

Editorial: Explorative Note on Phenomenology, Truth, and Correctness

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In *Phenomenology of Practice* (2023), van Manen refers to Immanuel Kant's distinction between 'noumena' and 'phenomena' and says that "the distinction of phenomena and noumena is [...] between the world of our senses and the world of our understanding (p. 198). We can only make sense of things through our cognitive dispositions. What the things in themselves really look like gives preference to vision. "Noumena can only be imagined", he says referring to Kant (p. 198). The real things of the world are not available, not even fully to our senses, but are hidden in their whatness. Van Manen sees Kant's noumena as sometimes synonymous with "das Ding an sich" or the "things themselves". Yet, what do 'noumena' and 'Das Ding an sich' tell about our connection to the whatness of our world? What is the relationship between human sensations and cognition, and the world of cause and reason? How are human spirit and consciousness, senses, feelings, and emotions, thoughts and reflections, able to truly understand the world, in the broadest meaning of understanding? Can the things of the world, the 'noumenas' only be envisioned, and the 'phenomena' only sensed by the human being, or is there a wholeness, a possibility to experience coherent and connected meaning?

While reading Heidegger's essay 'The question concerning technology' (1953), I notice that the way he understands the essence of technology, that which pervades technology as technology, is not really what technology *is*. What technology is as a tool or act, is something else than the spirit or kernel of technology. In his words, the common understanding of technology as "a means to an end" and "a human activity" (Heidegger, 1953, in Heidegger 1997, p. 288), are only representatives of technology, expressions of how technology is at hand for us, so to say. Heidegger shifts the bargain, as I understand him, with regard to the question of what something *is*, the *whatness* of things, and he relates what something is to the phenomenon and to phenomenology. When we as phenomenologists search the core of something, like for instance his example of a tree, "we have to become aware that what pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees" (p. 287). This expression is a momentarily thought break-down for me. What Heidegger actually does here, is to show the difference between what is correct and what is true. He distinguishes between the correct definition of technology, and the correct definition's inability to reveal the true meaning of technology. So far, I can follow. A definition is not what phenomenology is after either, so here I am on familiar ground.

Then he continues a few pages later: "we must seek the true by way of the correct" (p. 289). I stumble now. Is this another distinction I should have been aware of? To me the revelation comes when he writes that the correct (in Latin 'veritas') is not the same as the

truth (in Greek ‘aletheia’) (p. 294). Aletheia means bringing–forth something from concealment into unconcealment, to reveal this something, to free this something from being concealed. And then he writes: “[w]e say “truth” and usually understand it as correctness of representation” (p.294). This is really something we indeed do. I do. Without being sufficiently aware I am still so rooted in natural sciences that I take the Greek and the Roman truths to mean more or less the same. But Heidegger shows the difference between on one side, truth as presentation of the world’s isness, and on the other side, correctness as representation of things, issues and situations as correct, according to their depictions in the real world.

Now I begin to sense the depth of his expression. A phenomenon is not something you can determine or identify. Neither can epistemological reflection alone reveal or give us a glimpse of even the simplest phenomenon. A phenomenon’s whatness or isness is concealed and can only partly and incompletely be grasped by us, sensationally, spiritually, and cognitively. It does not matter how clever we are, or how experienced we are as phenomenologists. We cannot wring from the phenomenon its’ secrets. This is also why Heidegger’s essay ‘The question concerning technology’ (1953), is so incredibly radical: it reveals the border we have crossed while developing technology to something at our “disposition”, “at our command”, “object[s] on call for inspection” (p. 297), and “standing reserve[s]” (p. 302) to be taken as a constant order to the nature.

The world is no longer a question and a secret to us, or something we freely submit to. We try to keep the arts, poetry, music, and human relationality away from technology, but even here we have turned the world into something that is “on call for duty” (p. 298) to our needs and desires. We tend to search what we can determine and command, and imperceptibly, also to ourselves, turn life and life conditions into controllable entities and utilities. I quote at length from Heidegger:

Since destining at any given time starts man on a way of revealing, man, thus underway, is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and pushing forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards to this basis. Through this the other possibility is blocked, that man might be admitted more and sooner and ever more primally to the essence of what is unconcealed and to its unconcealment, in order that he might experience as his essence the requisite belonging to revealing (p. 307).

Does Heidegger here speak of doing phenomenology? If phenomenology is the opposite of technique – of being at disposition for our command - what then does doing phenomenology imply?

Biesta (2023) lifts a counter-voice to the very idea that it is ethical to strengthen and empower the human being with knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively master situations we encounter in life. He indicates that ethics is something else, namely, to weaken us, or disarm us from self-sufficient strength so that we might be more present to the risky and unplannable present. Rather than being prepared for everything and in danger of totalizing the encounter with the other, whether this other is a person, a thing, a phenomenon or a situation, he urges us to be open to possibilities and surprises. By empowering ourselves to be ready for action we might keep ourselves at distance from

things and feel that we already know what is worth knowing of the other. We feel a sort of mastership and control and are not openly present in the present but rather ready to act and take the lead.

As I read Biesta, he asks us to consider a pedagogy of risk and vulnerability instead of a preparation for mastering and being ahead of situations. When Heidegger in *What is called thinking?* claims that “what must be thought about, turns away from man” (2004, p. 8) I see a similar movement in the phenomenology of the human relationship with the world. What needs to be thought about withdraws from us, Heidegger says, and withdrawal to him is significant, because that which withdraws from us is what we should be interested in. He even says that what signifies man, is the interest for that which withdraws from us. What does he mean? He might think of the human being’s attraction to inaccessible thoughts, or our ability to master great complexity. However, what I think he suggests is that we should listen to that which “asks for thinking” (p. 28). But what is that? And does not an orientation to that which withdraws from us, that which asks for being thought of, require a risk of failure, and even an exposure to the uncontrollability of the world (Rosa, 2020)? In the very last lecture of the book, Heidegger turns to “the present of what is present” (p. 235) and claims that something “speaks in our speech long before thinking gives attention and a name of its own to it” (p. 235). He exemplifies with a mountain that raises in a landscape. Its presence in the present presents itself to us before we know its name, height or other details. It raises from unconcealedness, he writes (p. 237), and thus brings us back to ‘aletheia’ as the truth that reveals and withdraws at the same time. Here we might be at a point where phenomenology and the search for truth (rather than correctness) meet. We search for that which is unseen, unspoken, unheard but present as being, and sensed in our own being. We might see glimpses of this truth as we explore a phenomenon. We might sense breaths of truth while struggling to listen to what the world calls us to orient to with our deepest interest.

References

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