1 Introduction

Philosophy has been all through the centuries one of the most prominent disciplines to which theology relates, partly in dialogue, partly in concurrence. Philosophical phenomenology, after its arrival in the first decades of the twentieth century was an influential movement within the entire field of philosophy. Its main intersection with theology was with philosophical theology (Heidegger [1927] 1970), subsequently disappearing from interdisciplinary exchange for a significant length of time. Renewed theological interest in dialogue with philosophical phenomenology in the US, as well as in Germany, was prepared over the course of the re-discovery of the experiential nature of religion and faith as well as the empirical turn that Practical Theology took. Eventually it became an inspiring source of methodological innovation for empirical research in Practical Theology. Within contemporary French philosophy there is growing interest in the phenomenological analysis of religious experience (Chrétien and Courtine 1992), whether this really is a veritable “theological turn of phenomenology” (cf. title of Janicaud and Courtine 2000) will be evidenced through future developments.

2 The Phenomenological Movement

The word ‘phenomenology’ dates to eighteenth-century philosophy. For a long time, a rather Platonist meaning of the concept was popular. Phenomena were understood to be things as they appear to the human senses, rather than things as they are in themselves. In the twentieth century, phenomenology – as the most elaborated theory of phenomena – opposed this rather dualistic model. Likewise, phenomenologists contested the epistemological assumption that one could make sense of phenomena only by putting them into a mental frame, called ‘interpretation’.

The overall theoretical orientation of phenomenology can be summarised in four points (Zahavi 2019):

– As a particular theory of knowledge, it contributes to clarifying concepts such as truth, evidence, reason.
– It develops an understanding of the human subject as an embodied basis of experience and knowing it offers a frame for the Humanities and Social Sciences.
– It provides a sharp critique on objectivism and scientism; it clarifies the scope of scientific knowledge.
It contributes to analyses which are relevant for the empirical study of concrete phenomena like the experience of aesthetics, speech, encounter with foreign cultures and many others.

Phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) as a “descriptive psychology” (Husserl [1900] 1970) but it has been developed throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries in various specifications, such as a transcendental philosophy of consciousness (Mohanty 1985), an ontological analysis of existence (Heidegger 1962), a phenomenology of the social world (Schütz 1967), and also a phenomenology of religion (van der Leeuw [1933] 1978 and Waardenburg 1978). Subsequently it has been taken up by many academic disciplines (Embree 1997). The following pages present a rough sketch focusing on key concepts, taking up some of Husserl’s ideas as well as further philosophical developments after Husserl.

### 2.1 “The Principle of Principles”

Husserl tried to focus exclusively on the givenness of things. The phenomena that are initially given are not our intellectual categories, nor the discursive language in which we describe an experience. Husserl posited that we gain knowledge in the human mind about objects in reality followed his critical call to go back to the things themselves. This inherited posture of phenomenology is still little understood as regards the elementary and crucial question: what are data? The heart of phenomenological epistemology reflects on how to get knowledge from data, consistent with the very basic and essential idea of Husserl’s philosophy about data. In his rather essentialist language, Husserl describes this with the word ‘givenness’. This can be called an experiential start because his point of departure is an experience that is given to a human being. For Husserl, the structure of intentionality is basic, the “principle of principles”, as he called it, is “that every originally presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originary (so to speak in its ‘personal’ actuality) 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.” (Husserl 1983, 44).

To recover this quality, to step back from secondary causal explanations of reality to primary ‘givenness’, Husserl developed a set of methodical steps in reflection, including description, variation, and eidetic and transcendental reduction. The task is to approach living reality in the best possible manner, not preoccupied by a specific filter, called a scientific hypothesis. The overall phenomenological program that emerges can be summarized thus: “Through phenomenology, a significant methodology is developed for investigating human experience and for deriving knowledge [...]. One learns to see naively and freshly again.” (Moustakas 1994, 101)
2.2 Embodied Perception

Phenomenological epistemology deepened further into the specific relation between knowledge about “data” and human beings as knowing subjects. Husserl’s perceptual approach to reality implied a heavy critique of the intellectualistic and dualistic model common in his world – a model that posited ‘objective data’ on one side and a perceiving subject on the other. Instead, Husserl applied the two corresponding concepts ‘noesis’ and ‘noema’, pointing at the perceptive mental process and at the perceived object of conscious experience as two sides of a coin. ‘Reality outside there’ is only accessible for human knowing by way of a subject. And knowing is no mere naming of sensual perceptions with verbal concepts but is intimately connected to perceptions as the first layer of meaning-giving activities. Nevertheless, Husserl’s approach remained dominantly consciousness-centered.

After Husserl, the phenomenological concept of perception was deepened by many followers. The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) elaborated a broader and less idealistic concept of human existence, including especially its bodily rootedness. Based on philosophical as well as empirical arguments, Merleau-Ponty drew on a specific concept of human perception as bodily perception: “The perceiving mind is an incarnate mind” (1962, 4). Merleau-Ponty also described the specific ambiguity of simultaneously having a body and being a living body; this suggests a distinction between the body as object (in German, Körper) and the body as a living subject (in German, Leib), the latter implying that the body is also the subject of perception. The human body-subject with its emotions, desires and sensations might well be mediated by physical and social conditions. Nevertheless, the body is the basis for, and the transcendental prerequisite of perception, and thus of any knowing about ourselves and objects within the world. The body itself can never be perceived fully, never be reduced to a pure object.

This rooting of the concept of perception in corporality has been described as a ‘perceptive turn’ of philosophy induced by phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty’s essential proposition is thus: “The world is that which I perceive [...].” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 8)

2.3 Life-World

One of the programmatic concepts of phenomenological epistemology Husserl presented incompletely only in his almost latest, nevertheless most influential texts entitled The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (Husserl [1936] 1970). It was the idea of a “science of the life-world”. Corresponding to the notion of perception is the phenomenological way to perceive and conceive of reality from a life-world perspective. In Husserl’s sense, this aims at a pre-scientific encounter with the world, “the world in which we are always already living, and which furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance and all scientific determination”
Husserl, [1936] 1970). Life-world precedes any conceptual structuring of reality by naming this reality with human language. In this way, reality appears to us first as a whole, as a ‘gestalt’, before we distinguish different pieces in conscious mental activities. Life-word is “the world in which we are always already living, and which furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance and all scientific determination” (Moran 2000, 15).

The concept of life-world provides a way to reflect more precisely on Husserl’s key principle of givenness. The particular reality that is given in the senses does not only vary in terms of content, but also in the possibility that this reality might have different qualities. Some objects in reality sometimes appear quite clear to the senses and consciousness. Some objects intuitively appear as a profiled gestalt. Others are less profiled, only at the periphery of our senses, nevertheless still perceived and registered. This peripheral perception might happen for a long time in one’s life, and then suddenly, due to circumstances, change entirely. At such a time, the perception might press itself to the foreground of our perceptions. Such everyday pre-conscious experience of situations, scenery, and circumstances attach themselves to people in different ways. A particular life-world experience might lead one person to the overall feeling of being in a normal and well-known surrounding; it might even provide a deep emotional and cognitive sense of being at home. For somebody else, the same situation, or a similar interaction with this situation, might give a preconscious feeling of displeasure, tentativeness, sureness, or even estrangement. These phenomena are not without relevance to empirical approaches to reality.

As the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920 – 1996) has showed in detail, reflecting on one’s life-world means stepping back from the self-evident and basic givens of life (Blumenberg 2010). To think of the life-world subjectively is not, however, to circumvent the context, for this is one’s horizon or a form of life praxis. Neither does this approach restrict thinking in a narrow, circumspect way. Rather, reflecting on life-world stimulates further knowledge by encouraging people to reflect on the blind spots of their perceptions. Further, the unusual and extraordinary are grounded in the usual, in everyday life. The life-world is the universal horizon toward which meaning aims. In this sense, the life-world may be the object of theoretical criticism, or a source to critique the sciences and scientific methods when they either ignore life or become imperialistic towards life. In the development of theory, the concept can also function as a critical advocate in favor of a subject and against an institution.

The overall interest in the life-world perspective can be characterized as “seeking to describe rather than to explain, in valuing interpretation rather than ‘objective truth’, in opposing reductionism while focusing on intentionality, coherence, and intelligibility, and in assuming a fundamental pre-reflective, non-rational part of experience, which is consciously available to the person” (Aden 1990, 911).
2.4 Lived Experience

Phenomenological epistemology contributed to the theory of experience focussing on its pre-scientific roots. The empirical approach to reality in social scientific research usually follows the experiential ideal in terms of collecting data as detached objects, which are gained independently from the researching subject. Referring back to the world of experience in the life-world approach relates to the self-evidences and pre-reflexive familiarities in everyday life described by late Husserlian theory (Husserl [1936] 1970).

The life-world perspective emphasizes the relational aspect of experience. In the relational approach to the empirical way of focusing on ‘lived experience’ there is a more open and more contextual understanding of reality. Reality is not to be described without the individual’s involvement on the level of experience, as well as on the level of theoretical description. Furthermore, it contains *ab ovo* elements, which are spontaneous, irregular, faults, and slips, unexpected, and even strange. Similar to the detached model of experience, ‘lived experience’ as a theoretical construct, converges in the non-positivist stance that states that reality is not simply that ‘which is the case’. However, “things look rather different when we get to the roots of experience where things *become* what they could be” (Waldenfels 2004). In the relational approach, the empirical basis is conceived of as something “given” from beyond the perceiving individual, and only accessible through sensual experience of a human subject, being involved in the experiential process.

2.5 Culture: Home World and Alien World

Somehow in correspondence to developments of pluralization and advanced diversity in late modern societies, phenomenology participated in reframing the understanding of cultural conditions and patterns of human life-worlds beyond the traditional binary of ‘we – them’. During the last decades French and German phenomenologists especially, such as Levinas, Derrida, Foucault and Waldenfels made major contributions to developing a phenomenological theory, attempting to theorise towards a phenomenology of the inter-subjectivity and of the experience of the alien. From the very beginning, phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness has struggled with a basic epistemological weakness, that is: if every knowledge is given to me in my own senses, how to come to the experience of the other? Decisive for an enlarged phenomenological understanding of intercultural experience was a differentiated description of life-world. Not only beyond, but also within the world of self-evidences and pre-given certainties, people stumble about experiences of otherness. Reflecting on the encounter of the subject with the other does not only provide insight into the ambiguous conditions and limits of intercultural experience, however, it leads to the awareness of otherness within oneself, the intertwinement of one’s own world and the alien (Waldenfels 1998).
2.6 On Normativity

Despite some superficial critiques against a ‘pure descriptive’ status of a phenomenological approach to reality, it is quite impossible to overlook the value-laden character of phenomenology. It would be an error to identify the phenomenological way to reality with a ‘neutral’ stance stripped of any norms. Phenomenology, although using the method of ‘bracketing out’ for some steps of description, is based on normative ground, and its specific methods have normative implications. A normative basis is already given when research work starts with a life-world approach. Because life-world means at least two elements, first the ensemble of elements given through the senses, and second, a meaningful world to the perceiving subject. Everyday life is not neutral or random in terms of values, and structures of order. One can see that it is not only ethical judgments that contain a particular world view. Even observing and describing sensual perceptions through body and mind carries a particular understanding of life; a particular meaning; a world of self-evidence or an encounter with the extraordinary, the strange, or sometimes with the holy. Thus, life-world is a foundational basis for normativity.

3 Researching Lived Experience

As indicated above, Husserl and his followers developed a set of methods for philosophical inquiry. Although these authors constantly related to the theories and research praxis of empirical disciplines of their age, they did not invent methods for empirical research. Phenomenology itself was not intended to serve as a tool for empirical research in a contemporary meaning. However, methodological elements of phenomenology have been picked up for improving and enlarging the scope of qualitative empirical research in many disciplines, like sociology, ethnography, religious studies, educational science, language studies, social geography, environmental studies among others.

But to avoid misunderstandings; there is no pure ‘phenomenological method’ for empirical research. There are only some characteristic elements for a research approach that follow phenomenological theory, or better, a research ‘habit’. It can be indicated briefly by some characteristics.

3.1 Perceptions in the Field

Proceeding with research in a life-world perspective asks for one to enter a situation in everyday life as a concrete setting, as a field; it might be even in the field of dreams. In such a field, the scenery has a spatial as well as temporal structure. A ‘field’ is an unknown and unstructured terrain, which a researcher enters bodily and mentally, gets involved in, and may meet known or unknown images, visions,
and occurrences. It is not completely pre-established as a static entity. It is rather a dynamic interactive space where people will develop their own connections and contexts. Doing research then starts with the researcher’s suspicion that he or she initially has to unfold the very object of research because he or she does not know everyday life completely.

### 3.2 The Researcher as Self-Reflecting Subject

The emphasis on the subject’s involvement has a crucial impact on the research process. It asks for an actual research praxis in which the researching human being perceives his or her research field not only as distinct object, but also of being involved in the research scenery as mind-body subject. Ethnography points in this direction by offering rules for the method of participant observation. But usually, it keeps the awareness of the researcher to cognitive or emotional responses. The phenomenological impulse, however, moves the researcher-subject further.

### 3.3 Interpretation and Representation

Phenomenology opens an unlimited multitude of horizons, against which you could study the phenomenon. Nevertheless, every research project must come to a temporary end and to formulate insights. Phenomenologists (as well as ethnographers and psychoanalysts) hold that discovering reality is not refining data in the sense of mere reproductions or secondary structuring, independent of other methodical activities. Both approaches to research include a constructive element within the scientific, hermeneutic activity; thus, they reveal something that is not simply a ‘matter of fact’. Rather they have to represent ‘what takes place’ in its quality of ‘lived experience’. Thus, the problem of representation in phenomenological research is vibrant. There is a need for a specific use of language, called ‘phenomenological description’, narratives and stories are important and appropriate elements. “A successful description is made visible with words, it helps us to see, what we would not see without it.” (Waldenfels 2001, 67) And there is no exact and final interpretation of life.

### 3.4 The Methodological Paradox

Scientific validity of any research is based on methodical ways to get knowledge that can be controlled and used or falsified. Applying this principle to a research methodology based on phenomenology leads to a fundamental paradox. The approach sketched above essentially insists on the openness of the concept of religion against every attempt to take too much control of the subject matter by way of foreclosing, or fore ordaining the results, through using narrow definitions from the beginning. But
how can this be objectified and controlled in a research process? How do we organise a research routine to approach the unexpected and the strange? It is evident that it cannot be planned completely if the method does not risk to exclude the very object.

This argument is a strong warning against the ‘technisizing’ of the phenomenological method in any other empirically oriented discipline. Out of this necessary objection, it follows that this phenomenological attitude can never – neither methodologically nor conceptually – substitute for the exactness of scientific knowledge or of logical concepts. However, its “precise imprecision” (Moxter 2001, 92) is not an epistemological deficiency; instead, it is a plus for method and research. In principle this is in accordance with a theological understanding of reality according to a spiritual perception of reality as an open process.

The main contribution of phenomenology to the logic of empirical sciences is an anti-positivist notion. It stresses the interconnectedness between collecting data and meaning-giving activities. Further, it underlines the core role of the subject in gaining knowledge. Opposite to the ideal of objectivism, it stresses the conviction that the subjective view of experience, and hence any experiential-based research, is not a fault but rather a necessary part of the nature of knowledge. Dermot Moran states it in even more emphatic language “Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity.” (Moran 2000, 15)

Approaching the research situation from the perspective of ‘lived experience’, it is about the ‘me’ in experience, but it also challenges to ask back upon this ‘me’ in the subject-perspective; its boundaries and intertwinements. If experience, fully understood, is relational, there is next to inter-subjective relations of otherness also an internal relation. The phenomenological analysis of experience also sharpens our eyes to the reverse of the active position: experiences sometimes are also doing something to us. It emphasizes the perspective for those layers of reality, where the subject is inter-active, interwoven with reality, affected, touched, and perhaps even overwhelmed by things that happen. It includes sometimes even inactive, more passive elements, elements described by medical scholars like Victor von Weizsäcker and F. Buynendijk as “pathic behaviour” (von Weizsäcker 1947; Buynendijk, 1956).

4 Empirical Theology

Phenomenology in several theological disciplines played a major role in elaborating on programs of ‘Empirical Theology’ (cf. for a comprehensive overview Heimbrock 2011).
4.1 The ‘Chicago School’ of Empirical Theology

A model explicitly called ‘Empirical Theology’, which drew heavily on phenomenology, was first developed in the ‘Chicago School’ in the 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century (Meland 1969). All this happened long before the issue appeared on the agenda of European Practical Theology. Not denying the traditional theological notion of transcendence, this movement shared with other types of Empirical Theology the overall conviction that God’s presence is immanent to human beings in experience. The overall intention of his Empirical Theology method was “to take seriously the empirical situation as a source of grace” (Rogers 1990, 121).

The movement took its departure beyond Dilthey’s categories of explanation and interpretation, starting with other conceptual tools for religion, faith and experience, like the notion of ‘lived experience’. Referring to Schleiermacher and to pietistic traditions, the systematic theologian Bernhard Meland sharpens both the very empirical basis of faith and the reflective task of theology as a theoretical endeavour. Theological thinking about faith and experience cannot escape the necessity to distinguish between faith embedded within the vital immediacy of ‘lived experience’ and its attempt to conceptually clarify this experience to communicate about it on the grounds of rationality. Further on, Meland holds that an adequate theological understanding of faith starts by acknowledging “faith as a structure of experience” (Meland 1953, 183). This supposes that the vital essence of theological notions like revelation, forgiveness and grace is aiming at resonance in human experience and thus not treated exhaustively if reduced to “simply linguistic realities” (Meland 1969, 293).

Meland called his approach empirical realism. The model argues that theology could and should profit from this type of reflection on reality, which distinguishes language and reality, as well as semantic and logical explications from the awareness of an immediacy of lived experience. In a particular sense, his perspective defines the practical mission of theology as an academic discipline, which aims at “carrying the act of faith beyond linguistic preoccupations to an experience of grace and judgment within this vital immediacy” (Meland 1969, 305).

His programmatic question, “Can Empirical Theology Learn from Phenomenology?” (Meland 1969, 283), explicitly marks a theoretical link between empirical realism and a life-world based theory of experience. A bridging link is identified in Husserl’s ‘stream of thought’. Nevertheless, Meland followed the turn from a conscious-centred transcendental type of phenomenology of the younger Husserl towards a bodily-oriented thinking of his French pupil Merleau-Ponty.

To promote the notion of ‘lived experience’ as a theoretical tool for the praxis of faith as lived experience, theology must sharpen the understanding of the nature of experience. In consequence, in Meland’s way of describing the quality of experience, the engagement of faithful people is not only mirrored by presented objects as content, but also focuses on the experiential side of faith as a particular responsiveness, which he called “appreciative consciousness” (Meland 1953). This basic concept of his theological method, as he put it himself, “can best be understood as an orienta-
tion of the mind which makes for a maximum degree of receptivity to the datum under consideration on the principle that what is given may be more than what is immediately perceived, or more than one can think” (Meland 1953, 63). The particular intention of Empirical Theology was to define this quality as a central element of theological reflection, in order to avoid theological as well as epistemological objectivism against human experience.

Without any anti-rational bias, he states, “Theologians must reckon with the fact that their intellectual undertaking is motivated by objectives that differ decidedly from those of scientist. The scientist pursues knowledge of his world with a view to controlling” (Meland 1934, 199 f.). In his view, the theologian’s interest is not to control the world by gathering distinct data according to the rationale of exact science, but rather to prepare worship, to open life to the mysterious structure of reality.

4.2 The Empirical-Phenomenological Model of Practical Theology

Within Practical Theology in Europe as well as in the US during the last five decennia one finds many attempts to pick up impulses from phenomenology to broaden the empirical interest of theology, to enrich research methods and even to reshape the scope of the whole discipline of Practical Theology. First attempts were done in pastoral psychology (Aden 1990; Park 2014). The interest in experience and the theological task to regain contact with lived life played a major role in reconstructing and promoting a type of Empirical Theology called the empirical-phenomenological model (Dinter, Heimbrock, and Söderblom 2007).

Essential in this model is to pick up the specific phenomenological way to reflect about the ‘pre-givenness’ of reality in the human mind-body perception, the life-world perspective, and to transform this impulse into research strategies. This way of doing theological research is interested in the study of ‘lived religion’. It does not start with an explicit and completely predefined normative basis of a concept of faith, from which it would draw the findings of research, nor does it simply pretend to collect observations in a neutral way. ‘Living religion’ like religion in general, is used here in accord with a broad consensus in more recent theories of religion; it is used as a strategic concept. While it does include things in reality that are associated with religion, as everyday language might presume, it simultaneously points to specific perspectives on life. This enables empirical theologians to study the different qualities of subjects’ involvement in, and entanglement with, everyday life and culture, as well as their religious meanings.

During the last two decades this methodological orientation has opened up Practical Theological research perspectives on two levels:

Firstly, it helped to initiate the study of a wide range of material research objects related to everyday experiences which had up until then been neglected, like dreams, healing movements, aesthetic expressions, the enjoyment of listening to music, in-
tense body experiences, phantasy and virtual reality, and many others. Phenomenology, in this way, is helpful for theology to avoid a “clericalisation of practice” (Farley 1983). This helped to open up a perspective in Practical Theology that looked to an analysis of the culturally shaped forms and symbolic representations of life. In clear contrast to the religious studies’ discipline of the ‘phenomenology of religion’ a life-world approach does not deal with distinct ‘religious things’, but always starts and ends up with a broad perspective on life, connected to everyday culture. Phenomenology in the broad sense inspires theological education and sharpens our eyes to look more closely at familiar, everyday experiences.

Secondly, and concerning the scope of the whole discipline of Practical Theology, it contributed to re-consider the basic concept of ‘practice’. Following the overall epistemological question of phenomenology, how people are related to reality in their concrete life-world encounter, Practical Theology contributed to a broader concept of practice beyond pure activity. Many experiences – such as being touched by a specific atmosphere, being open to an experience of disclosure, being caught by the ‘flow’ of experiences and other religious or cultural phenomena – reach beyond the category of practice; they cannot be fully identified as activities of a particular individual or community. Responding to such phenomena, one Practical Theologian even proposed defining religion as the human experience of the impossibility of action, becoming aware of God’s action at the limits of human activity (Josuttis 1985).

The concepts of action and praxis in Empirical Theology still require further clarification to compare anthropological insights about religion as human activity to the classical theological notion of God’s actions.

For both however, doing research on particular material objects as well as reflecting on the formal objects of Practical Theology from the perspective of the empirical-phenomenological model, it is inevitable to take up the dynamic relation between reality under research and the perceiving and interpreting subject, who is ‘doing’ theology.

The contribution of the empirical-phenomenological model of Practical Theology to theology in general is to keep contact with – and reflect upon – religious life in congregations as well as with the culture Christians are participating in. If the task of Christians is to take part in God’s ongoing creation of the world, Empirical Theology contributes some intellectual tools to reconstruct this process. Practical Theology focusing particularly on ‘lived experience’ helps theology in general to profile its indispensable role within the academy. In times when ‘life sciences’ are on the rise in terms of popularity, there is an additional need to communicate the surplus of theological theory to the interpretation of humankind. Our epistemological reasoning provides secular arguments to enlarge an understanding of life and reality beyond restricted ideals of natural scientific objectivity.

After almost half a century starting of ‘hard’ empirical research in theology today, phenomenology might become a helpful partner for theology to open up a new interdisciplinary discourse on fundamental concepts like ‘reality’ and ‘life’. Its epistemological reasoning provides secular arguments to contest an understanding
of reality that is bound to modern ideals of conceiving reality according cause and effect, quantitative or even determinative correlations. The phenomenological notion of ‘otherness’ within life in itself is not ‘natural theology’ or an empirical proof for the theological proposition of God’s transcendence. However, it could be in service of an understanding of reality in accordance with a theological interpretation of life beyond the categories of cause and effect, in its dynamic and mysterious structure.

Bibliography


