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# Resisting the Drive to Theorise: *A Phenomenological Perspective on Social Science Research*



Resistiendo el impulso de teorizar: Una perspectiva fenomenológica en una investigación de ciencias sociales

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## Abstract

This article explores predominant uses of theory in social science research in relation to the approach of phenomenological philosophy. While phenomenology is sometimes interpreted as one theoretical or methodological paradigm amongst others in the field of qualitative research, this article explores key thinkers within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology to argue that this tradition can raise challenges for predominant conceptions of research and theorizing in the social sciences and certain philosophical idea(l)s that can be connected to them. The distinctive nature of phenomenological description is outlined, and new possibilities for qualitative research are sketched. Also considered is the question of whether qualitative research should seek to enshrine the intellectual virtues of the arts, and resist the inclination towards the scientific —and scientistic— drive to theorize.

## Keywords

Science; literature; background; phenomenology; Heidegger; foundationalism

## Resumen

Este artículo explora los usos predominantes de la teoría en la investigación en ciencias sociales en relación con el enfoque de la filosofía fenomenológica. Aunque la fenomenología en el campo de la investigación cualitativa se interpreta en algunas ocasiones como un paradigma teórico o fenomenológico entre otros, este artículo explora los pensadores claves de la tradición filosófica de la fenomenología para argumentar que esta tradición puede plantear retos para las concepciones predominantes de la investigación y la teorización en las ciencias sociales y para cierta(o)s idea(le)s filosóficos que pueden conectarse a ellas. Se delinea la naturaleza distintiva de la descripción fenomenológica y se esbozan nuevas posibilidades para la investigación cualitativa. Se considera también el interrogante de que si la investigación cualitativa debería buscar consagrar las virtudes intelectuales de las artes y hacer resistencia a la inclinación del impulso científico -y cientificista- de teorizar

## Palabras clave

Ciencias; literatura; antecedentes; fenomenología; Heidegger; fundacionalismo

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## Introduction

There is something curious about the uses of "theory" in social science research today. Part of that curiousness might be attributed to the fact that, on the one hand, "theory" seems to be a concept that remains largely *under-determined* in the social scientific field. Perhaps all the attention to methods and methodology is to blame. Swedish sociologist Richard Swedberg seems to suggest such a problem in his recent call for researchers in the social sciences to pay less attention to methods and methodology, and more attention to theory, and especially "the process that goes into the production and design of a theory" (2016, p. 5). This curiousness gets more curious however, when we also recognize that the concept of theory also appears to be, on the other hand, somewhat *over-determined* in social science research. As sociologist Monika Krause reminds us: "'theory' is a multivalent term, which means different things to different people'" (2016, p. 23). Theory is also, to continue in Krause's terms, "a judgmental term, which is used both to value and to devalue certain kinds of work" (2016, p. 23). The dimension of *prestige* that attaches to theory that Krause indicates here perhaps goes some of the way towards explaining why "theory" is (or why we might *want* it to be) a central concept within social science research today, despite its ambivalence. Whatever it means to attach the term "theory" to our findings, doing so seems a sure-fire way of giving those findings a particular value and weight.

What the above works to show is that the concept of theory has a complex relation to social science research. Certainly, more work needs to be done in further spelling out this relation. In this article, I intend to explore this question by examining predominant conceptions of theory in relation to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenology is sometimes read as one theoretical or methodological paradigm amongst others in the field of social science. Yet here I argue that certain thinkers within phenomenological philosophy present a *challenge* to certain idea(l)s that can be connected to predominant conceptions of research and theorizing in the social sciences. Let me clarify at the outset that my aim here is not to try to dismiss all theoretical offerings that social sciences have made over the past 150 years. Such a claim would certainly be too sweeping and would overlook the significant value for human understanding that have been opened by theoretical frameworks such as Marxism to Structuralism. My target here is rather on what I would call a *drive* to theorize within social science research: the misplaced move to attach value and prestige to the founding of theories, in ways that come to override more critical and productive attention to the particular. To make my argument for this, I will appeal to the phenomenological notion of the "background" and what this suggests about the relation between the human being and the world. Through this, I will contend, phenomenology opens onto an *alternative* conception of the task of philosophy and the philosopher, which resists the drive to theorize. The case for this will be made in sections (3) and (4). In the final section of this article, I will turn to consider whether, as a consequence of what has been discussed, qualitative research might be better off aiming to enshrine the intellectual virtues of the arts —rather than acceding to inclinations towards scientistic models of inquiry.[1]

**Article description | Descripción del artículo**
This research paper derived from the project *The Ways we Think: From the Straits of Reason to the Possibilities of Thought*, considers predominant uses of "theory" in social science research in relation to the approach of phenomenological philosophy. It argues that phenomenology serves to question certain philosophical idea(l)s that can be connected to predominant conceptions of research and theorizing in the social sciences. The article outlines a phenomenological approach, and seeks to show how this opens up new possibilities for social science research. It also considers the question of whether qualitative research should seek to enshrine the intellectual virtues of the arts, and resist the inclination towards the scientific —and scientistic— drive to theorize.

1 Of course this is not to suggest that philosophical approaches are *themselves* be immune to such drives —indeed, a major feature of the arguments I will be drawing on in this paper is that they are seeking to react against precisely such misplaced tendencies within the *philosophical* canon itself.

The question of whether such scientistic inclinations might be observed in certain assumptions that shape predominant conceptions of theory in social science research will also be addressed in section (5). I commence in section (2) with a consideration of the heritage of such approaches to theory.

## Conceptions of theory

"Theory" has its etymological origins in the Latin *theoria*, meaning contemplation, and in the ancient Greek *θεωρία*, signifying an action of viewing, sight and spectacle (OUP, OED, 2017). The English word was first used in 1588, and derived from the French *théorie*, which, as well as contemplation, had come to designate the branch of study that deals with contemplation and, more formally, the conceptual basis of a subject or area of study. In the 1600s, the term came to be used in a more specialized sense still, as referring to "a methodical intellectual construct… used to explain a great number of facts or phenomena" (OUP, OED, 2017). It is this weightier, explanatory sense that the concept of "theory" seems to carry in social science contexts today, and it is worth reflecting a little more on this inheritance.

The 1600s was a time of scientific and cultural revolution. Major shifts were occurring in the ways human beings came to think about themselves, the natural world, and their relation to it. This was due, in large part, to the challenges to established intellectual traditions that were being brought about by new developments in the natural sciences, and physics in particular. New forms of observation and investigation meant human beings started to be able to quantify and measure the natural world with unprecedented success. As a result of the immense explanatory and predictive power of the scientific enterprise, newfound faith was placed in the intellectual constructs of science. Scientific theories thus came to carry a certain epistemic weight. Science was seen as a practice that provided a neutral, value-free observation of the world, and generated knowledge that was universal and generalizable.

Of course, much has changed in the scientific landscape since the 1600s. While the tradition of logical positivism in the 1920s to some extent enshrined the naïve view of science, at least since Thomas Kuhn's investigation into *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), attention has been given to the way that frameworks of theories, concepts and rules somewhat guide scientists' work. That is, recognition has been given to the way that scientists operate under a *paradigm* that binds their work, and all scientific investigations, together. A crucial insight provided by Kuhn was that paradigms themselves can *change* – a "paradigm shift" can occur when the questions of scientists can no longer be answered using the accepted paradigm. In the field of physics, for example, such a shift occurred when Albert Einstein's theories of relativity came to replace Isaac Newton's laws of motion and gravitations. During such times of scientific "crisis", Kuhn suggested that social forces will to some extent influence the kinds of paradigms that are developed and which eventually come to dominance. In this way, the social nature of science came to be recognised. Moreover, there was growing awareness that the data of science might itself be dependent upon the theories and paradigms predominant in a particular society, at a particular historical time.

Kuhn's discussion of science has wide-ranging significance. Yet one important upshot was that it served to remove a key barrier between natural science and the social sciences that had taken off during the 20th

Century.[2] It is perhaps not too surprising, then, that one of the predominant ways in which the term "theory" is currently utilized within the social science has resonances with the way scientific theory was characterised by Kuhn. For when social scientists speak about "theory" today, it is often in relation to the notion of a *theoretical paradigm*. Moreover, such paradigms are also understood as ways in which the work of social scientists is bound together in a *collective enterprise*. The way such paradigms are at work in the social sciences is, however, also somewhat different to what Kuhn perceived in the natural sciences. So it is worth us consider a little further.



Let us take Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln's *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (1998) as a representative illustration of the predominant understanding of the theoretical paradigm in social science. Denzin and Lincoln's essential view of a theoretical paradigm is as a "net", or an "interpretive framework" (p. 26). They suggest that all qualitative researchers work within such frameworks, due to the fact that "all qualitative researchers are philosophers in that 'universal sense in which all human beings… are guided by highly abstract principles'" (p. 26). They identify four major interpretive paradigms ("positivist and post-positivist", "constructivist-interpretive", "critical" and "feminist post-structural") and suggest that these overarching paradigms broadly structure qualitative research. However, they also state that "these four abstract paradigms become more complicated at the level of concrete specific interpretive communities" (p. 26). They claim that theoretical paradigms should structure the design of qualitative research. They provide a table of "interpretive paradigms" to assist researchers with this task. This table specifies the "criteria", "forms" and "types of narration" that will be involved and permitted within different theoretical frameworks (p. 27).

This is only a snapshot of Denzin and Lincoln's account. Yet it is worth remarking on how complex a notion the "theoretical paradigm" turns out to be, even from this initial sketch. Denzin and Lincoln appear committed to characterizing theoretical paradigms as distinctively identifiable frameworks —this means presenting them in terms of sets of assumptions and "highly abstract principles" that can be articulated and made explicit. Such explication is assumed to be necessary for qualitative research to begin on a firm footing. That is, elucidation of the theoretical paradigm is a way of putting the qualitative inquiry on a secure *foundation*. Yet reading through their text one may be forgiven for beginning to feel a little overwhelmed at the task that is thus to be undertaken. So many new labels! So many sets of inter-related concepts and complex terms! So much specialized discourse! We want to be clear about matters, of course. But at what point does demystifying the research process give way to *mystification*?

I will return to such questions later. For now, however, let me move on to consider another predominant usage of the notion of theory in social science. This relates, not so much to what *begins* of the research process as its *results*. For the term "theory" is often employed in the social sciences to refer to a particular kind of *intellectual construct*. At this point, it may be helpful to re-invoke Swedberg's discussion of theory and theorizing in the social sciences. For in his account of what it is to produce a theory, Swedberg works with such an understanding. As he exemplifies (2016, p. 5):

> You start out by observing in an attempt to get a good empirical grip on the topic before any theory is introduced. Once this has been done, it may be time to name the phenomenon; and either turn the name into a concept as the next step or bring in some existing concepts in an attempt to get a handle on the topic. At this stage, one can also try to make sense of analogies, metaphors, and perhaps a typology, in an attempt to both give body to the theory and to invest it with some process. The last element in theorizing is to come up with an explanation… before having been properly tested against empirical material, according to the rules of the scientific community, the theory should be considered unproven.

Swedberg's picture helps to bring out the way that, in this sense, "theory" aims at producing a thesis that has some *explanatory* power. That is, a "theory" captures something about the social world. It thus plays something of an *integrating* role —it serves to *incorporate* data and findings and *organize* them into a coherent and consistent framework.

One of the key upshots of this conception of theory is that social scientific research is construed as producing results that can themselves be further *tested* —proved or disproved by further research. Simon Glendinning brings out this dimension in his description of "constructive" theoretical work (2007 p. 15):

> Constructive theorizing is centrally characterized by the effort to *advance a thesis.* Making use of recognised research methods and often building on the work of others, one seeks to develop a convincing rationale for a particular position on some topic (something which might then be further explored, debated and tested) a position which could be made public as the 'outcome' or 'result' of one's research activity.

2 Paul Standish (1995) provided further discussion of this point.

Of course, producing "outcomes" in the form of "theories" that can be tested is itself a hallmark of research in the natural sciences. This returns us to the point made at the outset of this article regarding the *value* and *prestige* that has come to be attached to what is designated as a "theory" in research today. Perhaps we might add a further dimension here and say that such value is connected to the idea that social science produces theories that can be *tested.* Indeed, on this basis we get the idea that the theories of social science provide some generalized explanations of the world that can be tested. They are therefore seen to be of *use* —to policy makers, to non-academic audiences, as well as to their research community as a whole.

## Phenomenological backgrounds

We have now seen two predominant conceptions of theory that are at work in the field of social science research today. At this point, I want to turn to phenomenology, and start to consider the sorts of opposition this tradition might make to such conceptions. As has been noted, phenomenology is sometimes read as one kind of theoretical or methodological framework amongst others in the social sciences. Yet my claim is that the potential scope of the critique drawn from phenomenology extends to assumptions that inform precisely such a reading. To understand why, I first need to say a little more about the phenomenological tradition. It is important to recognise from the outset here that phenomenology is itself not a monolith: there are competing perspectives to be found *within* the phenomenological canon itself. In what follows I do not intend to give a complete picture of 'phenomenology' as a philosophical approach. I rather aim to sketch certain lines of connections between thinkers who, I would suggest, are especially pertinent to the task of showing why there might be a need to re-interrogate the role of theory within qualitative research.

In philosophy, the term "phenomenology" is often used to stand for a philosophical revolution that was instigated by the work of the German thinker Edmund Husserl. Husserl envisaged phenomenology as a discipline distinct from traditional approaches in epistemology (which had previously dominated the philosophical scene) and "dogmatic science." For Husserl, previous approaches to knowing had been immersed within what he called the "natural attitude": the assumption that the world is something continuously and factually "on hand" (*vorhanden*), and the resulting preoccupation with discovering whether a subject's experiences correspond to the way the natural world objectively is —and thus with questions of justification, truth and veridicality (Husserl, 1983 [1913], § 27-30). Husserl's concern was that, with the focus on questions of truth, knowledge and justification, thinkers adopting the "natural attitude" were failing to consider a key aspect —viz. that "whatever physical thing are… they are as experienceable physical things" (§ 47). What Husserl thinks the natural attitude has overlooked, more specifically, is the mode of givenness of our experience: the *way* our experiences are given *as they are given.* Husserl conceived phenomenology as the study of precisely this sphere: phenomenological philosophy was to be a project of doing justice to the "lived experience" of consciousness (*erlebnisse*).

Husserl represents the beginnings of phenomenological philosophy, but the tradition that subsequently arose came to take his initial insights in directions that extended far beyond those of his own work. Husserl's approach was arguably still orientated towards providing a conceptual foundation for what human beings know. Later phenomenologists came to move beyond this more epistemological focus. Nevertheless, it can be said that what is characteristic of a number of subsequent 'phenomenological' approaches are their commitments to this broader Husserlian notion of doing justice to what is given in experience as it is given. As David Wood puts it (2002, p. 33), this phenomenological approach might be generally characterised as the "imperative of staying with experience, acknowledging experience" (Wood, 2002, p. 33). On one level, this might sound rather simple. Yet, as thinkers who follow this imperative exemplify, it has critical consequences for the ways we understand the human being, the world, and our relation to it.

To see how, I want to turn at this point to the phenomenological account, not of Husserl, but rather his student, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy serves as a useful entry point to the kind of position I am seeking to develop here.[3] In particular, I should like to invoke Heidegger's distinction in *Being and Time* between two ways in which human beings encounter things in the world: as *present-to-hand* (*vorhandenheit*) and as *ready-to-hand* (*zuhandenheit*) (2005 [1927], p. 97). For Heidegger, the former represents a contemplative, theoretical mode of understanding (like the detached observation of a thing as an object), which has been foregrounded by philosophers. The latter, however, refers us to the ways we encounter things in our everyday dealings with the world —for example, the way the hammer becomes a tool to drive a nail into a wall when I want to hang up a picture.

3 It is worth noting that Heidegger's philosophy is a key reference point for a number of subsequent philosophers who took up the phenomenological project such as Jean Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. I explore the distinctness of Heidegger's philosophy in terms of its developments and its limitations regarding a re-description of the human being and the human relation to the world in *The Ways We Think* (Williams, 2016a).

Crucially, Heidegger argues that this latter, engaged relation to things in the world is more *originary*. To understand why, we need to further consider what is at stake in encountering something as *zuhandenheit*.

For Heidegger, things in the world show up for us in this mode in terms of "equipment" —that is, as things that might be used "in order to…". Now, Heidegger questions, what makes it possible things to show up for us like this in the first place? Why is it that I happen to relate to a hammer as something that I can use "in-order-to" drive a nail into a wall? Here, Heidegger makes a crucial move. For he claims that this kind of encounter will itself presuppose a *familiarity* with the hammer. Put otherwise, it presupposes familiarity with a matrix of involvements, cultural meanings and significances, which I inherit and which constitute the hammer's being what it is for me. Indeed, Heidegger argues that I could not come to apprehend the hammer as a tool for driving a nail into a wall without such structures —my inheritance of them is a precondition for my being able to encounter the hammer as I do in the first place.

Of course, what Heidegger is suggesting here is not supposed to be confined only to things like hammers. Rather, by paying careful attention to the nature of *zuhandenheit,* Heidegger works to reveal something about the conditions of possibility of human beings' relating to the world more generally. Human beings, Heidegger argues, are always already are *engaged and involved* with the world. Our thinking, as Heidegger puts it, takes place within a 'background' —a world of cultural objects with historical meanings that have come down to us from the past and are used in the present for the sake of future goals. Hence, our thinking is *always already* imbricated in a web of significances. It is in this sense that *zuhandenheit* is a more originary mode of relating to the world. We do not occupy a neutral or disengaged standpoint —as though we *first* perceived objects and *then* went on to take them "as" something (for example as a house, or a car, or whatever). Rather we approach things with what Heidegger calls "fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception" —we are continually caught up in a circle of interpretation by and through our dealings with the world (2005 [1927], p. 191).

Notably, through this, Heidegger was going against the grain of much philosophical thinking at that time. For philosophy, and especially the philosophical tradition of epistemology, had tended to prioritize the detached and contemplative relation to objects.[4] The point is not merely that Heidegger shifted the emphasis. For, crucially, following Heidegger's discussion of the conditions of thinking, detached contemplation comes to itself be understood as a kind of praxis —as a way of thinking that is determined by its own mood and circumspection. "We are", as Charles Taylor puts it "always and inevitably thinking within … taken-as-there frameworks" (2013, p. 75). This holds as much for our states of *detached contemplation* as for our engaged dealings with the world.[5]

In his recent retrieval of the Heideggerian-type position, Charles Taylor has drawn upon the kinds of account sketched above to suggest that Heidegger's philosophy takes us in the direction of a kind of *holism*: the view that, "our particulate awarenesses, our grasp on particular things, are

4 I further explore the kinds of opposition to the epistemological tradition that can be drawn from phenomenology, and Heidegger's philosophy in particular (Williams, 2014).

5 As Heidegger puts it, a contemplative grasp of the thing "has sense only on the basis of an *already-being-involved-with*", and is thus itself "a *founded way of being-in-the-world*, a way which is always possible only on the basis of a non-cognitive comportment" (Heidegger, 1992 [1925], p. 162-164, emphasis in the original).


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embedded in a more general framework, which gives them their sense" (2013, p. 77). Crucially, as Taylor also points out, following Heidegger's account, such frameworks remain largely non-articulated and inexplicit —and *essentially* so*.* This is because the human embeddedness is a complex and multifaceted affair —it incorporates historical, contextual, and social elements— which cannot all spelled out at once. This, in turn, has crucial consequences for the way the task of the philosopher is to be understood. As Taylor puts it, "some or other such framework will always be there, making sense of what we do" hence we can "never get to the bottom": "the number of things a… philosophical mind could raise questions about is indefinite, endless" (p. 75). This is not, let us be clear, and expression of *scepticism*. It is not the claim that, for certain *contingent,* reasons we might be able to articulate the background. Rather, the insight is meant to challenge the very *project* of trying to articulate the background in full. As Taylor puts it, "this kind of foundational ambition is vain", since "where and when we are form part of the framework of our lives, in relation to which we go about the things we're doing, including the things we question and argue about" (p. 75).

## Phenomenological descriptions

I have now explained some of the ways in which the phenomenological project works to re-interpret the nature of the human being and their relation to the world. We have also seen that this involves, essentially and not just contingently, an opposition to a foundational project that would seek to fully articulate the background that conditions our thinking. Yet it is worth going further. For we want to know what kind of task remains for the philosopher following this account. Indeed it is from here that, as I will argue, new possibilities for social science research can be opened.

In his *In the Name of Phenomenology*, Simon Glendinning (2007) works to develop a picture of the distinctive phenomenological approach, which it will be useful to build on here.[6] Glendinning's characterization of phenomenology comes as a result of his reading of certain philosophical thinkers including Heidegger and Husserl. Yet Glendinning's characterisation also allows for the possibility that the insights of the phenomenological thinkers I am drawing on here might be further connected with work in other traditions of philosophy —traditions that do not conventionally fall under the label of phenomenology. I shall turn to consider this point a little later. Let me firstly draw on Glendinning's characterisation to spell out, more particularly, the specific kind of aims that these forms of phenomenological inquiry have, as well as the particular ways in which they works to achieve those aims.

Regarding aims, the first point Glendinning makes is a negative one. That is, on this reading, a phenomenological approach will not seek to develop a *thesis* (2007, p. 14-15)*.* As Glendinning explains, "phenomenological research does not have in view the defense of a 'position' in the sense of something which could be carried away with one *independently of the work of words in which such summary fragments might be formulated"* (p. 15, emphasis in the original). We should not misinterpret this to mean that phenomenology does not aim at providing any *insights* —such a claim would be absurd. But the point here is that the kinds of insights that flow from the phenomenological philosopher are not like any "results" that can be summarized in sound-bite form and transferred to a number of contexts. A number of historical examples from the phenomenological field attest to this. We might think, for example, of Jean-Paul Sartre's wariness of the way his ideas came to be encapsulated by his *Existentialism is a Humanism* lecture, or of Jacques Derrida's continual efforts to work with new words and new themes so as to resist the translation of his ideas into easily repeatable concepts or theories.[7] Indeed, as Glendinning suggests, when such attempts *have been* made to characterize the insights of phenomenology (and perhaps we might here think about the way that the "theoretical framework" or "methodology" of phenomenology is sometimes summarized in handbooks on social science research), this often happens at the expense of the *richer picture* than has been unfolded within the phenomenological literature.

Secondly, and relatedly, on this reading phenomenology aims at "description, not explanation or analysis" (p. 16). That is, phenomenological philosophers often interpret their studies, not in terms of the discovery of some *new theory* or knowledge, but rather as the attempt to unfold more fully *something we already know* but have forgotten or overlooked. Heidegger for example saw phenomenological philosophy as a means of describing a form of knowledge that he characterized as being "closest" to us as human beings. For Heidegger, however, this form of knowledge

6 Glendinning's account outlines five aspects of the phenomenological approach, but in what follows I have slightly re-characterized these to present four features.

7 Sartre's expresses his resistance to the kind of abstracting and theorizing of his ideas in his early novel *Nausea* (1933, p. 101): And then, about forty, they baptize their stubborn little ideas and a few proverbs with the name of Experience, they begin to imitate slot machines; put a coin in the slot on the left and out come anecdotes wrapped in silver paper; put a coin in the slot on the right and you get precious pieces of advice which stick to our teeth like soft caramels.

needed "recovery" insofar as it had been obscured by contemporary ways of thinking and understanding the world (particularly by modern science). Thus, as Heidegger saw it, phenomenological descriptions were not aimed at advancing some new kind of knowledge that can be simply be added on to the contemporary scene. Rather, it was orientated towards a kind of "leap" —out of familiar landscapes of knowing, but crucially onto "that soil upon which we really stand" (Heidegger, 2004 [1954], p. 41). As Glendinning points out, this is not to say that phenomenology does not invent new concepts. The distinctiveness of its approach, however, comes in what these concepts are put to work for: "in phenomenology what such conceptual innovation aims at is not a work of theoretical explanation but, essentially, an effort or activity of *elucidation*" (Glendinning, 2007, p. 16, emphasis in the original).

It is important to understand what is at stake in elucidation carefully. For, by claiming that phenomenology is oriented in its purpose towards 'description' and 'elucidation', it could seem that the purpose of this kind of approach is simply to draw out our immediate or intuitive relations with the world, rather than something more substantial. Yet this would be a misunderstanding. For it would miss the powerful nature of the elucidation phenomenology aims towards, and how this enables us to gain *more* insight than an explanation would allow for. One way in which we can see this is by re-invoking Heidegger's elucidation of everyday things such as a hammer as 'ready to hand.' What Heidegger's account reveals here is not just our immediate understanding of something like a hammer. Rather, his description works to open up the rich and multi-layered *possibilities* within the hammer —and connected to this, the ways in which a thing like a hammer opens onto wider values and practices and that are part of the ways of being of humans who are engaged using such tools as they live our their lives. The elucidation of the hammer as a tool used 'in order to' drive a nail into a wall, for example, opens onto the ways human beings use hammers to hang up pictures, and also how they might use it to fix a doorframe as part of a house or of a church and so forth. This elucidation of the hammer can be said to bring into view more broadly human practices of building, of dwelling, of worshipping. The picture of human existence opened up by Heidegger's attention to the hammer is thus far richer than the kind of account we could get through an 'explanation' of a hammer —that is, an account that would tend towards an objective and neutral depiction of the hammer as an object, abstracted from its role in human life.

The phenomenological approach, via elucidation, can thus be characterized as an attempt to look at the world anew: to re-orientate one's vision (p. 17). As Heidegger put it, his teacher Husserl gave him "the eyes with which to see". Heidegger's wording here is suggestive, not only of the way Husserl conceived the phenomenological project as a revelatory way of doing philosophy, but also the way a phenomenological approach involves a new revelation *of the human world itself*.

This leads onto a final characteristic of phenomenological philosophy that I should like to highlight here. Glendinning characterizes this in terms of phenomenology's apparent lack of explicit arguments (p. 22). As Glendinning explains it, phenomenology wants to resist emulating the "plain speaking" of science (p. 22). Why should such a resistance be important to the phenomenological project? It is not just a stylistic matter. The particular way of developing arguments and insights that phenomenology enshrines follows directly from its re-configuration of the human being and its relation to the world, as considered above. For, indeed, once we take the point that our thinking about the world will always take place

from within certain frameworks and contexts that, essentially and not just contingently, cannot be fully elucidated and articled, then it follows that the aim of a phenomenological enquiry cannot be to seek to somehow get "behind" experience and offer explicit theoretical justifications for the kinds of responses and judgments we make as human beings. This is not to say, crucially, that we cannot offer any arguments or advance any claims. What phenomenology is hereby rejecting is not argument *itself*. Rather, it is setting up an opposition to *false ideas* of what arguments might involve, and what they amount to. However "plain speaking" our argument might be, and however logical, it will never work to produce a picture of the world as it *really is*. For indeed, to borrow Stephen Mulhall's (2008) phrasing "which way is that"? We are *always* thinking within frameworks and with particular inheritances that cannot be fully cashed out in terms articulated propositions and assumptions. This is not to endorse a version of relativism. Rather it is to expose the exorbitant requirements that are so often attributed to notions of objectivity (including as the idea(l) that we might be able to adopt and achieve a the 'view from nowhere'). That is, it is to expose as problematic and damaging the denial of the very conditions that make it possible for us to know and think in the first place. And it is to show that our thinking about such conditions, and about our modes of being themselves, require a more subtle understanding than the false drives to objectivity can allow for.

I should like at this point to cross over to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. To some, this might seem like a strange turn, given the previous discussion has focused predominantly on thinkers who are more classically acknowledged as being part of the phenomenological philosophical canon. However, part of the argument I should like to offer in this paper is the claim that the phenomenological perspective I amoutlining is not one that is restricted only to those thinkers embedded within the classical tradition. On this point, I follow Glendinning and others in seeing a phenomenological approach as also being discernable in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy.[8] This can especially be seen from the way, for example, certain ordinary language philosophers were concerned with examining what is at stake in *specific* examples of our uses of particular words and phrases within everyday life (phrases such as 'I promise', or notions such as 'games' for example), rather than seeking to produce grand scale theories of language. Wittgenstein is a notable example of this approach, a point that is developed by Paul Standish in his paper *Why We Should Not Speak of an Educational Science*. In this paper, Standish suggests that Wittgenstein opposed the philosophical inclinations to theory and theorizing with the notion of Übersicht —that is, with the formation of a "perspicuous representation or overview" (1995, p. 273).[9] For Wittgenstein, the task of the philosopher is thus to be moved away from the attempt to provide grand-scale explanations that are thought to un-problematically map onto the

8 Of course, ordinary language philosophy, like phenomenology, is not a monolithic tradition. Yet arguments have been made for seeing a connection between the approaches of certain phenomenological thinkers, particularly Heidegger, and the work of ordinary language philosophers who had less systematic ambitions, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and John L. Austin. Simon Glendinning makes a case for this in his introduction to *In the Name of Phenomenology*, other influential arguments for these connections have been to have been advanced by Charles Taylor (1997) and Stephen Mulhall (2001). In the philosophy of education, Paul Standish defends this connection in his *Beyond the Self* (1992). I have also explored the connections between certain thinkers in the phenomenological tradition and those in the ordinary language tradition in my *The Ways we Think* (2016).

9 Like Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein is more usually positioned within the Ordinary Language Philosophy tradition, yet the overlaps of this with phenomenology are worth bringing out.

way the world actually is. What philosophy should aim for, by contrast, is a careful description or perspicuous survey of a limited segment of practice.

We can see such a view exemplified in Wittgenstein's own exploration of language and meaning. As Standish puts it, what Wittgenstein was after was a "clear view of the use of our words" —achieved by means of an "extensive, piecemeal, grammatical exploration of the psychology of concepts" (p. 275). Crucially, as Wittgenstein works to demonstrate, such an oversight is not achieved by means of abstracting words from their uses in specific concrete practices (a move that often happens in connection with a project of grand-scale theorizing, because here we would not be content with saying something only about how words are used in *one* context —indeed, the desire here is to say something apparently more "profound", and explain the meaning of words in *all* contexts). For Wittgenstein, rather, Übersicht is gained from a careful exploration of particular contexts of language use —or what he terms "language games." And a key feature of language games for Wittgenstein is their incommensurability. The criterion for the correct usage of words is bounded by the language game itself. Yet this is not to say that the project of describing the usage of words is a simple affair. As Standish also points out, what Wittgenstein's investigations are interested in are not only phenomena but also, in a way that might be compared to Heidegger, the *possibilities of the phenomena:* the range of projections and responses that might be appropriate. Such possibilities can *never* be fully stated or revealed —hence we return to the resistance to foundationalism, and to the sense that understanding is achieved via subtler means. As Standish explains it (p. 274):

> The *Übersicht* is in keeping with the holistic character of Wittgenstein's thought. It is not an exhaustive explanation; it is necessarily partial, covering a limited domain of our experience or a limited segment of grammar. The "craving for generality"… with its contemptuous attitude towards the particular case, is to be resisted and the *Übersicht* is set against any ideal of an over-arching theory.

There is much more that could be said here. But perhaps what has been suggested here does enough to demonstrate the kinds of approaches that phenomenology —understood in the sense I have been exploring here— opens. Perhaps it also works to show the ways in which a phenomenological approach can *oppose* certain conceptions —of the aims, ends and efforts of research— that seemed to work alongside the predominant approaches to theory outlined at the start of this article. But let me unfold this more slowly.

## From Science to Art

Earlier in this article, I considered two predominant understandings of "theory" in social science research. These related, more specifically, to conceptions of "theoretical paradigms" which are taken as a key starting point of qualitative inquiry and also to theoretical constructive work, which can be seen as the "outcome" or "results" of qualitative inquiry. What I would like to claim now is that we can draw challenges to *both directions* from the phenomenological approach.

Firstly, and regarding "theoretical paradigms" it can be said that phenomenology calls into question the idea that such frameworks are, or can be, well understood in terms of statements or commitments that can be articulated and made explicit in abstract and intellectual terms. For phenomenology, there is an essential *—and not just contingent—* inexplicitness within the background that conditions human thinking. Not everything can be shown all at once. Perhaps this will feel unsatisfactory to some. Yet it is worth reminding ourselves here of the particular way explication of such "theoretical paradigms" often tends to go. What the phenomenological approach allows us to consider is that such a practice is something of an unnecessary over-intellectualization. Far from demystifying the background to thinking, then, such practice rather seems to embroil us in *mystification*.

This feeds into the kinds of opposition drawn from phenomenology that can be leveled against the second predominant use of theory in social science —viz. "theory building". As I have suggested above, the approaches to phenomenology that I have drawn on here would resist the construction of explanations that can be made to work universally, across a number of domains. They would also would resist the drive to large-scale integrating accounts.[10] This is not to say that phenomenology takes us towards a narrow position of relativism. In fact, phenomenology would certainly suggest that there is something to be gained by the exploration of overlaps, connections and disconnections between different contexts and different studies. Crucially, however, phenomenology would want to say that such comparisons are illuminating *in themselves* —not because they might take us towards some grander, all-encompassing explanation (such as the uncovering of some underlying laws). While the

10 As I have stated, I am here drawing on particular thinkers within the phenomenological tradition, but this tradition itself is not monolith. There are different strands and traditions of thinkers within the broader category of 'phenomenology', and not all these would endorse the viewpoints I have drawn on here. Alternative phenomenological position to the approaches I draw on here have been developed, for example, by Amedeo Giorgi here, see Giorgi (1997).

notion of "theory building" in social science research is often taken to be a hallmark of its rigour and its value, then, following a phenomenological argument we might say that the imposed consistency and uniformity that theorizing brings rather works to preclude rigorous thinking insofar as such generalizing tendencies *disincline us towards the particular*. Yet it is only through attention to the particular and the concrete that things come to be understood by human beings in the first place.

I should also like to go a little further with the argument at this point. For we might want to consider whether certain wider *philosophical commitments* stand behind the conceptions of theory I outlined at the start of this article —and whether phenomenology might also bring us to challenges these. It will only be possible to offer an indication of these here. Yet let us consider, for one, just why it is that one might come to be inclined to give explicit and articulated "theoretical paradigms" for the field of social science. Could this be because, in doing so, the work of social scientist comes to emulate the work of the natural scientist who, as we noted above via our discussion of Kuhn, will also work within paradigms and frameworks shared by the scientific community. Let us, furthermore, consider why it might be that one becomes inclined towards seeing theoretical work in terms of the metaphors of laying foundations and, elsewhere, in terms of constructing and building. Could it be that because, in doing so, we further help to enshrine the idea that social science seem more of a unified and collective enterprise, which is on its way towards discovering a truth that will be shared by all? Yet behind inclinations there lies an assumed idea(l). That is, there lies a presumed valuation of the *natural scientific model* as the most reliable way of going on. Perhaps, given the immense explanatory power that natural science seems to possess, such a presumption is not unjustified. And perhaps in terms of the way that funding for research in the social sciences today seems to be distributed, such a presumption cannot easily be resisted.

Nevertheless, as the phenomenological arguments rehearsed in this article work to show, science itself enshrines a particular way of thinking. More particularly, science is committed to a *particular set* of values and commitments regarding, for example, the nature of scholarship, of rigorous inquiry, and of valuable knowledge. The unquestionable acceptance of science as the rule has come to be known as "scientistic". The question for those wishing to resist the allure of science is: where might we go instead?

One area within social sciences that would seem to naturally come into contact with the directions I am opening here would be arts-based research. However, perhaps we might attempt a broader move here and consider whether my phenomenologically based approach might open a connection between the social sciences, and the field of the arts and humanities. Indeed, I would contend that the kind of phenomenological approach I have sketched in this paper in many ways has more in common with ways of thinking and researching found in the arts rather than in the sciences.[11] If we take the field of literature as an example, an argument could be made that the best kinds of inquiry in this field do not develop along the lines of a foundationalist or construction-based model, but rather enact a kind of circling round a topic or text —describing, revisiting and questioning in ways which are not aimed at uncovering a fixed and completed "understanding" but rather at opening up new ways of think-

11 As Paul Standish (1995) highlights, it was observed by David Pears that Wittgenstein's philosophical method has more in common with arts than science "because the nuances of particular cases are not caught in any theory" (p. 272).

ing and kinds of imaginative insight. To give an example of this, we might consider the ways of thinking that would be appropriate for approaching a Shakespeare text. I go on to give an example below of *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*. Now, Shakespeare creates multifaceted characters that keep us guessing about the elusive nature of their psychic identities. This is evident from the way Shakespeare's characters have been portrayed in performances in a multiplicity of ways and from how, throughout his plays, our judgements about key characters are often interrupted and disturbed (think of Hamlet's perpetual questioning, for instance, or the way in which characters in *Coriolanus* constantly debate the principle protagonist's character). In this way, it can be claimed that Shakespeare's plays create the space for endless debate, interpretation and reinterpretation of the characters and their motives. The appropriate response to such openness, ambivalence and indeterminacy seems thus to be to 'circle' the text: not impatiently reaching after a final theory that neatly summarises everything, but rather seeking to look and look again —to open up avenues for interpretation and new perspectives.[12]

It is perhaps worth adding here that the term "theory", while used in the field of literature, has been the subject of much debate and opposition in itself.[13] Part of the concern here, in a way that is again somewhat like the opposition I have been developing in this paper, is not so much with theory itself (with engaging in discussions of notions like ideology; deconstruction; psychoanalysis for example), as with *false conceptions* of theory which lead to *misapplications.* Things go wrong when literary interpretation takes its cue from *large-scale frameworks* in ways that overlook and often *obscure* the specificities and the particularities of singular texts. Such (mis)uses of theory, can be resisted, however. To do so, we need to recognise that, as Jonathan Culler (1997, p. 16) puts it, "to admit the importance of theory is to make an open ended-commitment, to leave yourself in a position where there are always important things you don't know" —but, as Culler also adds, "this is the condition of life itself."[14]

## Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this? As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this paper has not been to reject theoretical offerings in general. However, my point has been to show up the problems that can emerge when the drive to theorize is taken *too far.* To this end, the article has sought to demonstrate the kinds of oppositions to predominant uses of "theory" in social science research raised by certain thinkers who can be seen as part of the tradition of phenomenological philosophy. It has been seen that these take the form of, on the one hand, misconstruals of the nature of the "theoretical framework" and, on the other hand, a resistance to the idea(l) of constructing large-scale integrating explanations. Furthermore, through phenomenology, it has also been questioned whether behind the current conceptions of theory in social science, there might lurk a draw towards *scientism*. It has been argued that a phenomenological approach that foregrounds holism, careful description and attention to the particular, might embody an approach that comes closer to the arts than the sciences. The extent to which the social sciences should become more aligned with the procedures and practices of the arts and humanities is a question that lies beyond the scope of this paper. Yet perhaps important barriers are removed, for both fields, once certain *false ideas* of theory have been overcome. I would argue that these traditions within phenomenological philosophy helps us on the way to this. Phenomenology can enable us to rediscover the significance and the meaning in the particular —the achievement in the piecemeal rather than the desire for large scale systematizing. The success of the phenomenological approach is thus that it serves to "replace explanation and analysis with description without leaving us yearning for something more" (Glendinning, 2008, p. 26).

12 I further explore resonances between phenomenological approaches and literature in Williams (2016b).

13 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (2003). As Eagleton remarked in an interview about this work (Jarvis & Oakley-Brown, 2004, p. 188):

Where theory bites is for people for whom it isn't an option… it's when you *need* it, when it's not just a hat you can put on, or an option you can choose academically, that you begin to see something of a meaning in it, I think. But we can't tell the tune on how that happens.

14 Culler provides an insightful account of theorizing in literature, which is sensitive to similar issues regarding theory we have been discussing here. As Culler explains (p. 17):

Theory makes you desire mastery: you hope that theoretical reading will give you the concepts to organize and understand the phenomena that concern you. But theory makes mastery impossible, not only because there is always more to know, but, more specifically, and more painfully, because theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based. The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premises and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable. You have not become master, but neither are you where you were before. You reflect on your reading in new ways. You have different questions to ask and a better sense of the implications of the questions you put to works you read.


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