

DEBATE

Phenomenology and homeopathy

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There is a great overlap between the way of seeing the world in clinical homeopathy and in the technical philosophical system known as phenomenology. A knowledge of phenomenologic principles reveals Hahnemann to have been an unwitting phenomenologist. The ideas of phenomenology as applied to medicine show that homeopathy is the ideal medical system to fulfill the goals of coming ever closer to true patient concerns and experience of illness. *Homeopathy* (2013) 102, 225–229.

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Analogy between homeopathy and phenomenology

I would like to suggest that the way of looking at the World and patients in homeopathy is pretty similar to the way of looking at the World in the technical philosophical system known as phenomenology. The congruence of homeopathy and phenomenology is hardly a new idea. Koehler for example, in his handbook¹ refers to it a few times, but the similarity of principles has not recently been alluded to very much and so a reminder seems to be needed. Furthermore, insights gained through a clear phenomenological analysis of things can usefully contribute to our work with patients and also enable us to more deeply understand exactly what it is we are up to and in what way it differs from conventional treatment.

In ‘The Sight of Death, an experiment in art writing’, well-known art historian T.J. Clark who teaches at the university of California, San Diego, describes his responses in diary form, to two paintings by Poussin that were temporarily hung together in the Getty museum in Los Angeles in 2001.² He of course knows the art historical literature and writing about art in general extremely well, but in this book he has done his best to avoid responding according to received custom and

(rather wonderfully) emphasised his personal responses to the paintings themselves as they exist in the real world, untainted by what he ‘knows’. This way of analysing starting with the impact of the things themselves and doing one’s best to avoid received opinion, is the essence of the phenomenological approach.

This particular way of analysing is not fashionable or particularly easy. An example from a different area is Goethe’s theory of colour.³ Goethe strongly disagreed with the received opinion which held that Newton’s ideas about colours and the spectrum of visible light were unquestionably correct and could not be argued with. Goethe performed many experiments and concluded that Newton was wrong to prefer an abstract ‘scientific’ understanding over an understanding based on the ‘thing itself’ (light) and its effect on the perceiving organs (our eyes). Goethe once said “Search nothing beyond the phenomena, they themselves are the theory”.⁴

The word ‘phenomenology’ appears to be much misunderstood and misused in a watered down form in conventional medicine. It is often used as a shorthand for talking about the signs and particularly the symptoms associated with a particular disease, as in ‘the phenomenology of (say) migraine’, meaning the phenomena which might be part of leading to a particular diagnosis.⁵ There are many fewer references to phenomenology in the medical literature which seem to be trying to fully understand it.⁶

It seems to me that a major thing we are trying to do in the homeopathic process, is to listen to what people say in detail and have a therapeutic way of responding. This is illustrated by the Scottish writer Kenneth White (1936–), ex-Professor of Modern Poetics at the Sorbonne in Paris and the founder of Geopoetics, in his poem ‘Near Point

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of Stoer'. Stoer is in the far North West of Scotland on the coast and there is a famous light-house there.

Near Point of Stoer⁷

Full moon
and a wind from the North

little sleep tonight

up at four
walking along
a silent shore

trying to translate
into a tongue that's known
a poem writ
in the language of stone.

I think that a phenomenological outlook can help us as we try to translate the poem of the person and their life.

What is phenomenology?

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy which was formulated in modern terms by the German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), though its ideas are older. Phenomenology, in Husserl's conception, is primarily concerned with the systematic reflection on and analysis of the structures of consciousness, and the phenomena which appear in acts of consciousness. A later development by Merleau-Ponty (1908–61), emphasises the fact that people only know the world by their relationships with things, objects and feelings perceived in their own private world – 'phenomena'.⁸ As such, people are by necessity 'enworlded' and embodied. An important saying of Husserl's which encapsulates the main thrust of thinking in a phenomenological way and its main preoccupation with our relationship with objects in the world, is '*to the things themselves*'.

You can't think of a mind without a body. This is in stark contrast to the more traditional 'philosophical' view of people existing as bodies and a separate, free-floating mind, which can do any thinking needed, including philosophical thinking.

This is probably best known in homeopathy as 'Cartesian Dualism', from the statement of Rene Descartes 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am). All modern 'scientific' thinking and especially scientific method has grown from this seed of dualism. A major task and challenge of homeopathic thinking and practice over the years since it was first formulated by Hahnemann, has been in countering this dualistic view of the human being, in sickness and in health. This is a major, root similarity between the phenomenological and the homeopathic ways of thinking.

So phenomenology is concerned with observing things (phenomena) as they appear in a subject's experience.

Husserl states:

'By my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing and acting, I can enter no world other than the one

that gets its sense and acceptance or status...in and from me, myself'.⁹

Husserl believed that phenomenology could provide a firm basis for all human knowledge, including scientific knowledge, and could establish philosophy as a "rigorous science".

To state a Wikipedia definition; "In its most basic form, phenomenology attempts to create conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective: consciousness and the content of conscious experiences such as judgments, perceptions, and emotions. Although phenomenology seeks to be scientific, it does not attempt to study consciousness from the perspective of clinical psychology or neurology. Instead, it seeks through systematic reflection to determine the essential properties and structures of consciousness and conscious experience".¹⁰ In other words, it is mainly concerned with the individual's unique experience. There is another strong parallel here with Homeopathy's much vaunted 'individualisation'.

In order to approach, cultivate and ultimately to achieve this removed objectivity, Husserl introduced the concept of 'bracketing' the received world and all its previous sense impressions, received opinions and the things you already 'know' about an object (like the clinical 'facts' related to a conventional diagnosis) and approaching knowledge of an object – say a patient – in a completely fresh and unbiased way. This process is the phenomenological 'epoche' (from Greek *epokhē* "suspension"). Husserl says of the epoche:

'(It) has in truth a hitherto unheard of radicalism. For it encompasses expressly not only the validity of the previous sciences, but even the validity of the pre- and extra-scientific life-world, i.e. the world of sense experience constantly pre-given as taken for granted unquestioningly and all the life of thought which is nourished by it'.¹¹

It is very important to note – both from a methodological phenomenological perspective and that of the medical homeopathic wish for the bringing together of knowledge from many different understandings, that no one is suggesting *disbelief* in the world and science and all their characteristics. Rather, Husserl recommends (in the 'epoche') suspension of both belief and disbelief as a way of looking at the world in a fresh way, clarified and freed of preconceptions.

Hahnemann the phenomenologist

We say we always try to do this in homeopathy, with each patient, following Hahnemann's statements in the Organon¹² about case-taking (paras 82–104):

e.g para 83:

'This individualising of a disease case, ... demands nothing of the medical-art practitioner except freedom from bias and healthy senses, attention while observing and fidelity in recording the image of the disease'.

or in his Definition of Disease and Cure para 6:

'The unprejudiced observer, even the most sharp-witted one – knowing the nullity of supersensible speculations

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