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Phenomenology, Environmental Protection, and Pedagogy. Attempt of a Synthetic Approach

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Abstract

Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline dedicated to the scientifically rigorous and accurate study of conscious experience. It was founded by the Austro-German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and has become one of the most influential philosophical and intellectual movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. Its impact extends beyond philosophy, enriching the arts as well as a wide range of disciplines, including the humanities, social and political sciences, ethics, law, pedagogy, economics, psychology, psychiatry, psychopathology, cognitive sciences, and even certain branches of the natural sciences. Phenomenology has also influenced non-academic domains, particularly in applied political, ethical, and normative fields. It has played a significant role in academic and non-academic discussions on ecological issues, particularly environmental protection. Due to the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Hans Jonas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and many others, eco-phenomenology (or ecological phenomenology) emerged as an independent field of study by the 1960s at the latest. Additionally, phenomenology has profoundly influenced pedagogy, as researchers have recognized that its first-person perspective-related approach can be particularly effective in communicating with and educating children (e.g., Manen, 1982). In our present age, environmental protection has become an increasingly urgent issue. In response, environmental education and pedagogy have gained significant relevance in addressing today’s ecological crisis. This study outlines a synthetic approach that seeks to unify two disciplines: eco-phenomenology and environmental pedagogy. Our central claim is that phenomenological methods can significantly enhance the effectiveness of environmental education and pedagogy.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, eco-phenomenology, environmental education, environmental pedagogy, ecological crisis

1. Introduction¹

Phenomenology is the scientific study of first-person perspective, subjective experience, a philosophical discipline founded by the Austro-German mathematician and philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). This discipline became a highly influential intellectual current during the 20th century, and which also fertilized a number of Academic fields and non-philosophical scientific disciplines, among others various areas of humanities, social, political, economic sciences, law, psychology, psychiatry, psychopathology, ecology, and even certain segments of natural sciences. What will be of particular importance for our present study, phenomenology also affected pedagogy (Manen, 1982). Husserl, the founder of phenomenological philosophy, who defined this field as a systematic investigation of every possible conscious phenomenon (hence the name of discipline) strictly distinguished this conception from natural scientific and empirical psychology. He said that the latter studies empirical consciousness bound by the contingent laws of nature, while phenomenology wants to study such structural peculiarities of consciousness and mental life which are absolutely necessary and bounds every possible consciousness whatsoever. In other words, Husserl dedicated phenomenology to the examination of the apriori laws and features of every possible conscious, mental sphere (Husserl, 1983, 2001a, 2001b). In the center of this approach there is the idea of *intentionality*, according to which the fundamental feature of every conscious experience is the relationship between consciousness and its object. Husserl calls this particular relationship “intentionality”, or “intentional relation”, and in his opinion this relationship is the essential and main carrier of the apriori features and laws of conscious life.

At this point rightfully arises the question how this evidently philosophical discipline can contribute to academic fields like environmental studies, ecology and pedagogy. The answer to the first question is that the nature-human relationship has been a central topic to phenomenology since Husserl (see Husserl, 2001c, 2002, Jonas, 1966, Abram, 1988, Kohák, 2003 etc.). The second question could be answered by referring to the importance of intersubjectivity, or, in other words, sociality in Husserl (1960, 1970, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1989 etc.) and after him (e.g. Schütz, 1967); to the significance of the idea that the concrete subject is an essentially social and intersubjective being, whom cannot be properly understood without referring to the nexus of social relations in which she is embedded. Finally, the above-

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mentioned fact should be emphasized that the originally philosophical considerations of phenomenology have fertilized non-phenomenological and non-philosophical academic and scientific disciplines, and that these ideas have influenced even normative and practical aspects of extra-philosophical life.

It is especially important to refer to the crucial role of *empathy* in Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity and sociality (Husserl 1960, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c, see also Moran 2002, pp.175-176). For Husserl, empathy constitutes a distinctive form of intentionality that enables a subject to apprehend the body of another person as a feeling, sensing, and experiencing body. In other words, through empathy, we are capable of grasping another subject's physical body (Körper) as a lived body (Leib), imbued with conscious and subjective experiences. In Husserl's opinion we experience our very own bodies in this twofold way, externally as a physical body and internally as a lived body (Husserl, 1960, 1989), and due to this double experience, we became capable of experiencing someone else's body as a partially sensing, subjective, experiencing body like ours, to the analogy of our body (Husserl, 1960). According to Husserl, the higher forms of sociality merely constitute increasingly complex and refined manifestations of empathy.

The core idea of the project I would like to propose here is that phenomenology could be an incredibly effective tool in *fostering empathy in children* towards non-human beings and nature in general. In this context it is also of utmost importance that a specific branch and field of phenomenology emerged in the 1960s under the name of eco-phenomenology (or ecological phenomenology) that focused on environmental topics and sustainability in particular (e.g. Jonas, 1966, 1984, Abram, 1988, Melle, 1988, Brown, 2003, Kohák, 2003 etc.). Already the classic authors of phenomenology realized that the project of modernity could easily end up in a catastrophe with its current way of development (e.g. Husserl, 1970, Heidegger, 1998, Henry, 1987). Eco-phenomenological authors, in particular, have emphasised the claim that a fundamental transformation of our basic attitude towards nature and non-human beings is necessary.

In other words, I would like to propose practically applied phenomenology in environmental education and pedagogy. Since the fact of our ecological crisis became unmistakable for the vast majority of experts and scientists in the 1960s, it has been a fundamental question how to convince society that there must be serious efforts to do in this regard, if we are to prevent a planet-scale global collapse of the society (e.g. Donella Meadows et al., 1972). The current way of life especially in the Western world is convenient and comfortable for the majority of the society. People want to live better, and they would like to

secure a better, more convenient and comfortable standard of living that they had. It is challenging for a politician to secure electoral success by advocating for reduced consumption, the imposition of new regulations and stricter limits, and by acknowledging the absence of promising prospects for economic growth, given that the planet and humanity as a whole cannot sustain such developments. People do not want to hear slogans like that, and many of them will not vote for politicians who campaign with such plans and pessimistic, “alarmist” statements. Politicians usually realize this and try to lessen or diminish the level of threat of the ecological crisis in their campaign and governmental policies, and even their actions are way below the measures which is usually considered necessary by scientists who actually research the topic.

Experts often see two ways out of this paradox. First, the role of non-governmental organizations that— sometimes cooperate with each other beyond national borders — can make campaigns among citizens about the actual scale and grade of the threat of ecological collapse. The other — which is tightly related to the first option — is environmental education and pedagogy, that is to say, making children understood what they should do if they want to live a relatively comfortable, healthy and happy life in a relatively bearable natural environment, that does not look like a totally deforested, overheated, over-polluted wasteland. This will be the option we are going to emphasize in this present publication.

This article will be articulated in four further sections. 2. Main Ideas of Phenomenology. 3. Ecological Applications of Phenomenology. 4. Critical and Environmental Education. 5. Applying Phenomenology to Environmental Education and Pedagogy.

2. Main Ideas of Phenomenology

“Phenomenology is intentionality” – said Emmanuel Levinas, one of the many famous students of Edmund Husserl (Levinas, 1998, 112). Levinas argued that at the heart of phenomenological philosophy — in the thought of Husserl and all other members of the phenomenological movement — lies the concept of intentionality. Husserl inherited this notion from his mentor, Franz Brentano, who, in turn, borrowed this concept from the Medieval, scholastic philosophy. “Intentionality” means that every conscious experience is related to something object-like (gegenständliche) entity. When we are afraid, for example, we are afraid of *something*, when we hope, we hope *something*, when we imagine, we imagine *something*, in our memories we remember *something*, and when we experience, we always experience *something*. With the term „intentionality” Husserl referred to this relationship (or correlation) between consciousness and its object (Husserl, 1983, 2001a, 2001b). Husserl, furthermore, thought that there is a *necessary* structural connection or correlation between consciousness and its object. In his mature period,

he used the term “constitution” to express that consciousness cannot represent (stellt vor) its object in an entirely arbitrary way; when Husserl said that the consciousness “constituted” its object (or itself as consciousness), Husserl wanted to refer to this necessary aspect of the appearance of the object to consciousness (see e.g. Sokolowski, 1970, 2000). Husserl believed that phenomenology as a philosophical and rigorously scientific discipline must be dedicated to a systematic exploration of the apriori (that is to say, absolutely necessary) aspect of the relationship between consciousness and object.

Husserl, around 1906/07, started to elaborate his methodological procedure called “phenomenological reductions” (2008), that aimed to focus the gaze of the philosopher on the purely phenomenal aspect of the appearing things. The main objective of phenomenological reduction was to reveal the necessary features of pure appearance. For this reason, the philosopher in the attitude generated by the phenomenological reduction considered everything as pure phenomenon, nothing more and nothing less. Which provoked a question already raised by the students and contemporaries of Husserl, and which was thematized by Husserl himself too: Does this position, which considers everything solely as phenomenon, not risk leading to solipsism, wherein the philosopher is regarded as the only conscious being in the world? (See Moran, 2002, Sokolowski, 2000). After all, only phenomena appear to the regard of the philosopher. Husserl elaborated a systematic answer to address this challenge, namely the *theory of empathy*. That is to say, in Husserl’s view, amongst all the phenomena there is a special type, namely empathy, that enables us to experience another subject as a sensing, feeling, experiencing, conscious subject (Husserl, 1960, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1989). Empathy, in Husserl’s interpretation, is a peculiar type of intentionality that is specifically directed to another subject. More specifically, Husserl thought that when I see a body similar to mine (a warm human body), which acts like me, then this experience provokes something in me called by Husserl “analogical appresentation” (Husserl, 1960). This means that I conceive (or “constitute”) the other person’s body to the analogy of my body. When I grasp my body and the other person’s body as a pair, as one element of a twofold unity, then I also learn to conceive the other, similar body as the body of an experiencing, feeling, conscious, and sensitive subject.

Husserl then, from more or less complex weave of empathic acts, builds up every level of the social world. But in the core of sociality, Husserl believes, there are always acts of empathy, which represent a subject with a first-person subjective perspective to the philosopher’s own subject. Although, empathy is not capable of making accessible the other person’s first-person perspective to me (I can never know for sure what’s going on in the head of the other subject), at least it can inform me that there is another first-person perspective for sure, in the other

sensitive, acting, animate body. Through empathy, Husserl claimed, I am not capable of directly accessing the other person's inner mental sphere (otherwise, Husserl said [1960], I and the other person would be one and the very same subject), but I am able to reconstruct in a rather evident manner what the other person might experience from her subjective first-person perspective. This Husserlian claim will be crucial in our present project.

3. Ecological Applications of Phenomenology

Already Husserl and his student realized that the current way of Western society is a dead-end, and it leads with an enormous possibility to a global ecological disaster (Husserl, 1970, Heidegger, 1998, Jonas, 1984). In the 1960s eco-phenomenology, as the ecologically and environmentally applied phenomenology started to rise and flourish (Jonas, 1966). The core idea of this current was that modern, calculating, instrumental rationality prevents the subject to see the real richness of things, this type of rationality subordinates everything to profitability, and it cripples humans and non-humans both, and overexploits human and non-human nature in the name of the profit (Henry, 1987, Brown and Toadvine, 2003). Our very attitude must be changed if we are to survive the next century (and the following ones after the next).

It is the consensual opinion of representatives of this current of phenomenology that during Modernity something utterly went astray. The problem was not only that Modern individuals had an extremely anthropocentric stance. Some thinkers of eco-phenomenologist movement were and are themselves anthropocentric theoreticians (e.g. Thiele, 1995, Lányi, 2022). These philosophers and scientists rather saw the problem in the narrow, one-sided character of theoretical and practical rationality that emerged during and through Modernity. It was an essentially pragmatic and instrumental rationality, that was and is exclusively open to the exploitable features and attributes of human and non-human reality. We are speaking about the exclusive tendency to dominate the world, to make it predictable and – along with rising capitalism – subordinate everything to the universal *pursuit of profit*. What we lose with such an attitude according to those thinkers, is a much more sensitive, multi-faceted rationality, which is capable of apperceiving the qualitative, non-quantitative, non-formalizable features of the world, of human and non-human nature. This more sensitive, multilayered, and nuanced form of rationality — referred to by Husserl as "transcendental subjectivity" (see Husserl, 1970; also Kohák, 2003) — would carry significant practical implications. It would make humans much more sensitive to our natural environment and the joy and suffering of non-human beings. This practical implication that we have just mentioned means that if one wants to behave

authentically, as a truly rational human being, then one cannot remain insensitive to the suffering of non-humans (and her other fellow humans) and the integrity of the natural environment. In other words, one must limit the viewpoints of profitability and instrumental rationality.

These normative and ethical considerations also have relevance in the field of *politics*. Namely, Husserl believed that the future of mankind should be a society in a universally elaborated and unfolded rationality (Husserl, 1988, 3-124; 1970). The reader can discover the more or less explicit signs of a political theory in Husserl (see Drummond, 2000), according to which mankind ought to be reorganized in the form of a fully rational community, which is also based on the *feelings of love* (Liebesgemeinschaft, Husserl, 1973c). Capitalism, the prevailing and universally dominating viewpoints of profitability and exploitation in such a fully rational community cannot remain intact in their current form, they also must be transformed. A rational society, that adopted the collectively shared attitude of qualitative rationality depicted by Husserl (1970, Kohák, 2003), and such a community must also fundamentally change its collective attitude towards nature and non-human living beings, cultivating a far greater sensitivity towards them (see also Marosan, 2018).

4. Critical and Environmental Education

Critical Pedagogy is a branch of pedagogy particularly dedicated to revealing the oppressive structures of society and different forms of social injustice to children. It emerged in the 1960s (see e.g. Freire, 1970) and it was specifically connected to Critical Theory (e.g. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, David Riesman etc.), as its application within the field of education and pedagogy. Ira Shor, a close colleague to Paulo Freire, the founder of Critical Pedagogy, defined it with the following words: “Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse” (Shor, 1992, 129).

The fundamental objective of Critical Pedagogy is to make children and students aware of their freedom and capacity to change their situation, and ultimately to transform society for something better. It seeks to explore structures, institutions of repression, and factors that inhibit citizens, the members of society, living freely and living a better life. Economic inequality,

feminism, gender gap, ethnic hatred, political manipulation are frequent and crucial topics in the curriculum of Critical Pedagogy. These topics mostly diverge from topics of usual, common school curriculum, and they are not easy either to be taught to young children, not even to more mature students or adults. For this reason, teachers who work with the attitude and methods characteristic to Critical Pedagogy, on the one hand are trying to teach more reflexivity to children in social regard, and, on the other hand, they are also attempting to make these matters (different examples and versions of injustice) more re-livable, experienceable and concrete to the students. Proponents of Critical Pedagogy specifically like dialogical methods and classes.

It is a central thesis to our paper that Critical Pedagogy – in the context of this present study – is a nice complement to environmental education and pedagogy, the origins of which can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century. Its early elements could already be found, for example, in Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (Rousseau, 1979). The particular significance of nature was a crucial idea both in European and American Romanticism, whose representatives also believed that it is of utmost importance to raise children in an intimate connection to nature (to this see Stone, 2018). In its current form environmental education and pedagogy, as a specific educational and pedagogical discipline, dedicated to reveal the importance of environmental issues to children and young adults, making them more empathetic to non-humans, and attempting to render them open to the particular forms of natural beauty, appeared in the 1960s (Swan, 1969). Today, a subject like environmental studies is part of the curriculum in many schools (elementary, secondary, and higher education) and other educational institutions. Considering its ratio regarding the complete curriculum and its usual status, environmental studies, in our opinion is mostly still rather marginal, and/or optional.² It is our opinion that this subject – including the exploration of our current ecological crisis and its causes –, already in institutions where it exists, should be taught much more intensively.

In this study – at this point of our essay – we would like to propose a synthesis of Critical Pedagogy and environmental education or pedagogy. First of all, it should be emphasized that Critical Environmental Education/Pedagogy as such would not be a new discipline. It already exists and there are active and intensive theoretical, academic research studies concerning this field and approach (see e.g. Gkiolmas and Skordoulis, 2020, Gunansyah, Ariadi, and

² It should be noted that “environmental studies” and “environmental education/pedagogy” are not the same, because the latter is far broader than the former. Environmental education refers to a whole new, independent style of education/pedagogy, namely, such a form when the very process of education takes place in an intimate connection to nature. The teaching process of environmental education regarding the entire curriculum could take place in the nature or in close connection to the nature; namely, classes in literature, history, physics, even mathematics (not to mention biology) etc.

Budirahayu, 2023), and there are also practical applications in the sphere of pedagogy and education. Critically interpreted environmental education and pedagogy, or as it is usually referred to, Critical Environmental Education seeks to shed light to the addressees of educational and pedagogical process (children, young adults, students of different age and sort etc.) on the socio-economic and political factors which serve as obstacles and counter-forces against sustainability and an environmentally more conscious form of human life and future. From the various topics of Critical Environmental Education, we only would like to mention and highlight two major ones of crucial importance. First and foremost, Critical Environmental Education seeks to disclose environmentally related issues of *social injustice*, whereby lower classes in Western countries and citizens of Developing and Third World countries are forced to endure deprivation and hardship as a result of the overconsumption and wasteful use of resources by the upper classes, particularly in First World countries

Secondly, a further crucial topic of critical environmental education is climate (or climatological) injustice, showing that negative effects of climate change had a more negative impact on lower classes and members of poorer classes, most importantly, citizens of the Global South (cf. e.g. Tuana, 2022).

In the context of our present study, it is worth mentioning the name and works of Keith Peterson also (Peterson, 2020; 2021), who made contributions to this field and such remarks which are – in our opinion – of enormous importance to elaborate and practice a r effective form of Critical Environmental Education. According to Peterson, one should not underestimate the gap between worldview and action. He says that it is an idealistic assertion that if one changes their worldview, their then actions will change automatically with it. In his opinion, it is not easy at all for one to change worldview on a deep level, and even if it is successful at a certain point of one's life, her actions will not change instantly with it. Peterson claims that individuals are deeply embedded in their web of specific material conditions, and they are fundamentally dependent on these socio-historical, economic and political factors, alongside their bodily peculiarities and precise, microscopic details of their relationship to nature. He emphasizes that when one wants to implement effective environmental actions, then *one must not abstract from the above-mentioned material and socio-historical embedment and dependency of individuals*, whom she wants to convince and motivate to act in an environmentally friendly, or at least sustainable way.³

³ We also should mention that Peterson is very critical to phenomenology, interpreting it as an essentially *idealistic* approach, that does not take into consideration the *material dependency* of man on nature with enough and necessary emphasis. In our opinion this should not be the case.

It follows from the related considerations of Keith Peterson, that Critical Environmental Education should be specific; it must be adapted to the particular situation of the students. The teacher must be aware of the web of specific material conditions that surrounds a student, or what is characteristic – on average – of a particular class. This means, that the teacher should adapt her particular methods and techniques, her specific way of pedagogical approach to these conditions. She cannot teach critical environmental studies or apply Critical Environmental Education in the same way for every single student. A lower-class US student with, e.g. immigrant and coloured family background must be taught differently than a middle-class Slovakian student with average middle-class Slovakian parents. Potential and actual, apparent biases must also be taken into consideration.

5. Applying Phenomenology to Environmental Education and Pedagogy

The main idea of this present study would be – and it is the ultimate objective of this final, concluding chapter – to propose a synthesis between phenomenology and Critical Environmental Education. The dialogue between phenomenology, pedagogy, and education is not unprecedented, at the moment, it already has a decades-long, deep-rooted tradition (e.g. Manen, 1982, Trajtelová, 2018, Howard et al., 2021, Bassiri, 2024 etc.). Currently, we have already a wide variety of different approaches of phenomenological pedagogy: Husserlian, Heideggerian, Sartrean etc. The first-person perspective and the role of subjective experience have an orienting role in all of them. Although I must note that – to my knowledge – there is no systematic and widespread application of phenomenology outside academic science and discourse, – in the concrete in-the-field pedagogical practice. Phenomenology still awaits being introduced into widespread pedagogical and educational practice in a systematic and methodologically conscious way. In our project, we would like to propose a specifically Husserlian approach and interpretation of phenomenological pedagogy.

Already in chapter 2 (“Main Ideas of Phenomenology”), we highlighted the special role *empathy* plays in phenomenology for Husserl, and also for other authors in phenomenology (like Max Scheler, Edith Stein or Alfred Schütz). Through empathy, Husserl could make a step forward from a first-person perspective, subjective, and somewhat *solipsistic* experience to concrete interpersonal relations, and ultimately to the entirety of our *social world*. Empathy, as we told earlier, enables us – according to Husserl and his followers – to have an at least *indirect access* to the other person’s first-person perspective. Of course, we would not be able through empathy to relive what the other person experiences from her own first-person perspective, otherwise, as Husserl said, me and the other person would be the very same one (Husserl, 1960,

106-107, 108-109). Due to empathy however, he said, I am capable of conceiving another, apparently similar body as the body of another, subjective, sensing, feeling, experiencing subject like me, and also capable of at least indirectly reconstructing the other person's first-person perspective; or, in other words, figure it out with more or less accuracy what might go on in the other subject's head. In a pedagogical and educational context phenomenology could make it easier that one student or children could grasp and understand the other person's situation, or the particular case of a certain minority group.

Our idea would be that a systematic application of phenomenology within the field of education could enhance empathy in children and more mature students more efficiently than other, non-phenomenological methods. It is a hypothesis which, – to our knowledge, – has not been tested yet, but – in our opinion – would be worth closer studies and experiments. A systematic methodology of a Husserlian phenomenological pedagogy should be elaborated first, then be applied in different (test-)classes; and after that, later, psychological tests at least could indicate whether our hypothesis holds true, and whether children, trained and educated in classes where Husserlian phenomenological pedagogy is used, are more empathetic on the average, than children who are taught in regular, or at least non-phenomenological classes. Of course, such classes and experiments should also require initial tests to measure the empathy of the students, before the test-class or test-year begins. In our opinion, a Husserlian phenomenological pedagogy, by raising the average level of empathy in children and young students, could be an enormous, invaluable contribution to Critical Pedagogy in general, and Critical Environmental Education in particular. If our hypothesis is true, then Husserlian phenomenological pedagogy, applied practically within the field of Critical Environmental Education, could make children and students more empathetic to the integrity of the natural environment and to the joy and suffering of non-human beings. It could help us to raise environmentally more conscious and sensitive citizens, who are willing to and capable of making a better, more nature-friendly society.

Dialogical, role-playing game techniques (see e.g. Udvarhelyi, 2022, 437-475), and also Virtual Reality technologies have been introduced to pedagogy a long time ago; although, – to my knowledge – the latest VR devices are still in an experimental phase in education. Our idea is that a methodologically conscious application of Husserlian phenomenological method in education combined with partly older (dialogue, role-playing games), partly new technological innovations (Virtual Reality) could make children and older participants of environmental education even more sensitive to environmental and ecological issues, for example, in particular, to animal suffering. In this regard I would like to mention as an example, the recent

project “Misunderstood Bodies”, when the creators attempted to relive and access the subjective experience and situation of people with special bodily, mental, and health conditions, and also other people who are member of certain specific minorities or target to some sort of discrimination.⁴

Phenomenologically (in accordance with the principles of Husserlian philosophy) interpreted Critical Environmental Education could thus help us create a more eco-friendly and healthy society for the future.

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⁴ See <https://www.verzio.org/en/2024/vektor-vr-application> (Retrieved 26 March 2025).

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