Phenomenology and information studies

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine work on phenomenology and determine what information studies can learn and use from that work.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a literature-based conceptual analysis of pioneering work in phenomenology (including that of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and others), application of such ideas as intentionality and being in information studies work, and the potential for greater application of the information seeker as other.

Findings – The literature on phenomenology contains thought that is directly relevant to information studies and information work. Close examination of perception, intentionality, and interpretation is integral to individuals’ activities related to searching for and retrieving information, determining relevance, and using technology. Essential to the realization of phenomenology’s potential is adoption of communication by dialogue so that an information seeker is able both to conceptualize need and to articulate that need. Some promising work in information studies demonstrates an openness to the ongoing and continuous perceptual experiences of information seekers and the relation of that process of perceiving to the growth of knowledge.

Originality/value – Offers a different way of thinking about human-information relationships and the ways that information professionals can interact with information seekers.

Keywords Phenomenology, Philosophy, Information science, Libraries

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

One thing the library and information science (LIS) literature shows is a skepticism regarding philosophical approaches to the field’s work. (At the outset I will acknowledge and agree with Wilson’s (2002) recognition that there has been a lack of cohesion across LIS; examination of one particular philosophical way of thinking will not miraculously produce the kind of cohesion he speaks of, but it can awaken workers in the field to some foundational imperatives from which to start.) Butler (1933) noted the skepticism about seven decades ago. Others have echoed it more recently (Zwadlo, 1997). A collection of essays such as those in this issue of the Journal of Documentation is an explicit response to the skeptical stance. Not only are several philosophical schools of thought informative, but also they can actually improve practice in information agencies. This is not an empty dictum; they can help us seek truth, and truth is part of any reflective practice. The quest for truth and its link to practice is acknowledged by Habermas (1973, p. 32):

The mediation of theory and praxis can only be clarified if to begin with we distinguish three functions, which are measured in terms of different criteria: the formation and extension of critical theorems, which can stand up to scientific discourse; the organization of processes of enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by
the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups towards which these processes have been directed; and the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle. On the first level, the aim is true statements, on the second, authentic insights, and on the third, prudent decisions.

Bernstein (1971) closely examines the history of praxis and finds a consistent purposefulness in the use of the word and what it stands for. Praxis refers to change in activity as a means to achieve the ideal of free human action. This definition of praxis is adopted here, and this word is used in preference to the narrower practice.

Phenomenological thinkers
Among the ways of approaching the key questions of intellectual and practical interest to us in LIS is phenomenology. As is true of other schools of thought addressed in this issue, phenomenology is complex and it has a rich and complicated history. There is no single agreed-on definition of phenomenology; a number of philosophers have developed phenomenological programs that have similarities, but they also have distinct identities. To Hegel, phenomenology represented the appearances apparent to human consciousness, particularly as human consciousness has changed throughout human history and as it changes in the course of each person’s life. While consciousness is integral to all conceptions of phenomenology, it is not Hegel’s idea that will be the focus of this paper.

As we will soon see, there are differing stances (or at least stances with differing foci) regarding phenomenology, but there are some very important commonalities. Lyotard (1991, pp. 32-3) says:

> The term signifies a study of “phenomena,” that is to say, of that which appears to consciousness, that which is “given.” It seeks to explore the given – “the thing itself” which one perceives, of which one thinks and speaks – without constructing hypotheses concerning either the relationship which binds this phenomena to the being of which it is phenomena, or the relationship which unites it with the I for which it is the phenomena.

It is evident in Lyotard’s definition that phenomenology is at odds with empiricism, especially empiricism’s confidence in the reliability of sensory experience. Across all conceptions of phenomenology there is a clear and explicit recognition that experience is richer than what our physical senses can apprehend. Experience is mediated through consciousness, and so has a cognitive element that is not explicable by empiricism. Through perception, intention, and cognition we seek to understand the world, ourselves and others. As Scheler (1973, p. 137) points out, phenomenology is not a methodology – it does not provide a formal construction for investigation; it is an attitude, a way of preparing oneself for inquiry, for seeing. Also consistent across the thinking of phenomenological philosophers is the realization, not only of the centrality of consciousness itself, but also of the object of consciousness:

Basic to phenomenology is the contention that the world has no meaning apart from consciousness. But the relationship is reciprocal: consciousness has no meaning apart from the world (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 43).

A journey through, mainly twentieth-century, thought informs phenomenology today, and that journey, for convenience and with good reason, begins with Edmund Husserl.
Husserl developed a particular definition of phenomenology and, given that he was preparing a new science of perception and of essences, he had to begin with a new conception of “Being”. Central to Husserl’s phenomenology, and a key point in later programs, is that the openness to discovery of the essence of a thing requires that one ignore one’s pre-existing biases about the world. A hallmark of contemporary thought, usually labeled postmodern, is that bias and prejudice are so pervasive that anything resembling truth is unachievable. Husserl, beginning more than a century ago (and before what could be called a postmodern skepticism) began to address challenges to our ability to grasp truth and to attain knowledge about something. He employed the Greek work *epoche* (taken from ancient skeptical philosophy, but without buying into the skepticism of that school of thought) to signify the questioning of presuppositions. Stewart and Mickunas (1990, p. 26) explain Husserl’s position:

This kind of presupposition must be suspended in order to examine the full range of the different dimensions of experience (dimensions which the empiricist will overlook because of his presuppositions).

Husserl, as did later phenomenologists, expressed doubt regarding the power of empiricism to provide final and meaningful answers. The questions at the foundation of his doubt deal with the limitation of experience to offer anything other than contingent conclusions or explanations, and then only about very particular matters, that is, the experience of the individual (Lyotard, 1991, p. 38).

The foregoing seems to suggest that Husserlian phenomenology is anti-realist. This is not the case, but, according to Husserl, the complexity of the human condition involves perceiving reality at a point in time, in a place, within a social context, in a psychological state. In other words, there is so much that is part of our Being that the genuine apprehension of reality is not an easy task. Ultimately, though, Husserl’s goal is to present a means of examination that can help us bridge the gap between initial (especially uncritical) perception and reality. Husserl (1962, p. 108, sec. 36) himself writes:

> We must, however, be clear on this point that there is no question here of a relation between a psychological event – called experience (Erlebnis) – and some other real existent (Dasein) – called Object – or of a psychological connexion [sic.] obtaining between the one and the other in objective reality.

Hintikka (1995, p. 83) clarifies Husserl’s goal:

> It is not a part of this position that what is so given to me are mere phenomena. On the contrary, the overall phenomenological project would make little sense unless the phenomenological reductions led us to actual realities.

The point Hintikka makes warrants emphasis; it is more than an event that we perceive. What is needed is a way to grasp both the thing perceived and our process of perception. Further complicating the phenomenological part of our Being, as Verlade-Mayol (2000, p. 33) states, is that our consciousness entails the object and the mental act of perceiving. The object can be a physical thing or an idea; both are apprehended through mental acts.

Our consciousness – including the mental acts that accompany many of our perceptions – is not merely a blank slate on which phenomena write. Consciousness is
intentional; it is directed; it has a purpose. Since consciousness is active, phenomenology must account for intentionality, for the realization that our perceptions are perceptions of something. Intentionality is not new with Husserl (his studies in his youth with Franz Brentano sowed the seeds of this part of his program), but he developed the idea more fully than it had been. Inherent in intentionality is what we might call a cognitive imperative, or an a priori state of and disposition to cognizing. Our Being is dependent on the Cartesian cogito, which sums up the human aspect of thinking plus the act (as well as the condition) of consciousness. One of phenomenology’s contributions to understanding and knowledge is its diminishing of the distance between the cogito (the thinking subject) and cogitatum (the content of thought) (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 10). Intentional consciousness, then, is synthetic in that it critically assesses perception according to epistemological standards, including evidence. The synthesis is achieved, in part, through linguistic expression, through an effort to represent phenomena by means of judgmental reasoning (Bernet et al., 1993, pp. 182-3). The intentional consciousness thus relies on semantic categorization and analysis as a way to come to knowledge about a thing.

At its heart, Husserl’s program is about knowledge; its focus is on epistemology. This focus is the strongest potential connection between phenomenology (Husserl’s or other philosophers’) and LIS. The transformation of information to knowledge – something LIS is concerned with – is dealt with by Husserl. At one point he (Husserl, 1962, pp.46-7, sec. 2) writes:

The acts of cognition which underlie our experiencing underlies the Real in individual form, posit it as having spatio-temporal form, as something existing in this time-spot, having this particular duration of its own and a real content which in its essence could just as well have been present in any other time-spot; posits it, moreover, as something which is present at this place in this particular physical shape (or is there given united to a body of this shape), where yet the same real being might just as well, so far as its own essence is concerned, be present at any other place, and in any other form, and might likewise change whilst remaining in fact unchanged, or change otherwise than the way in which it actually does.

Husserl is describing what can happen as an information seeker experiences, say, a text; the understanding of the seeker is genuine, but is contingent on, among other things, prior knowledge and other information. The process of understanding is, as Willard (1995) points out, at least in part a semiotic (sign-based) one, and entails both authentic and symbolic representation. An information seeker perceives a genuine sign (words on a page, or authentic representation) as well as symbolic representation upon which consciousness operates through interpretation (Willard, 1995, pp. 140-1). Husserl (2001, pp. 220-21, sec. 14), in a previous work, explains the interpretive challenge; he speaks of:

the possibility of indefinitely many percepts of the same object, all differing in content. If percepts were always the actual, genuine self-presentations of objects that they pretend to be, there could be only a single percept for each object, since its peculiar essence would be exhausted in such self-presentation. We must, however, note that the object, as it is in itself … is not wholly different from the object realized, however imperfectly, in the percept.

Further, and Davis (1996) helps to understand this difficult area of Husserl’s thought; phenomenology entails reflection on the very ways we perceive and experience things.
The object perceived (the intentional object) and the consciousness perceiving it are not separable. As we see, the epistemological challenge is real, but not insurmountable.

Heidegger

It is not the intention here to review all phenomenological philosophers, but Martin Heidegger deserves some attention. Heidegger was Husserl’s student, and the mentor’s ideas are certainly present in the student’s thought, but Heidegger departs from Husserl in some important ways. Husserl’s phenomenological program is far-reaching, but at its heart is a means that leads us to knowledge. More specifically, Husserl does not propose a theory of knowledge; rather, he seeks to detail a science that could result in knowledge. Heidegger is much more concerned with ontology, the examination of what is, or being. It could be argued that his ontological project is not divorced from epistemology; he attempts to provide a way to gain a deeper understanding of being. This fundamental difference between the two philosophers marks a difference in approach. As Macann (1993) illustrates, Husserl advocates beginning any phenomenological investigation with what we can call the “object” (the thing as it is in nature), with the ultimate aim of discovering the transcendental essence of the thing. Heidegger reverses the process; he begins with the higher place of existence in an effort to move towards an understanding of the natural existence of the thing (Macann, 1993, p. 63).

For Heidegger there is a definite distinction between being and beings. His prose, not completely impenetrable, has to be read very carefully to appreciate the distinction, but it is this distinction that should interest us in LIS most. Beings (plural) refers to entities themselves; that is, in the purely physical sense. Being, on the other hand, is a rich existential concept. He (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 26-7) writes:

Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves.

Perhaps the most profound signifying characteristic of being in Heidegger’s thought is that being entails the possibility of its own questioning. In other words, being is conscious and aware and can examine its own existence. The questioning is integral to another key element that Heidegger (1962, p. 27) expresses in Being and Time:

This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term Dasein.

The self-reflective quality of Dasein is pivotal Heidegger. Gelven (1989, p. 28) elaborates:

the meaning of existence can be significant only to one who asks about his own existence. For this reason, the question of Being itself is possible only because Dasein can reflect upon its existence.

Herein lies the importance for LIS. While Heidegger does not delve deeply into interpretation (although other philosophers do, as we will see), he does connect hermeneutics to Being-in-the-world (Moran, 2000, p. 235). Any serious examination of informing should take into account the interpretive ontology of Heidegger. The question, “What does it mean to be informed” is the kind of reflective questioning that is integral to being. In what ways does being informed alter being in the Heideggerian
sense? What are the processes by which a person could change being and existence? These seem like lofty questions, but there is a pragmatic element to them. If information gives shape to our thoughts and beliefs, what happens within us that results in a reshaping? For example, what would be required of any classificatory scheme so that it genuinely informs? The development or revision of categorizations would have to be a deeply reflective and interpretive action. Seeking information similarly necessitates such a reflective action that inevitably has at least some existential character.

Other philosophers
Husserl and Heidegger might be considered giants in the development of phenomenology, but other philosophers have offered modifications, revisions, and (at times) opposition to their work, even while being undeniably influenced by them. These other philosophers bring their own purposes to, as well as their own development of, phenomenology. The purposes include progress in the social sciences, purely philosophical investigation, a furthering and an expansion of ethics, and a maturing of interpretive action. All of these purposes are of interest to us in LIS, since research and praxis in our field embrace each of them, and an examination of the thought of a few selected philosophers can be instructive. Schutz (1967) sets forth as his goal to remake the interpretive sociology of Max Weber by directly addressing the phenomenon of meaning in the social context. Schutz, recognizing the ontological challenge inherent in an interpretive sociology, sees the need to account for the alter ego, the other self. He sees a definite limitation to understanding the alter ego, in that, “the concept of the ‘other mind’ is from the standpoint of science epistemologically superfluous; and that statements about other minds are scientifically meaningless since they lack empirical content” (Schutz, 1967, p. 21). In other words, the transcendental ego is precisely that – transcendental, and cannot be understood in the same way the ego understands itself. (This dilemma is faced by Husserl, who struggled, not altogether successfully, to respond to charge of inevitable solipsism, the ego only able to admit to its own existence.)

The methodological challenge Schutz identifies is the derivation of a means of understanding intentional acts when we have access only to what is said and what is done by the other. His solution is, in part, to assume that while the lived experience of the other is not identical to that of the “I”, a cognitive process of consciousness describes both. That cognitive process, the human apperception of experience, is, according to Schutz, sufficiently shared that it can lead to interpretation of the meaning of intentional acts. So, for Schutz (1967, p. 241), “the social sciences can understand man in his everyday social life not as a living individual person with a unique consciousness, but only as a personal ideal type without duration or spontaneity”. Herein lies a persistent problem for research and praxis in information work. An information seeker may articulate a query, and the respondent is faced with attempting to understand the meaning of the query. The human interlocutor can engage in a dialogue with the information seeker so as to enhance understanding of what is really sought. An information system may have an iterative function so that feedback is provided by the system to the seeker and the seeker can revise or reframe the query. We will return to this challenge later.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, throughout his all-too-brief life, addressed phenomenology through the particular question of how individuals perceive the world and, further, how they perceive those perceptions. As do all phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty seeks to delve deeper than a naïve empiricism, and to reach what could be called a meeting of minds (or perhaps more appropriately, a meeting of selves). In his major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 58), he writes:

> Once the prejudice of sensation has been banished, a face, a signature, a form of behaviour cease to be mere “visual data” whose psychological meaning is to be sought in our inner experience, and the mental life of others becomes an immediate object, a whole charged with immanent meaning.

Inherent in this statement is Merleau-Ponty’s hostility to behaviorism, particularly the reductionism of John Watson. In his own study of psychology Merleau-Ponty is much more sympathetic (although not entirely sympathetic) to the *Gestalt* school. This sympathy is evident throughout *The Phenomenology of Perception* as he maintains that, as someone perceives something it is not possible to perceive the perception simultaneously; the latter requires a reflective action that is a separate and unique event. Moran (2000, p. 416) points out that Merleau-Ponty is also hostile to behaviorists’ narrow conception of rationality, which he finds deterministic and mechanistic. Merleau-Ponty’s (1964, pp. 23-4) critique of behaviorism extends in some ways to *Gestalt* psychology, in so far as each reduces behavior to a “scientistic or positivistic ontology”.

It is understanding of perception that, for Merleau-Ponty, counters the limitations of narrow empiricism and the illusions of narrow intellectualism. Madison (1982, p. 20) illustrates the trouble Merleau-Ponty sees with both:

> For empiricism the subject is but an object in the objective world; for intellectualism the world is still an objective world only with this difference, that now it exists as such only for a consciousness which projects it before itself.

Throughout *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty’s goal is to establish the acceptance of a continuum of objectivism to subjectivism; in this Merleau-Ponty is arguing against an idea of Cartesian dualism that separates the two absolutely (Macann, 1993, pp. 193-4). At the risk of oversimplifying, Merleau-Ponty is connecting “I perceive” with “I perceive something.” As he (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 372) says:

> It is either to reduce experience to a collection of psychological events, in which the I is merely the overall name or the hypothetical cause, in which case it is not clear how my existence is more certain than that of anything, since it is no longer immediate, save at a fleeting instant; or else it is to recognize as anterior to events a field and a system of thoughts which is subject neither to time nor to any other limitation.

Another contribution Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 177) makes to phenomenology is his explanation of speech as phenomenon, which is, again, a refutation of empiricism and intellectualism (“the word has a meaning”). There is, as a counter to both flawed ideas, a voluntary action on both sides of the word articulated – there is a language of which the word is part and of which a person is conscious prior to the word’s articulation; and there is thought or an expression of the word as representation and as cognitive intention. In keeping with his explication of speech as phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty
points out speech is not merely the product of thought; it is the culmination and accomplishment of thought. He (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 180) says:

We must recognize first of all that thought, in the speaking subject, is not a representation, that is, that it does not expressly posit objects or relations. The orator does not think before speaking; his speech is his thought.

One of the key elements of phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty offers for LIS is the conjoining of ontology and epistemology:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xx).

We come to knowledge in the process of Mitsein, of being-with-others.

Emmanuel Levinas contributes two elements of phenomenology that are integral to our purposes here – a full comprehension of the other, and the ethical relationship between self and other. For both of these elements Levinas (1998, p. 131) expresses a debt to Husserl:

No one combated the dehumanization of the Real better than Husserl, the dehumanization which is produced when one extends the categories proper to mathematized matter to the totality of our experience, when one elevates scientism to absolute knowledge ... Husserl's phenomenology has furnished the principal means for substituting a human world for the world as physicomathematical science represents it.

That said, Levinas criticizes what he sees as Husserl’s overemphasis on intentionality as a diminishing of experience (although it could be said that Levinas reads this diminution into Husserl while it may not be as damaging as he thinks it is). Levinas provides a unique interpretation of the other as alter ego; while almost all other philosophers place complete stress on ego, Levinas stresses alter. It is in the manifest otherness that interaction lies. As have others before him, Levinas admits that the other is not simply another I; there is a distance, but the distance is what the self must be aware of so that an ethical relationship can be developed. The ethics of Levinas could be called unconventional; it is not rooted in classical or modern thought. Ethics is marked by a nonreciprocal relationship; the self cannot, has no right to, expect the other to have the same responsibilities. It is only in the self’s admission of the other’s existence and voice that an ethical relationship inheres (Davis, 1996, pp. 47-53).

A primary space for the relationship between self and other is discourse. Discourse is where possibilities for understanding exist, but it also where misunderstanding can get in the way of the relationship. It is through discourse that there is exchange, and exchange can be defined as both speaking and hearing. The responsibility of the self is to affirm the autonomy of the other both through what the self says (and in the saying the self is responsible for speaking truth) and hearing what is said by the other. According to Levinas (1969, p. 178):

in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response – acuteness of the present – engenders me for responsibility ... Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other.

The challenge for Levinas is the constraint of language, which he claims is essentially inadequate to express what the self grasps through apprehending a phenomenon.
Davis (1996, p. 90) points out that speech and text include the enigma, the puzzlement of language that serves to hide rather than reveal. In practical terms, discourse becomes hidden if it degenerates into rhetoric:

Rhetoric, absent from no discourse, . . . approaches the other not to face him, but obliquely—not, to be sure, as a thing, since rhetoric remains conversation, and across all its artifices goes unto the Other, solicits his yes (Levinas, 1969, p. 70).

Through his writings Levinas makes it clear that phenomenology is a critical exercise that is never completed, since we are all works in progress. It is in the critical aspect of phenomenology that the possibility for knowledge resides. He (Levinas, 1969, p. 82) says:

Knowing becomes knowing of a fact only if it is at the same time critical, if it puts itself into question, goes back beyond its origin—in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one's own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom.

Knowledge, like the self, is a work in progress, a journey made alone and with the other. Discourse, embodying the ontological (the realization of being in conversation with the other) and the epistemological (as a locus for possible meaning, even through texts and not direct conversation).

It may seem obvious that phenomenology has an interpretive element (as Heidegger noticed), but for some theorists hermeneutics is vital to phenomenology. Also, as might be expected, an interpretive aspect of phenomenology has language and what may be called language events as its focus (including authorship, reading, and discourse). A sense, if not an explicit acknowledgement, of interpretation is evident in many philosophers, but interpretation comes to the fore in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. The work of Merleau-Ponty, among others, introduces perception as integral to phenomenology; Ricoeur’s writings guide phenomenological investigation through an emphasis on language. Ihde (1971, p. 7) observes:

Ricoeur’s phenomenology opens the way for a second breaking of the bounds under the sign of hermeneutics. Ricoeur begins the shift from a perceptualist phenomenological model to a linguistic phenomenology.

Hermeneutics, as applied interpretation, has its own substantial history. Palmer (1969) thoroughly reviews this history and recognizes an ineluctable connection with phenomenology in the lived experience of interpretation. Ricoeur recognizes the history and extends the scope of hermeneutics, particularly through the introduction of what Max Scheler refers to as a phenomenological attitude. In order to adopt this attitude Ricoeur and any other hermeneutic phenomenologist must admit that the key to interpretation lies in understanding the joint yet distinct phenomena of language (langue, or what can be said) and speech (parole, or what is said). The resulting understanding is essential to knowledge.

Ricoeur’s (1991, p. 16) interpretive stance has clear implications for LIS and many of its concerns. Interpretive action can be applied only to discursive practice in some form, and simply to language as a whole:

First of all I came to realize that no symbolism, whether traditional or private, can display its resources of multiple meaning (plurivociété) outside appropriate contexts, that is to say, within the framework of an entire text, of a poem, for example.
To this we can add a mediated information query, a search for meaningful information, a judgment about the relevance of retrieved information. While written and spoken discursive practice is at the heart of Ricoeur’s concern, his approach is not so radically removed from the aforementioned philosophers. For example, perception is comprehended through linguistic translation of the experience of perceiving, and an ethics-based understanding of the other is mediated through speech. Indeed, all of the lifeworld is apprehended linguistically, or at least semiotically. He does develop some of the key points that Husserl makes and transforms them from an idealist transcendental phenomenology to a praxis-oriented pragmatics of understanding being. While Husserl attempts to derive the foundation of being and the transcendental ego, Ricoeur (1991, pp. 32-3) recognizes that, through interpretation, neither origination nor finality can be located:

In what sense is the development of all understanding in interpretation opposed to the Husserlian project of ultimate foundation? Essentially in the sense that all interpretation places the interpreter in medias res and never at the beginning or the end.

There is one other element of Ricoeur’s work that should be acknowledged in LIS. He is clearly influenced by the work of Levinas; he inquires deeply into the relationship of self and other. He sees it as a dialectical and shifting relationship; one speaks and then the other speaks and the interaction is both limited and freed by the interpretation of speech. Also, in an Aristotelian vein, Ricoeur (1992, pp. 172-94) claims the importance of an ethical imperative – the good life, e.g. a life fulfilled and guided by purpose (telos) – that is manifest with and for others. This position is a fundamentally ontological one; being, for the self, is interdependent on the being of the other. Ethical aims are achieved, not in solitude, but in a mutual and mutually dependent relationship with the other. The third element of Ricoeur’s ethical imperative (following the good life as realized with and for others) is that the praxis, the fulfillment of the relationship, occurs within a just institution. He (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 194) sees that:

What fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules. In this, we are carried back to the ethos from which ethics takes its name.

Commenting on Ricoeur’s inclusion of the institution, Dauenhauer (2002, p. 211) points out:

Institutions provide a way of including more people in a community than interpersonal or face-to-face relations could. The also extend the efficacy of actions or practices over long spans of time. Through institutions and the distributions they make, the ethical aim is extended to include within the circle of concern many more people than could be encompassed by “I-you” relationships.

The information setting can certainly extend beyond an I-you relationship. The construction of a thesaurus or body of subject headings or descriptors, the design of an information system, the structure of a physical library or information agency all contain the phenomenological necessity for ethical inclusion of the other as part of the institutional being.
Phenomenology and LIS

The foregoing brief background on phenomenology provides the context for an examination of the potential for knowledge growth in LIS. Some examples of implications for praxis have been mentioned; it is now time to delve more deeply into the epistemological possibilities. One of these areas is the study of reading. I begin this section with reading because it is more than a reception of aesthetic objects; it is itself a perceptual process of cognition. A substantive concern within LIS centers on the reception of texts (and the reception, as was just noted, is not limited to creative works, but extends to anything that can be “read”). Some of the connections between reading and phenomenology are obvious: we are conscious of the text through perception; this consciousness is an intentional mental act; the critical assessment of the text is based on epistemological standards; language, and especially speech, are the focal points of perception; and interpretive action is applied in an effort to reach understanding. Iser (1974, p. 275) emphasizes that a literary work is more than simply the text, but is the product of experience and perception:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.

Segueing from reading in a strict sense to reading as what we may call a receptive phenomenon aimed at finding meaning does not require much of a leap. Bakhtin (1986, p. 107) tells us that:

A human act is a potential text and can be understood (as a human act and not a physical action) only in the dialogic context of its time (as a rejoinder, as a semantic position, as a system of motives).

The dialogue Bakhtin speaks of is an explicit explanation of one element of phenomenology that remains tacit in the writings of most philosophers. Any consideration of self and other, though, must admit to a dialogic relationship. Further, dialogue (in the sense used here) is more than a dyadic conversation in two important ways:

1. it is symbolic of social communication in practice generally (Bernard-Donals, 1994, p. 34); and
2. it is representative of a cognitive, as well as a linguistic, exchange.

It should be noted that the cognitive aspect of the reception of signs is not a narrow physicalist property and does not result in reification of thought, reading, or informing. It may be illustrative to refer to some work in LIS that embodies at least some of the elements of phenomenology as summarized here. Overwhelmingly this work does not openly acknowledge the phenomenological “attitude,” but there definitely are projects that attempt to go beyond naive empiricism and other scientistic models of inquiry and even recognize explicitly the shortcomings of empiricism (see Fugmann, 1999). Some rather early, and imperfect, efforts at comprehending the complexity of intentional consciousness, perception, and recognition of self and other realized through interpretive action signal a beginning of epistemological progress. Writings by Belkin and others on cognition and information, while problematic (see Frohmann, 1992), seek to accept that individuals interpret the world and their perception of it (Belkin and Robertson, 1976), and operate within anomalous states of knowledge (Belkin, 1980).
Ingwersen (1995, p. 96) admits that information is only potentially informing until it is perceived by someone, and that there is an intentionality at work in the process of perception. What is evident in the aforementioned work is admission of the absence of a single, unchanging, and universal position regarding information retrieval. Unfortunately, the admission is replaced by a too-constrained and inflexible model that is not sufficient to enable epistemic vitality. Scheler (1973, p. 159) illustrates the shortcoming of the cognitive approach as it is frequently applied in information science:

The theory of cognition . . . is a discipline which does not precede or ground phenomenology, but follows it . . . There is no cognition without prior recognition; there is no recognition without the prior existence and self-givenness of the things recognized.

In a different mode, writings by Dervin (1977, 1989) and Kuhlthau (1994) demonstrate that meaning cannot be imposed on an individual, that the individual mind engages in a complicated assessment and interpretation. The almost complete attention to the individual, however, does not recognize the dialogic nature of consciousness and the other. As Frohmann (1992, p. 375) points out, both sets of work reduce complex praxis to a narrowly interior construction of identity.

More recently there has been some work that comes closer to achieving the phenomenological goals. One example is Erdelez’s (1996) exploration of “information encountering” as a less prescriptive and deterministic process than is information retrieval. In order to encounter information (that is, the accidental discovery of useful information with an explicit recognition that the information is useful) a person must be open to perceiving all that is present and to allow the information that is present to be subject to intentional consciousness. She also notes that systems could be designed to incorporate less deterministic retrieval. In a similar vein, Foster and Ford (2003) examine serendipity, accepting that serendipity is more than the mere passive happening on information, but is an active and intentional process. Researchers who admit to serendipitous information discoveries report employing strategies and accepting stances that create opportunities for the finding of information. These examples are not full adoption of the phenomenological attitude, but they do mark a departure from more limited epistemological positions.

There is further potential revealed in projects undertaken by others. Gross (1999) examines an ontological distinction that exists between categories of users’ queries in libraries. The vast majority of inquiry into user questioning begins with the premise that it is the user her/himself who generates the question. User generation of questions is, of course, a legitimate and important field of study. It ignores, however, a rather common occurrence, particularly one resulting from educational experiences – what Gross call the imposed query. An imposed query may, for example, follow the directive of a teacher to a student to locate information on a given topic. A phenomenological approach is not explicit in Gross’s inquiry, but her future work might benefit from examination of the particular lived experience of a user expressing an imposed query and the ethical-phenomenological stance of the librarian or mediator that incorporates interpretation based on attention to the other. In a somewhat related line of study, Hjørland (2003) writes of social and cultural awareness and responsibility as central to LIS. He critiques a psychologism that focuses too much on the individual and says:
This seems to bring the user in control in relation to his or her information need. However, because such studies overwhelmingly are based on assumptions about human beings related to behaviorism, this impression is not correct (Hjørland, 2003, p. 88).

To be successful, Hjørland’s suggestion necessarily includes a dialogic process aimed at understanding.

While it is impossible to review all of the work in LIS that includes at least a phenomenological attitude, the writings of a few individuals merit special mention. Cornelius (1996, p. 2) provides one of the most sustained and cohesive pieces that incorporates many phenomenological tenets into:

An interpretive approach [that] gives practice an enhanced role in theory construction for the field by binding practice and theory into a closer and more complex relationship.

His approach builds on the need to construct shared meaning through discursive practice, reflective praxis, and perception. It is the sharing of meaning that is, perhaps, the integral dialogic imperative that is necessary for genuine informing.

What would a phenomenological study in LIS look like? Let us consider mediation services in information agencies. Any interaction between an information seeker and an information professional is a discursive event. An examination of such events in, say, libraries can draw from the work referred to here. For example, the examination can inquire into the dispositions of the professionals and ask how they “receive” the questions of information seekers. Do the professionals assume that the information seekers’ questions represent objects or relations, or do they assume that the seekers’ speech is their thought? Both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas point to the limitations of language in communicating meaning and perception. Given the limitation, how do the professionals respond to the questions – do they immediately offer a proposed solution to a problem (in some ways reifying the question), or do they engage in a dialogue in which both actors expose something of themselves? Is there mutual reflection (not merely individual introspection) and critical exchange in which rhetoric is minimized? This kind of study could be based on these kinds of research questions and could be conducted in real settings with observations of mediation exchanges.

In the process of the exchanges the inquirer would be able to observe the extent to which states of knowledge (or at least knowledge claims) are also exchanged as part of the dialogic mediation event. Further, the interpretive actions, where they exist, of both professionals and information seekers could be examined in detail. The extent to which the discursive act includes a cognitive exchange could be assessed. The study would have some necessarily anthropological aspects, in the sense of Geertz’s (1973) advocacy of “thick” description of the experiences of both actors in an authentic setting. Interviews with professionals and information seekers could shed even more light on the outcome of the mediation and the experiences of those involved in the act. This brief sketch of a possible study embodies several of the key elements of phenomenology and points not only to a research application, but to the implications of the study’s results for praxis.

**Summary/conclusion**

This all-too-brief treatment of phenomenology and LIS is likely to raise more questions than to provide answers. To reiterate a point made by Scheler, phenomenology is not a method, but an attitude; it is extra-methodological. The preceding is not intended as a
dismissal of, for instance, quantitative data, but it is intended to illustrate the limitations of such research. As Bakhtin (1993, p. 44) reminds us:

The category of experiencing the actual world, actual Being – as event – is a category of uniqueness or singularity. To experience an object is to have it as something actually unique or singular, but this singularity of the object and of the world, presupposes its being correlated with my own uniqueness or singularity.

Lifeworld, or lived experience, is individual. Each person perceives, intends, interprets. Phenomena such as relevance judgments are understood in various ways, but the phenomenological approach offers understanding in a way that others cannot. Further, an understanding of the tools we employ can also be grasped phenomenologically:

[T]echnologies must be understood phenomenologically, i.e. as belonging in different ways to our experience and use of technologies, as a human-technology relation, rather than abstractly conceiving of them as mere objects (Ihde, 1993, p. 34).

I am not quite as optimistic as Wilson (2002) is, but I do agree with him that “we can then firmly ground our attempts at research education in that philosophical framework [phenomenology]”. The foregoing is an effort at such a grounding.

References
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