qualitative phenomenological research (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

More recently, it seems as if the characterisation of phenomenology as concerned with what experiences are like is now sometimes utilized by qualitative researchers putatively working within the phenomenological theoretical standpoint. It is common to frame qualitative phenomenological research methodology in terms of uncovering “what experiences are like.” Another way to frame what is at stake here, drawing on the distinction found in the introduction to Crotty (1998), is that one way to characterize the theoretical standpoint of phenomenology is as concerned with “what-experiences-are-like,” and once this characterisation of this standpoint is adopted in a qualitative context then the methodological approach which follows is one where the researcher relies heavily on simple descriptions of an individual’s experience, as such descriptions purportedly convey what experience is like.

For example, a recent introductory text states that qualitative phenomenological research questions are phrased by asking “*What is it like to...*” (Vagle, 2018, p. 218). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s 2009 textbook on the qualitative research method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) states that the IPA researcher wants to “see what it is like from the participant’s view” and involves “trying to see what it is like for someone” (p. 37) to undergo different experiences. They urge the qualitative researcher to bear in mind they are “trying, as far as possible, to allow the participant to tell you what it is like to live in their personal world” (p. 63), and that a detailed IPA case study assists “in helping to understand what it is like to have a major personal experience” (p. 128).

Van Manen, whose prolific authorship includes another well-known introduction to qualitative phenomenological methods (van Manen, 2016a), thinks that classic phenomenological philosophical accounts can all be characterised as attempts to answer the question of what different sorts of experiences are like. A “phenomenologically generic form” of inquiry asks, van Manen thinks, “What is this lived experience like?” “What is it like to experience this phenomenon or event?” (van Manen, 2017, p. 776). Highlighting the connection between simple or lived experience, what-it-is-like, and phenomenological qualitative research, van Manen writes that to do his type of qualitative “phenomenological research is *to question* something phenomenologically and, also, to be addressed by the question of what something is “really” like. What is the nature of this lived experience?” (van Manen, 2016b, p. 42).

So, to dub a simple, singular description of lived experience “phenomenological” is to characterize phenomenology in a certain way and reinforce a conception of phenomenology as concerned with what experience is like. I take it as obvious that such descriptions of lived experience are commonplace within most varieties of phenomenologically orientated qualitative research studies. Just one example taken from the aforementioned Smith, Flowers, and Larkin textbook is the following description of what it is like to undergo dialysis:

It’s sort of intrusive ‘cos it’s got these sharp needles of the thing that attaches you to it. With the needling it can be quite painful and it’s yeah that intrusion of metal into a very soft part of yourself. (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 126)

4.3 The inadequacy of “what-it’s-like”

Now that I have explicated the connection between what-it-is-likeness, qualitative phenomenological research, and simple descriptions of lived experience, let me turn to some objections to this cluster of concepts. What ought to be mentioned is that the connection of “what-it’s-likeness” with phenomenology is not really at home within the Continental phenomenological tradition, stemming as this connection does from within analytic philosophy, and Zahavi, for example, attempts to articulate additional conditions which a description must meet to qualify as phenomenological in the more traditional Husserlian Continental philosophical sense.

A basic objection is that the “what-it’s-like” characterisation of phenomenology is inadequate. Zahavi stresses that phenomenology has far greater philosophical concerns than merely describing what different experiences are like. He argues that the phenomenological tradition appreciates the significance of being able to experience and verbalise conscious life, but “amassing experiential descriptions is a poor substitute for the systematic and argumentative work of phenomenological philosophers like Husserl” (Zahavi, 2017, p. 27). According to this objection, reference to experience is perhaps a necessary condition of phenomenological work (after all, phenomenology cannot study something that there’s *nothing*

that it's like to experience)¹ but it is insufficient, and it seems some systematic and argumentative analysis is further required.

To put a similar point in Husserlian terms, these sorts of low-level descriptions appeal to a level of simple, singular “intuition.”² But Husserl was quite adamant that these sorts of descriptions could not constitute the sort of *science* he envisaged for phenomenology. Husserl thinks that, once we limit our investigation to the phenomenal or experiential realm, we are not permitted to make knowledge claims about our experience of phenomenally appearing individuals like qualia, because we have no points of reference available to us (i.e., we have no way to objectively compare one phenomenal individual with another or locate it in conceptual space; Husserl, 2008, p. 220). We cannot say, for example, that this blue is bluer than a previous one or bluer than your blue. In the phenomenological sphere, individuals do not “stay put” for the purpose of objective comparison in the same way that individuals do in the natural world (ibid, p. 219).

§4.4 A further condition—essential/eidetic research

Husserl concludes that we must apprehend or take the phenomenal appearances as instantiations of universal structures, or in other words, as possessing *essences* (such as “color in general,” “sound in general”; Husserl, 2008, p. 222). Only by moving from the realm of singular to general or preferably universal intuition through an act termed *Wesensschau* (literally, the “seeing” of essential structures) can we begin to establish a *scientific* approach to experience (Husserl, 1977, section 9). For Husserl, phenomenology is *eidetic*. Giorgi holds this position too:

If one does not employ the eidetic reduction and arrive at an essence or some other type of eidetic invariant concerning the concrete, detailed description of an experienced phenomenon by one or several participants, *proper* phenomenological procedures have not been followed. (Giorgi, 2008, p. 4, my italics)

So, building on the objection that it is poor depiction of the discipline, there are a few variations on the conditions which phenomenologists apply to the thesis that phenomenology is the description of what experience is like. Husserl and Giorgi argue that phenomenology was essentially eidetic and interested not in singular experiences but universal structures. One gets the impression from the above quote and Zahavi's recent exchanges (Zahavi, 2018, p. 900) that another condition seems to be that singular descriptions must be incorporated within a philosophical phenomenological framework, even those descriptions arising from qualitative research. I address the basic rejection of the characterisation of phenomenology as what-it's-likeness immediately below (§5.1), and then the addition of the condition of ideation from §5.2-§5.4. The extent to which qualitative phenomenological research must draw on phenomenological philosophy is addressed in the second half of this article (§7ff.).

¹ Though, see Steinbock (2017).

² I am using this term in the philosophical sense that Kant did.

§5 Responses and commentary

§5.1 Response to the objection that the “what-it’s-like” characterisation of phenomenology is inadequate

So, I have explicated the connection between what-it’s-likeness, phenomenology, and qualitative research in terms of the provision of descriptions of lived experience, and then voiced some objections to these connections. I will now address the objections, beginning with the claim that the ‘what-it’s-like’ characterisation of phenomenology, which we saw stemmed from analytic philosophy and has been drawn on by qualitative researchers, is inadequate. My response is that the analytic tradition and qualitative researchers are not unjustified in using the term “phenomenology” this way, because descriptions of what experience is like are indeed a legitimate trait of even of Continental philosophical phenomenology.

Let me start with a few contemporary phenomenological researchers from other fields to show that it is not only analytic philosophers and qualitative researchers who think of phenomenology as the verbalization of what experience is like. Contemporarily, well-known cognitive scientist and phenomenological scholar Shaun Gallagher intimates that, when a patient in a waiting room reports “I have a headache and blindness in one eye,” then the patient is doing phenomenology (Gallagher, 2012, p. 203). Similarly, the eminent Husserl scholar D. W. Smith claims that an elementary form of phenomenological practice is providing reports like, “I see that fishing boat on the edge of the fog bank,” or “I desire a warm cup of green tea” (D. W. Smith, 2006, p. 163). Such first-person reports are straight-forwardly the verbalization of what our everyday experiences are like.

Moreover, these low-level experiential descriptions can be found within the canonical phenomenological philosophical tradition as well.

Husserl writes:

I speak, e.g., of my *inkpot*, and my inkpot also stands before me: I see it (Husserl, 2001b, p. 201). While taking an evening stroll on the Loretto Heights a string of lights in the Rhine valley suddenly flashes in our horizon (Husserl, 2001c, p. 202). Let us suppose that in a garden we regard with pleasure a blossoming apple tree, the freshly green grass of the lawn, etc. (Husserl, 1983, p. 214). Wandering about in the Panopticum Waxworks we meet on the stairs a charming lady whom we do not know and who seems to know us, and who is in fact the well-known joke of the place: we have for a moment been tricked by a waxwork figure. (Husserl, 2001b, pp. 137-138)

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole... But all of a sudden, I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! (Sartre, 1992, pp. 259-260)

Many from the phenomenological tradition see the characterisation of phenomenology as what-it’s-likeness as an oversimplification. Zahavi states that this characterisation has “little to do with phenomenology understood as a specific method or tradition in philosophy” (Zahavi, 2018, p. 901). However, the provision of first-person descriptions of experience has an awful lot to do with phenomenological philosophy, and so we should not be so defensive. As the quotes I have just provided show, there’s a good reason why phenomenology can be characterized as either concerned with the phenomenal character of experience, or the provision of descriptions of what various experiences are like: because, at times, it is! What this defensiveness fails to face up to is that even Husserlian phenomenology often refers to first-

person experience disclosed via singular descriptions. It thus shares this genetic trait with its contemporary descendants, and it is this trait which qualitative disciplines concerned with what experience is like are calling on when they call themselves “phenomenological.”

Instead of trying to disqualify disciplines which share this trait, the better tactic is to delineate the nature, function, virtues, and pitfalls of these descriptions (see §5.3–§6).

§5.2 Addressing the objection over additional conditions

So, let me now turn to the claim that there are *additional* conditions which phenomenological methods must fulfil to qualify as truly phenomenological. What is certainly the case is that Husserl supported this thesis. Though Husserl often provided singular descriptions of what experience is like, he also thought that phenomenology must additionally articulate *laws about essences*: “scientific-phenomenological investigation is aimed at general essences and laws of essence” (Husserl, 1977, pp. 35-36; see also Husserl, 1983, p. 324; 2001c, p. 624; 2008, p. 226). Giorgi is as a matter of fact quite explicit in acknowledging that he in turn adopted the methodological operation of ideation largely due to the influence Husserl has had on his thought (Giorgi, 2008). Yet, it serves us well to ask *why* Husserl sought to uncover phenomenological laws via the operation of ideation.

Husserl is an author of great ambiguity. On the one hand, he founded a tradition which radically criticises the very roots and value of the positivistic scientific enterprise. On the other, the way he describes the nature, role, and place of phenomenology is often largely concomitant with the very picture of scientific traditionalism. One reason for Husserl’s essentialist ambitions are that he has in mind, first, a traditional *nomological* vision of science. Husserl thinks that, *to be afforded a place amongst the scientific nexus*, phenomenology must engage in the formulation of laws, and this can only obviously be done by ascending up from the level of singular experience to the more general, essential level (Husserl, 1977, pp. 35-36; 1983, p. 324; 2001c, p. 624; 2008, p. 226).

Second, Husserl has a classical *foundational* vision of phenomenology’s place within the scientific nexus. He thought that by laying out the lawful relations amongst the types of structures of consciousness which give rise to any form of knowledge whatsoever, phenomenology lays out the grounds for all scientific endeavors (Husserl, 1999, 2001a, 2008, 2019). These laws only flow from eidetic analysis, and so Husserl’s contention that phenomenology *must* move to the eidetic level results from his vision for phenomenology as a type of metascience. So, even though Giorgi for example is not motivated by foundationalist concerns, the source for his inherited eidetic methodology is.

Contemporarily we have good reasons to be skeptical of Husserl’s nomological, foundationalist proclivities. None of the phenomenologists who followed continued this vision of founding natural science on phenomenology. Moreover, the foundationalist vision of empirical science has been challenged by the anti-foundationalism which pervaded philosophy of science in the latter half of the 20th century, thanks largely to the likes of Quine (1969, 1951, 1970), Kuhn (1962), Sellars (1963), and Feyerabend (1975). Moreover, the nomological nature of science—especially human sciences—is by no means given, and qualitative research in particular rejects the idea that science ought *only* or even primarily to be in the business of articulating laws.

If empirical science does not require a foundation, and the human sciences need not aspire to the articulation of laws, then there is no need for phenomenology to aspire to be a nomological metascience. Such aspirations are inextricably linked to Husserl’s attempts to institute eidetic analysis, and Husserl is the source of contemporary authors who claim that any non-eidetic method is not phenomenological. The picture we have of the scientific nexus and the place that phenomenology has within it have all undergone a radical revision since

Husserl's time, and so therefore can the methodology of qualitative phenomenological research.

§5.3 The value of the description of simple lived experience

And so, if our descriptions do not need to be eidetic and aspire to the articulation of laws, we are free to ask ourselves whether there are other virtues that we might value in our phenomenological methods. Bitbol and Petitmengin, for example, suggest that the validity of methods that value the first-person perspective (as phenomenological qualitative analysis does) should not be measured in terms of "truth," if this notion is conceived as adequacy or representative accurateness. Instead, we might think of value "in terms of authenticity on the one hand, and of performative consistency" or coherence on the other (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2009, p. 373). I would add that the purpose of a phenomenological description is to convey the nuances of experience amongst interlocutors, and so qualities such as attention to salient details, vivacity, liveliness, and a propensity for disclosure are important (Williams, 2016).

Zahavi criticizes qualitative research methods on the grounds that they are too descriptive. He notes that Smith's IPA "seeks to provide rich experiential descriptions" but questions whether this or merely considering the first-person perspective are enough to secure "phenomenological credentials" (Zahavi, 2018, p. 900). Zahavi clearly thinks not, but what I find remarkable is that no actual arguments or reasons are given for this. He goes on to say that phenomenologically "informed qualitative research has different aims than phenomenological philosophy, but it is questionable whether the former can qualify as phenomenological if it either ignores or misinterprets the latter" (ibid).³ Yet, it is not the level of attention or adherence to the original theory of some field but a broad etymological relation and the sharing of genetic material which licenses the use of a term. There are many features of a science which might qualify a species to constitute a branch on the family tree, and, due to the examples provided and the reasons outlined hereabouts, it would seem to be that articulating descriptions of first-person experience (even simple ones) is indeed a qualifying trait of phenomenology.

Van Manen in turn claimed that Zahavi's work lacks attention to descriptive detail and is overly philosophical and analytic (van Manen, 2019). This will come as a great surprise to professional philosophers who know Zahavi for his non-technical writing style and the clarity of his elucidations.⁴ However, van Manen asks a question which penetrates to the heart of the matter: "When is it too much argument and too little description? Too much technical systematizing philosophy and too little interpretive and expressive phenomenological disclosure of meaning?" (ibid, p. 8). This strikes me as a question without a criterion for an answer. The reason this question has no answer has to do with the fact that the meaning of cultural product terms like "phenomenology" is open to variation, change, and interpretation. In Husserlian idiom, these ends on the continuum between analysis and description represent limiting conditions which serve to differentiate species of a genus of meaning, but neither rules the other out as non-phenomenological.

§5.4 From description to analysis

Against Smith et al. (2009), Zahavi (2018, p. 2) casts doubt on heavily descriptive approaches when he expresses skepticism that what phenomenologists do is formalize

³ At the end of this paper, we'll see that I agree that *misinterpretation* of phenomenological philosophy is indeed a problem, but not one which disqualifies a research method from being phenomenological. I propose quite a different solution to misinterpretation than Zahavi.

⁴ Zahavi is one of the most accessible expert Husserlian phenomenologists.

something we are all already doing (i.e., articulating experience). However, take the following passage:

When I am watching a football match, I normally pay no attention to the turn of my head as I follow the motions of the players... When I am occupied with objects, my perceptual acts and their bodily roots are generally passed over in favor of the perceived, that is, my body tends to efface itself on its way to its intentional goal. (Zahavi, 2005, p. 205)

The first sentence is a singular description of an experience. It conveys “what-it’s-like” (bodily) to watch a football match. The purpose of the first sentence is to illustrate a structural feature of embodiment (i.e., that embodiment is not normally the intentional object but the overlooked vehicle or medium of perception). The second sentence is more generalized and explicitly talks about the just mentioned “general” or structural feature which is present in all embodied experiences of this type; it is an eidetic description of the structures which were latent in the first sentence and it employs a more sophisticated and philosophically informed conceptual framework.

This is a good example of the canonical phenomenological philosophical method. The descriptions I provided from Husserl and Sartre, for example, are embedded within lengthy eidetic analyses.⁵ For Husserl, singular descriptions only provide a focal point and serve the purpose of exemplification. Yet these descriptions certainly do provide us with a logos of experiential phenomena, and they satisfy the minimal condition of adhering to the so-called “principle-of-all-principles,”⁶ the gold standard of Husserlian phenomenology. So, is it right to say that the first parts of the passage from Zahavi lose their phenomenological status if unaccompanied by the final? It seems more productive and less dogmatic to say that there are different levels, phases, or even types of phenomenology.

Sometimes, these phases are dispersed across different individuals. For example, you might read the rich descriptions contained in Sartre’s *Nausea*. You might then generalize (starting with yourself) to features of shared structure, precisely because it was a particularly lively and vivacious depiction. In the applied context, commonly singular descriptions are gathered via an interview. The qualitative researcher then analyzes the data in order to identify generalities such as “essential structure” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 6; 2012) or “emergent patterns (i.e., themes)” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80). Whenever we have one person giving a description of their individual stream of consciousness and another person analyzing these descriptions for more general features, presumably across a diverse population of interviewees, we have a sharing of phenomenological tasks. This is an important difference in method,⁷ and crucial methodological questions arise.⁸ For now, though, the essential point is that to say that a

⁵ This point should be well heeded. It would be misleading to think that phenomenological philosophy was largely composed of mundane descriptions like the ones I provided.

⁶ As it is presented in Husserl (1983), the principle-of-all-principles is “*that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily... 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*” (p. 44). The principle of all principles is the methodological edict that phenomenology ought to be arbitrated by an appeal to experience (that which is given in intuition).

⁷ However, it is not so different from the philosophical context. Husserl might have both the experience and the eidetic or general insight based on it himself, but this insight will need to be shared or “reactivated” amongst other phenomenologists via a communicative act, firstly, and secondly an act of understanding on the reader’s behalf (see Williams, 2016). This highlights the importance of using lively and rich descriptive examples in the philosophical context.

⁸ For example, Giorgi suggests that it is the *researcher* analyzing the data who needs to bracket their presuppositions (Giorgi, 2012). I would have thought it was just important that the *interviewee* who is providing the description do so.

research project becomes “phenomenological” at the eidetic or generalizing stage of research seems rather arbitrary.

§6 Conclusion to part one

The only important thing to do is to make sure we understand the features of each sense of the term “phenomenology.” We have distinguished a heavily eidetic, universal, and structural type of phenomenology from a more singular and everyday descriptive variety. As we have also seen, sometimes these different meanings of phenomenology operate in the same study. In cases however that they do not, they might be better characterized as different phases. Either way, we should not confuse them, because they present us with different strengths.

Husserl employed the descriptive method because he thought that the mistake of philosophers who had come before him was that they failed to understand the experiential ground of certain concepts they relied on so heavily. He sought to unpack concepts like “consciousness” or “content” via a return to “the things themselves” as they exist and are experienced in the prescientific, intuitive, non-theoretical lifeworld from which these concepts receive their constitutive genesis.

An example of this method is Husserl’s close descriptions of the relation between the lived and material body in works like *Ideas 2* (Husserl, 1989). Husserl’s descriptions show that Descartes’ analysis of the concepts of “mind” and “body” in his famous *Meditations* (2008) does not stick closely enough to the intuitive data of the way the psychically ensouled lived body is experientially intertwined with and not divorced from our own material body. This description amounts to a reorganization and relativization of Cartesian duality. This obviously carries huge philosophical implications. Thus, what close but singular descriptions do is provide a type of evidence which allow us to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic theoretical presuppositions imposing themselves on our philosophizing. I will later demonstrate the analogy between this role that descriptions of experience play in a philosophical context and the contemporary qualitative context.

But of course, there are disadvantages to approaches which rely too heavily on the description of simple experience. Firstly, singular descriptions are open to charges that what is described is merely an idiosyncratic feature of the describers mental or conscious life. Until researchers begin to generalize to shared or structural features of experience, it is hard to know whether we are dealing with something general and therefore important, or something eccentric. Notice, in this regard, the tendency to interpret the surreal experiences in *Nausea* not by reference to a loss of meaning which characterizes the human condition but by a bad mescaline trip that Sartre experienced as a young man (e.g., in Valjak, 2017).⁹

Moreover, singular descriptions are open to the charge that any sort of method which relies on first-person reports is unreliable, as people are not in fact very good at determining their own cognitive states (Nisbett & Bellows, 1977; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), nor very good at determining what is in their perceptual field (Levin & Simons, 1997; Simons & Chabris, 1999), nor are we in fact even able to accurately self-report *what we experience* and are conscious of (Block, 1995; Bornstein & Pittman, 1992). Such charges can partly be responded to be the employment of new criterion for measuring the success of descriptions (i.e., those suggested by Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2009), but a generalizing analysis confers a different sort of academic weight (Williams, 2020). The takeaway point, however, is that there is a dialectic within phenomenology between singularity and generality; description and analysis; the subjective and the objective. These make up phases, moments, or movements of a project which can broadly be called “phenomenological.”

⁹ This explanation was in fact partly offered by Sartre himself (Gerassi, 2009).

§7 Part two. An assessment of van Manen VS Zahavi VS Smith

One of the criterion van Manen invokes for defining “phenomenology” is resemblance or adherence to primary philosophical literature. Smith’s method, he contends, “does not resemble any of the phenomenologies that are to be found in the primary literature, tradition, and movements” (van Manen, 2018, p. 1966) and it therefore should not be considered phenomenological. (This raises the thorny problem of how to decide what constitutes “primary literature, tradition, and movements.” Van Manen’s definition seems much wider than Zahavi’s, for example). Zahavi sided with van Manen on this issue, though, claiming that the link between Smith’s method and “philosophical phenomenology is so tenuous, that anybody practicing it, can only be said to be engaged in phenomenological research in the most superficial sense of the term” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 2). Morley claims that “IPA is phenomenological in ‘name only’ with limited relation to the actual phenomenological tradition” (Morley, 2019, p. 165).

These criticisms, however, do not appear to hit the mark they intend. Smith may not be engaged in phenomenological research in the *originary* sense of the term, yet, as he correctly points out, “philosophy does not own phenomenology” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34). Indeed, no one does, or can, because of the nature of cultural objects. What constitutes a science is always open to revision by the next generation of practitioners, and so it is difficult to see how the claim to break with tradition, by itself, is supposed to constitute an objection.

van Manen’s motivation for attempting to restrict the use of the term phenomenology is because he thinks that too wide a definition damages “the larger project of phenomenology in relation to professional practices in fields such as psychology, health science, education, and pedagogy” (van Manen 2018, p. 1966). I find this motivation most curious. The other professional practices whose opinion he worries about could themselves hardly be called homogenous. Psychology, for example, comes in qualitative, Freudian, cognitive, humanistic, phenomenological, developmental, clinical, counselling, neurological, and abnormal varieties, to name just a few distinctions. All broadly qualify for the title because they develop a “logos” of the “psyche,” but each probably have different conceptions of both terms. A Freudian psychoanalyst will probably stress that they mean something slightly different in calling themselves a “psychologist” than the cognitive psychologist does. Moreover, it would be absurd to criticize any of them on the grounds that they do not adhere strictly to the methods and theories of Freud, Wundt, Fechner or any of the other fathers of psychology and their “primary literature.”

Although Zahavi agrees with van Manen’s assessment of Smith, he criticizes van Manen for associating phenomenology with the “what-it’s-like” renditions of phenomenology which, as we have seen (though associable with Continental phenomenology), essentially arise from the analytic tradition. As Zahavi shows, van Manen himself does not, on this score, do justice to the eidetic or philosophic aspirations of Continental phenomenology which he portends to represent, and Zahavi’s criticisms thus reveal an inconsistency. Yet still, inconsistency does not demonstrate that the method van Manen proposes is un-phenomenological. Despite what van Manen himself thinks, it is not adherence to tradition that grants one the right to use a name; if this were true, the natural scientists of today would be as blindly accepting of Aristotle’s theory of causation as the Scholastics.

§8 Zahavi on qualitative research

In closing, I will assess Zahavi’s recent recommendations to qualitative researchers. The focus up until this point in this article is the right to call a movement by a title. My central point is that a science is not defined or evaluated by its adherence to tradition. However, I do

not mean to imply that all variants of a scientific movement are on equal footing. The new is not even necessarily better than the old. For example, even though I have just argued that van Manen's theory qualifies as phenomenological, I also think that Zahavi offers some detailed criticisms of this theory that are particularly adroit (2019).

One of the strengths of Zahavi's recent analysis of qualitative research methods was his reasoned arguments about the need to develop more philosophically informed semi-structured interview tools or intervention practices that directly draw from the rich pre-extant body of phenomenological insight *in the right circumstances*. For example, he points to previous tools developed in close interaction with phenomenological theory in the field of clinical neuropsychiatry that allow the clinician to measure a patient's sense of self-awareness along a variety of axes (Zahavi & Martiny, 2019). There is a lot of canonical phenomenological work on the structural features of our sense of ipseity. Thus, a strength of this analysis is its reasoned match between the phenomenological theoretical standpoint and contextual demand determining a particular methodology and method, and I concur with much of what Zahavi and Martiny have to say. In this final section, my focus is to offer a similar but divergent argument about a particular circumstance where some of the methods Zahavi criticizes are appropriate.

Zahavi (2019) and Zahavi and Martiny (2019) critique Giorgi's (2009) approach as applied in the work of Beck (2013), as well as Wood's (1991) approach, on the grounds that they utilize an open technique method to interviewing that has a methodology of minimising intervention.

To adopt a hands-off approach, where one simply asks the patient to describe his or her experiences and then sits back and listens, is clearly not the right way... it is all about conducting the interview in light of quite specific ideas and notions, notions taken from phenomenological theory. *To conduct a phenomenological interview is consequently not simply a question of being open-minded and interested in first-person experience*. It is very much also about adopting and employing a comprehensive theoretical framework that will allow one to ask the right questions (Zahavi, 2019, p. 6, my italics).

As Morley's response makes clear (2019), many of the qualitative researchers Zahavi criticizes for their passivity are more active than he and Martiny portray them as.

My response is somewhat different, though. What these criticisms neglect is the methodological virtues that qualitative researchers attempt to import from the theoretical motivations that drove Husserl to employ the methodology of presuppositionless description of experience (which strikes me as much a *bona fide* genetic trait of phenomenology as any so far discussed), and it is this virtue that open-minded questioning and non-structured interviewing methods attempt to instill.

As Churchill and Wertz (2015) note, the "nature and handling of various kinds of 'presuppositions' have been the topic of extensive discussion and debate among phenomenologists" (Churchill & Wertz, 2015, p. 281). Giorgi utilizes the reduction because he thinks it implies that we "refrain from bringing in past knowledge" (2012, p. 4). Similarly, Mapp suggests that bracketing involves "the suspension of the researcher's own preconceptions, beliefs or prejudices so that they do not influence the interpretation of the respondents' experience," and that the Husserlian approach "requires the researcher to put aside her preconceived ideas regarding the subject of the interview prior to data collection" (2008, p. 308 & 309).¹⁰ Tuffour states that the phenomenological attitude requires us to "put aside past

¹⁰ It should be noted, I do not actually think that the idea of presuppositionless description should be associated with bracketing, the *epoché*, or the reductions without much greater discussion and analysis. I just want to point

knowledge or presuppositions” (2017, p. 53). Smith et al., finally, makes the connection in question explicit when they state that “Husserl famously urged phenomenologists to go ‘back to the things themselves,’ and IPA research follows his lead in this regard, rather than attempting to fix experience in predefined... categories” (2009, p. 7).

As previously indicated, Husserl thought that stripping away preconceived ideas (or, dogmatically held philosophical theses) was a crucial aspect of phenomenological methodology. So, let me be explicit here: the analogy in question is between suspending entrenched philosophical theses for the purpose of giving an accurate description of experience which allows us to formulate a more robust philosophical account on the one hand, and on the other, suspending our dogmatic or biased and prejudicial beliefs for the purpose of giving a more accurate qualitative account of experience, perhaps the experience of previously marginalized populations. This is one of the shared genetic traits that underwrites certain schools of qualitative research calling themselves “phenomenological.”

Zahavi, on the other hand, contends that it is by no means a methodological prerequisite for doing phenomenological research “that one initially strips one’s own mind of preconceived ideas” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 6). He might be right that it is not a necessary condition of phenomenology, but the value of this methodological proposal very much depends on which ideas. If one is operating, for example, with a sharply naturalistic, strictly non-psycho/social biological model of patient care (such as has historically predominated in some health care settings), that is, if one is living in what Husserl (1989) termed the purely “naturalistic attitude,” which takes a naïve stance towards the importance of experience, then one might indeed be well served by stripping away these ideas, because they filter phenomenologically salient categories and thus prohibit insight.

There is a broader point to be made here as well. There is something of a disjoint between the concerns of the progenitors of the originary philosophical theoretical standpoint of phenomenology and the aims which motivate the methodology of many contemporary qualitative researchers. The overwhelming majority of phenomenological philosophers were white, upper-class, Judeo-Christian, European males living in the first half of the twentieth century. Hardly a cohort known for their receptivity to the concerns of many contemporary qualitative researchers. A noteworthy absence from the canon is discussions of class, race, sexuality, or gender. On the other hand, qualitative phenomenological research has been found to be particularly suited to describing these types of experiences. For example, there are a variety of studies on women’s and parenting experiences: feelings and fears during obstetric emergencies (Mapp & Hudson, 2005), women’s expectations and experiences of childbirth (Gibbins & Thomson, 2001), pain during childbirth (Lundgren & Dahlberg, 1998), and the experience of fathers breaking down from PTSD following the birth of their child (White, 2007).

It has also been applied to topics as diverse as women’s experience of inorgasmia (Lavie & Willig, 2005), how ex-offenders in Asian cultures experience the process of desistance (Adorjan & Chui, 2011), transgender individuals experience of the transition process (Paralik, 2017), how gay men of color experienced gay-specific racism (Giwa, 2016), and how HIV-positive gay men think about sexual relationships (Smith et al., 2009). The latter analysis revealed relational structures such as that sexually risky behavior was a form of giving of oneself as a gift, with the aim of becoming closer and more intimate, and a power dynamic. There is little to nothing on these sorts of topics in the canonical phenomenological literature, which just doesn’t approach the structures of the kinds of experiences described. Moreover, given the tendency of implicit biases towards race, gender, sexuality, criminality, etc., there is

out that qualitative researchers were inspired by the former notion, which some of them then identify with more technical Husserlian apparatuses.

probably even a good reason to begin these studies with a limited amount of traditional phenomenological theoretical background.¹¹

These are good reasons why contemporary researchers sometimes look to engage in “pure” research which explores new phenomenological dimensions, distinctions, and categories. Zahavi goes some way towards acknowledging as much, stating that “by attending to specific aspects or dimensions that the phenomenological philosophers might have overlooked, [qualitative researchers] can also contribute to theory development, and help refine the phenomenological analyses and distinctions” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 7). Yet, one study Zahavi endorses ends by challenging a core phenomenological categorisation schema, that is, the fundamentality of the distinction between lived and objective body and calls for a reconsideration of “the prejudiced critique of the ‘body as object’ in mainstream phenomenology” (Slatman, Halsema, & Meershoek, 2016, p. 1). Thus, not only will the uncovering of new experiential dimensions often require us to suspend and go beyond the traditional categories employed by phenomenologists, these categories may not need to be refined but overturned or redefined all together, and in this context a purer, more open, and less interventionist descriptive method seems more appropriate.

What presuppositionless description aims for is the establishment of new theoretical distinctions which increase the color palate of the lifeworld. It is difficult to allow such fresh categories emerge if we are directing interviewees along well-trodden theoretical paths. “An open-ended contact with everyday life is thus preferred over experiments or questionnaires, which often manifest biases unreflected on by the researcher” (Churchill & Wertz, 2015, p. 282).

The very *raison d’être* of the “so called” unstructured interview is to avoid the mistake made by designers of questionnaires which pre-frame the categorical structures of the phenomena before the interviewee even speaks. Phenomenological interviewers prefer, as much as reasonable, to take a “discovery” approach to interviewing (Morley, 2019, p. 165).

In summary, on the one hand, Zahavi calls for a greater engagement and employment of phenomenological theory using interview methods which are structured by the theoretical viewpoint engendered by traditional phenomenological categories, *and* he attempts to do justice the mutual enlightenment thesis. He even urges nursing researchers merely to consider phenomenology as “*an open-minded attitude*” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 8). Yet, it is precisely the way this open-minded attitude manifests in existent phenomenological methods that he criticizes on the other hand, scuttling research methods which advocate for pure description and are explicitly designed to break free from pre-established theoretical molds. I think a minor adjustment is to allow that *some* contexts should neglect or suspend the traditional phenomenological theoretical standpoint and will call for a purer descriptive methodology, involving less structured interview methods. Importantly though, neither one of these methods is more “phenomenological” than the other.

§9 Conclusion to part 2

I agree with Zahavi that the level of *philosophical* scholarship that is present amongst qualitative research is sometimes quite poor. Mapp’s (2008) article, for example, which portends to provide a basic introduction to phenomenological methodology, actually manages

¹¹ There may be other, more appropriate, theoretical backgrounds, that is, queer or critical race theory, or perhaps even the newly developed *critical* phenomenological theory.

to misspell *Husserl's* name! I commiserate with qualitative researchers, though. Phenomenological philosophy is a daunting and at times impenetrable field, and this is because much of the corpus is overly technical and obscure. A guilty secret amongst Husserlians is that he was often inconsistent and unclear, and even we do not know what he meant much more often than we like to admit. I sincerely hope that qualitative researchers engage more with phenomenology, or philosophy of any sort, but it takes as much time to become an expert Husserlian as it does to become an expert psychotherapist, educator, or nurse. As may have become clear in the opening sections of this article, qualitative research and phenomenological philosophy (once understood) are at times antithetical and strange bedfellows. So, *feel free to move beyond traditional phenomenology.*

It is, of course, not that anyone is *prohibited* from adopting a philosophical phenomenological theoretical standpoint or methodology, it is just that one does not need to. Both standpoint and methodology (not to mention the actual *methods*, such as the *epoche* and reduction) are fraught with difficulties and may not even be appropriate. Morley states that the suggestion that “researchers give up applying the *epoche* and reductions is essentially the same as saying that they should abandon doing purely phenomenological qualitative research” (Morley, 2019, p. 166). I just do not understand what the invocation or “purity” is here supposed to achieve; as if Husserl is some sort of methodological unicorn. Crotty laments the disconnect between the original spirit of phenomenological philosophy and qualitative research, but as he somberly admits, there just “is no place here for any kind of purism or the mounting of a defence of some alleged orthodoxy” (Crotty, 1998, p. 84).

I lament not. The spirit of radical critique that Crotty mourns is alive and well, and it is well served by the observation that there is no need to aim for methodological or theoretical purity. Both Giorgi and van Manen’s mistake is the claim of methodological authenticity when, in fact, they are not always representative of philosophical phenomenology. Methods such as the *epoche* and the reductions have borne more confusion than they have fruit in any context. I would thus advise against importing your methodological vocabulary from the likes of Husserl and Heidegger. Finally, stop trying to accuse one another of inauthenticity. This last is a pernicious hubristic habit.

Conversely, qualitative research already provides high-level, original accounts of experience. Indeed, it is more than possible that qualitative approaches to phenomenology will provide a more powerful and comprehensive science of lived experience than philosophy ever could, and that it will in the end become the dominant form of the science (at which stage, I am sure qualitative researchers will start claiming that philosophical phenomenologists are not “genuine” phenomenologists, if they are not already!)

Many philosophical concepts cannot be used in qualitative research without losing their identity altogether. Thus, we have to accept that the phenomenological notions qualitative researchers develop are something new produced for the sake of the research. So, why not just redefine terms? One might just reasonably say, “the idea of bracketing” or “*epoche*” arose in a philosophical context, perhaps provide a very short definition from a leading expert on Husserl’s methodology, but then say: “however, we mean something slightly different by that term here” or even “we are using a different method altogether in order to study experience.” Then give your own definition. My contribution is to say that, in doing this, qualitative researchers are not voiding their right to call their method “phenomenological.” And the reason for this has nothing to do with anything *inside* of phenomenological theory but because of the far broader considerations about the ways that language and the “meaning” of the terms which denote a science function.

An author who gets the tone right is Smith and his co-authors, who envisage “a mature, multi-faceted and holistic phenomenology” which does not seek to “operationalize or privilege one particular phenomenology or phenomenological theorist,” and instead admits that “IPA is

influenced by the core emphases of the approach, and by a number of further elements drawn from the different positions” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). Smith thus takes broad inspiration but gladly (and explicitly) breaks tradition on the specifics. There is no need to say, “I’m using the same method as Edmond [*sic*] Husserl,” because you are almost certainly not, there probably wouldn’t be any point in doing so, and the truth is you just do not need to. Each new branch of science has the right to reenvision the method on its own terms often dependent on more overarching theoretical considerations. Failure to make all this explicit, however, risks the equivocality that is causing real problems in the contemporary context.

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