

## Twenty-three definitions of phenomenology (full citations follow definitions)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience (Sokolowski 2000, p. 2).
  2. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as experienced by human beings. The primary emphasis is on the phenomenon itself exactly as it reveals itself to the experiencing person in all its concreteness and particularity (Giorgi 1971, 9).
  3. Phenomenology takes its starting point in a return to the “things” or “matters” themselves, that is, the world as we experience it. In other words, for phenomenologists, **experience must be treated as the starting point and ultimate court of appeal for all philosophical evidence** (Brown and Toadvine 2003, p. xi).
  4. Phenomenology is the study of experience, particularly as it is lived and as it is structured through consciousness. “Experience” in this context refers not so much to accumulated evidence or knowledge as to something we “undergo.” It is **something that happens to us and not something accumulated and mastered by us**. Phenomenology asks that we be open to experience in this sense (Friesen, Henricksson, and Saevi 2012, p. 1).
  5. The aim of phenomenology is to *describe the lived world of everyday experience*.... Phenomenological research into **individual experiences gives insight into, and understanding of, the human condition**. Sometimes it “languages” things we already know tacitly but have not articulated in depth. At other times, quite surprising insights reveal themselves.... (Finlay 2011, p. 26).
  6. Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of the matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology’s first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within (Moran 2000, p. 4).
  7. As a method, [phenomenology] serves to remind us of the **significance of the full range of meaning of human experience, including taken-for-granted assumptions, values, and perceptions** often forgotten about in analytic frameworks. In attending to pre-thematic ways of being-in-the-world, **phenomenology helps to comprehend human behavior in its fullness** (Stefanovic 2015, p. 40).
  8. Phenomenological method is driven by a pathos: being swept up in a spell of wonder about phenomena as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us. In the encounter with the things and events of the world, phenomenology directs its gaze toward the regions where meanings and understandings originate, well up and percolate through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—then infuse, permeate, infect, touch, stir us, and exercise a formative and affective effect on our being (van Manen 2014, p. 26).
  9. **Phenomenology is an attempt to understand from the inside**—and not to dismiss or criticize from the outside—the whole spectrum of experience which we generally call “reality” (Vesely 1988, p. 59).
  10. Phenomenology never purely coincides with lived experience in itself, but by probing its ultimate horizons and seeking to grasp the englobing sense of what appears within them, renders lived experience anew. The subject matter is the *intelligibility* of lived experience, which phenomenology realizes essentially; and it is in rendering this “intelligibility” that the faithfulness of phenomenology to lived experience lies (Burch 1989, p. 195).
  11. Phenomenology seems to take the ground away from under our feet, while at the same time giving us the sense of being where we have always been—only now recognizing it as if for the first time. It’s hard to catch hold of it because it’s like trying to catch something as it’s happening and which is over before we can do so. It can perhaps best be described most simply as “stepping back” into where we are already. This means shifting the focus of attention *within experience* into the experiencing of it. So if we consider seeing, for example, this means that we have to “step back” from *what* is seen into the *seeing* of what is seen (Bortoft 2012, p. 17).
  12. Phenomenology recovers the order of truth as residing *in* things. It is not hidden, it does not lie under or behind or beneath things, and hence does not require Depth Theory to winkle it out. It is what is manifest (what shows) in things and *how*. If this is very obvious (as it *must* be) it yet requires a particular way of seeing and understanding in order to grasp it, for it can simply be no-seen at all (Scannell 1996, p. 169).
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13. Phenomenology: The disciplined struggle “to let be,” to let being appear or break through (Buckley 1971, p. 199).
  14. Phenomenology: The gathering together of what already belongs together even while apart (Mugerauer 1988, p. 216).
  15. Phenomenology: To let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself (Heidegger 1962, p. 58).
  16. [Phenomenology] adopts no standpoint and provides no single direction of approach. [It] informs us simply that something we experience is to be disclosed, and this in turn means that it must somehow be hidden from us, though it may be superficially familiar. Phenomenology thus reveals itself as a gentle, responsive way of thinking. It tends to become what it studies. It is the method of imposing no method (Relph 1983, p. 201).
  17. Phenomenology invites us to stay with “the experience itself,” to concentrate on its character and structure rather than whatever it is that might underlie or be causally responsible for it. . . . [Phenomenology] facilitates a return to experience, to awaken in us a sense of its importance by demonstrating the founding role of experience in our conception of the world, however sophisticated that conception has become through the advancement of the natural sciences. In striving to awaken us to our own experience, to the phenomena through which our conception of the world is constituted, phenomenology seeks to awaken us to ourselves, to make us alive to our existence as subjects who bear a kind of ultimate responsibility for that conception (Cerbone 2006, p. 3).
  18. [Phenomenology entails] letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them. . . . [T]he very essence of true understanding is that of being led by the power of the thing to manifest itself. . . . Phenomenology is a means of being led by the phenomenon through a way of access genuinely belonging to it. . . . Such a method. . . is not grounded in human consciousness and human categories but in the manifestness of the thing encountered, the reality that comes to meet us (Palmer 1969, p. 128).
  19. Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perceptions, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy that puts essences back into existence and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of [human beings] and the world from any starting point other than that of their “facticity” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. vii).
  20. Many aspects of Husserl’s original formulation of phenomenology endure as central themes, including his catch cry “back to the things themselves” (*Zu den Sachen selbst*), which expressed the idea of the avoidance of metaphysical speculation, the attempt to gain a presuppositionless starting point, the use of description rather than causal explanation, and the attempt to gain insight into the *essences* of all kinds of phenomena (Moran 2001, p. 353).
  21. Phenomenology: The excavation of human experience, first, in terms of particular persons and groups in particular places, situations, and historical moments; and, second, as this excavation engenders a self-conscious effort to make intellectual and emotional sense of what that experience reveals in terms of broader lived structures and more ethical ways of being, willing, and acting (Seamon 2008, p. 15).
  22. Our relation to the world is so fundamental, so obvious and natural, that we normally do not reflect upon it. It is this domain of ignored obviousness that phenomenology seeks to investigate. The task of phenomenology is not to obtain new empirical knowledge about different areas in the world, but rather to comprehend the basic relation to the world that is supposed by any such empirical investigation. . . . The world is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, wonderful. It is a gift and a riddle. But in order to realize this, it is necessary to suspend our ordinary blind and thoughtless taking the world for granted (Zahavi 2019, p. 67).
  23. [The aim is] making evident an essential distinction among the possible ways in which the pregiven world, the ontic universe [*das ontische Universum*], can become thematic for us. Calling to mind what has repeatedly been said: the lifeworld, for us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the “ground” of all praxis whether theoretical or extra-theoretical. The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world. Waking life is being awake to the world, being constantly and directly “conscious” of the world and of oneself as living *in* the world, actually experiencing [*erleben*] and actually effecting the ontic certainty of the world.  
The world is pregiven thereby, in every case, in such a way that individual things are given. But there exists a fundamental difference between the way we are conscious of the world and the way we are conscious of things or objects (taken in the broadest sense, but still purely in the sense of the lifeworld), though together the two make
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up an inseparable unity. Things, objects (always understood purely in the sense of the lifeworld) are “given” as being valid for us in every case (in some mode or other of ontic certainty) but in principle only in such a way that we are conscious of them as things or objects *within the world-horizon*. Each one is something, “something of” the world of which we are constantly conscious as a horizon.

On the other hand, we are conscious of this horizon only as a horizon for existing objects; without particular objects of consciousness, it cannot be actual [*aktuell*]. Every object has its possible varying modes of being valid, the modalizations of ontic certainty. The world, on the other hand, does not exist as *an* entity, as an object, but exists within such uniqueness that the plural makes no sense when applied to it. Every plural, and every singular drawn from it, presupposes the world-horizon. This difference between the manner of being of an object in the world and that of the world itself obviously prescribes fundamentally different correlative types of consciousness for them (Husserl 1970, pp. 142–143).

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## Full citations for definitions

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## Note

1. This set of definitions was originally assembled to be included in “Whither Phenomenology? Thirty years of *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology*.” This article was written to celebrate the thirtieth year of that journal’s publication (*Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology*, vol. 30, no. 2, summer/fall 2019, pp. 37–48); the definitions were published at the end of this article; the list of questions relating to environmental and architectural concerns and mentioned in the text are available in the issue on p. 36. The issue is available at: <https://krex.k-state.edu/dspace/handle/2097/39802>