

Paradigms, Praxis and Environmental Phenomenology

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There is only one thing that a philosopher can be relied upon to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers.

-William James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet"

That philosophy might offer more than a history of contradictions and theoretical debates described by James in 1904, is promising once one recalls Husserl's phenomenological dictum: "To the things themselves!" (2001: 168.) Reacting to a western metaphysical tradition that for centuries prioritized universalizing speculation to the messiness of the lived world, phenomenologists from Husserl onwards arguably shifted the attention from merely abstract, scholarly debate to a different kind of engaged, philosophical commitment and understanding of being-in-the-world.

To be sure, the argument can be made that many phenomenologists and their postmodern cousins continued to principally argue concepts in a war of words. However, others paid heed to the call for a new kind of philosophical engagement in the *Lebenswelt*, illustrating in a concrete way how philosophy itself as a discipline deserves to be rethought in terms of everyday challenges of *praxis* and lived experience. (Briggle *et.al.*, 2015; Frodeman, 2014.)

This chapter explores the intersection of phenomenology and environment, specifically from the perspective of what it means for phenomenology to be "applied" in an interdisciplinary setting. To provide some context, select examples illustrate how phenomenology has come to operate beyond the discipline of philosophy proper, informing non-philosophical enquiry from lived nursing practice to the design of built environments. A more focused, in-depth discussion follows, illustrating, in a practical sense, how phenomenological and hermeneutic methods are

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helping to uncover taken for granted paradigm shifts in our very understanding of the meaning of “environment,” specifically as it has informed four decades of university curriculum programming in Canada. We describe and critically reflect upon paradigm shifts that reveal changing values of interdisciplinarity and interpretations of “environment,” emerging from the early 1970s, when many environmental programs were developed, to present day. Ultimately, the aim of the chapter is to consider how phenomenology can move beyond traditional philosophical boundaries to impact our understanding of a broad range of environmental issues from policy development to education.

Part One addresses how phenomenology opens the door to a fundamental rethinking of the meaning of philosophical engagement in interdisciplinary settings. Over the years, interest has emerged in what some call “phenomenology in practice” and certainly, there have been calls in the field of environmental philosophy for a different kind of phenomenological engagement in interpreting environmental priorities. (Madjar and Walton, 1999; Stefanovic, 1987.) How such moves reflect a distinct vision of philosophy than that caricatured by James, above – and how that vision calls for a unique notion of philosophy as “lived” in the environmental field – is discussed.

Part Two presents a case study, describing how phenomenological and hermeneutic methodologies have structured an investigation of shifting interpretations of interdisciplinarity, specifically within the field of what has for decades been described in Canada as “environmental studies.” Interviews with key university leaders across the nation draw from a qualitative, phenomenological approach, in an effort to uncover strengths and weaknesses of interdisciplinary, environmental curriculum design. In addition, a hermeneutic investigation of post-secondary curriculum content from the 1970s to the present aims to identify paradigm shifts in our understanding of both “interdisciplinarity” and “environment”.

Part Three then assesses the significance of phenomenology as it informs a different sort of environmental engagement for the discipline of philosophy itself.

I: Phenomenology in Practice

In his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty poses the question: “What is phenomenology? It may seem strange,” he continues, “that this question has still to be asked half

a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered.” (1962: vii.)

Martin Heidegger himself attempted to address the question, noting that “within phenomenological inquiry, there are...differing definitions of its nature and its tasks. But even if these differences in defining the nature of phenomenology could be brought to a consensus,” he mused, “it would remain doubtful whether the concept of phenomenology thus attained, a sort of *average concept*, could direct us toward the concrete problems to be chosen.” (1982: 2.) Undoubtedly, Spiegelberg has it right when he notes that phenomenology, as “on the way”, is best described as a *movement* instead of a definitive doctrine. (1960)

That being said, recently, some have suggested that phenomenology, together with postmodernism, deconstructionism, poststructuralism and so on, remains within the realm of “theoretical” approaches that “litter” the field, serving as nothing more than “windows with shutters, ways of seeing that close doors.” (Denzin, 1992: 22.) In such cases, the conclusion is that “standard theories are no longer working” and there is a need for a “different approach” – perhaps one that experiments with new forms of “visual and heard representations.” (Denzin, 1992: 22; 26)

Our own sense is that drawing upon the notion of “phenomenology” continues to be relevant, precisely because it was originally interpreted, as Heidegger notes above, as *other* than a universalizing “average concept” or theory that closes doors and shutters thinking. Sensitive to the fact that experience is multi-layered, complex, temporal and embodied, the classic term always did capture the need to understand our emplacement as ontological, nuanced and essentially mysterious. Moving beyond metaphysical hypostatization; recognizing that thought encompasses much more than a narrow rationality; acknowledging that experience is historical, changing and open to futural possibilities, phenomenology seems to continue to capture ways of being in the world that elude other speculative, reifying theoretical approaches to understanding.

Equally, phenomenology’s focus on the *lived* world has meant that essential to its vision is to bridge the long-standing, metaphysical divide between theory and practice. To engage in phenomenological thinking is to illumine concrete, everyday taken-for-granted ways of being-in-the-world, rather than to fabricate theoretical constructs. That such structures of understanding

are described less as *actualities* but rather as possibilities of encounter is captured well by Werner Marx, who reminds us that what makes studies phenomenological is:

“the way that they address the issues through an appeal to *experience*, not simply as a report about the author’s own individual factual experiences or indeed necessarily about anyone’s actual experience, but about the possibility of certain kinds of experiences which any reader should be able to recreate imaginatively on his or her own and thereby see that the possibility for such an experience is universal, even if the reality is not.”
(1992: 6.)

That engagement in uncovering elements of possibility within *lived* experience suggests a new approach to philosophy proper. To some, it means a natural extension and “application” of philosophy to the lived world but our reading of this engagement is quite different than such a top-down model might suggest. Instead, we see the intersection of phenomenology, and lived experience to be essentially iterative and transformative of both philosophy and *praxis*. Martin Heidegger has it right when he notes that it is “correct and proper” to conclude that we can’t *do* anything with philosophy. At the same time, “granted that *we* cannot do anything with philosophy, might not philosophy, if we concern ourselves with it, do something *with us*?”
(Heidegger, 1959: 10.)

For a work to be phenomenological, a particular sensibility is required of a researcher – a willingness to absolve oneself of the comfort of theoretical certainties and immerse oneself instead in the messy business of how life interjects itself into our apparently neat categories of understanding. Neither a matter of “applying” philosophy top-down to problems of everyday experience, nor simply an agglomeration of “bottom-up” narratives that are mere inventories of plural perspectives, phenomenology seeks to navigate the space *between* mindful interpretation and a lived world that is given, rather than simply created. Such enquiry serves to illumine taken-for-granted truths but those truths are seen as historically embedded interpretations of a world that is temporal and to that extent, never fully understood.

Perhaps because of this emphasis on a multi-layered, lived world of human experience, the phenomenological method has informed other disciplines beyond philosophy. Questioning positivist approaches to their disciplines, critics have been moved by a recognition that phenomenology offers a possibility of exploring human experience in a unique way.

Psychologists, for instance, interested in moving beyond the fragmented, reductionist, behavioural modes of enquiry prevalent to their discipline, have turned to phenomenology to inform a “constructive alternative in terms of praxis.” (Giorgi, 1970; cited in Kruger, 1979: 113.) Dukes (1984), Giorgi (1985), Polkinghorne (1989), Moustakas (1994) and others have explored ways in which the phenomenological sensibility translates to a different approach to psychology, one that is “obsessed by the concrete” and whose primary aim is to “observe, to comprehend, then to render explicit what was initially seen vaguely in the first comprehension.” (Kruger, 1979: 113.) Acknowledging that we do not experience ourselves as “pure mechanism, thing or mere organism,” phenomenological psychologists aim to rethink statistical generalizations about human behaviour, describing instead unique, individual stories of human being as “always already out there, interacting with others and the world.” (Kruger, 1979: 27.)

A similar sensibility defines phenomenological work in the nursing profession. “Interpretive phenomenology” is said to “illuminate the world of the participants, articulating taken-for-granted means, practices, habits, skills and concerns” across a wide range of issues, from caring practices for hospitalized patients, to assisting families with critical care challenges, to advising patients who are recovering from illnesses. Through their daily “bedside” experiences, care providers have come to realize that universalizing conclusions about complex, individual human needs of patients within plural environmental settings demand a different approach than that offered by analytical, positivist rules and standardized regulations. Providing assistance in such situations is seen to be better facilitated through a phenomenological approach to nursing that is guided less by a set of procedures and more through “an ethic of understanding and responsiveness.” (Benner, 1994: xvii.)

When it comes to issues of the “natural” environment, phenomenology invites a different philosophical engagement from the standard analytic model of environmental and animal ethics. Drawing upon themes of embodiment, for example, thinkers such as Stephen Smith move beyond positivist, narrowly rationalistic arguments to explore the human-animal relation by attending to “‘visible and invisible’ actions, touches, senses and energetic transfers of interspecies connectivity.” (2011: 9.) By focusing specifically on the lived experience of training horses, Smith (a rider and horse trainer himself) explores the nature of a lived communion with animals through evolving training practices that now move beyond “breaking” horses to more

interactive, relational notions of “horse gentling” and “joining up” and ultimately, “becoming other.” (Smith, 2011: 9; 15)

Smith is one of a growing number of phenomenologists who are moving into the field of environment to rethink not only “theory” but how thought itself is differently informed by way of an attentive, attuned engagement to the world as it shows itself, prior to theoretical constructs. Environmental Phenomenology has defined a new way of thinking beyond the traditional, analytic field of “environmental ethics.” The International Association for Environmental Philosophy, an outgrowth from the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), was specifically founded in order to enable gatherings of scholars and students from the tradition of Continental thought to address the challenges emerging within the relation between human being and their lived environments.⁴ The affiliated journal, originally named *Call to Earth*, eventually became the refereed publication *Environmental Philosophy*, once again signalling that environmental issues include more than simply ethics but encompass a range of lived challenges emerging from fields such as aesthetics, epistemology, feminism, postmodernism, ontology, pragmatism and much more.⁵

Attending to built environments, the field of Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology⁶ has emerged, with multiple publications about built environments, place, space and design. (Norberg-Schulz, 1979; Seamon and Mugerauer, 2000; Malpas, 1999; Casey, 1993; Stefanovic, 1987 and 2012.) Significantly, in some instances, phenomenology has actually influenced architectural *praxis*. The impact of phenomenology here has been profound inasmuch as architects themselves have turned to phenomenology to inform their designs and to rethink their profession. (Alexander, 1977; Baird, 2015.)

In such instances and more, phenomenology has inserted itself into interdisciplinary conversations that range from the architectural to health sciences. Arguably, in such cases, the impact of philosophy upon a range of practices, programs and pragmatic decisions has been felt not only in terms of the *content* but the *methodologies* employed by these non-philosophical disciplines as well. In the following section, we consider examples of such new methodologies as

⁴ For more information, please see <http://environmentalphilosophy.org/> and <http://www.spep.org/>.

⁵ For more information, please see <https://www.pdcnet.org/envirophil/Environmental-Philosophy>.

⁶ The long-standing *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter*, edited by David Seamon, is available online at <http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/eap.html>.

they have inserted themselves into an interdisciplinary conversation between phenomenology, philosophy, lived experience and diverse examples of *praxis*.

II: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and a Case Study

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of extending phenomenology into the field of architecture is undertaken by David Seamon, who builds upon Goethean phenomenological sensibilities to develop exercises to enable “looking and seeing” of patterns and relationships within our cities. (Seamon, 2012: 242) Participants are invited to move beyond mere observation to “plunge into the looking – they must literally ‘pay attention’ so that they see *with intention* rather than just having a visual impression.” (Seamon, 2012: 246.) The hope is that through such a seeing, informed by phenomenology, “we might assure a more natural city wherein at-homeness and serendipity, ordinariness and extraordinariness all have their place.” (Seamon, 2012: 252.)

Others within fields of social science have taken a similar inspiration from phenomenology to reframe standard data collection and interpretative practices. “Qualitative”, rather than quantitative methods have emerged as phenomenologically informed. (Creswell, 1998.) Acknowledging that phenomenologists “explore structures of consciousness,” qualitative research methods aim to uncover “the meaning of the lived experiences” without prejudging the content of those experiences. (Creswell, 1998: 51.) A major goal is to identify methods that avoid the imposition of rigid, theoretical presuppositions or statistically-relevant expectations upon the investigations from the start.

The phenomenological approach to *interviews*, for instance, aims to incorporate an approach that is “flexible and dynamic... nondirective, unstructured, nonstandardized and open-ended.” (Taylor and Bogdan, 88.) Researchers within the social sciences have recognized that standardized questionnaires or detailed sets of interview questions already prejudice and theoretically frame a range of possible answers. The answers one collects are already shaped, inadvertently, by the rigid, predefined format of the questions asked.

Canadian planner, Hok-Lin Leung, beautifully illustrates this point with a story about how he was approached through a telephone survey for a chain restaurant. (1992: 5-6) The

interviewer was asking whether the “all-you-can-eat” salad bar provided value for the money. “You can choose one of the following answers,” the interviewer offered. Explaining that his wife usually paid the bill, Leung asked the interviewer to remind him of the actual price of the salad bar. Citing slight differences amongst different cities, the interviewer replied that he was “not supposed to give him the price.” Leung describes how:

“Undeterred, he asked if I would go to the same restaurant in future: ‘Once a week, once a month...’ I answered, ‘It depends. I don’t eat out often but if I do, I would consider your restaurant. But I don’t really know how often I will be eating out.’ He said very apologetically that I must choose an answer from his list of answers or it would foul up his computer.” (1992: 5-6)

Leung concludes that the experience was sobering: “I must have designed many similar question-and-answer surveys in the past and had gotten numbers that were probably as useless as those I gave this hapless interviewer.” (1992: 6) Quoting Terkel, Leung concludes that traditional, positivist survey techniques “may be of value in determining favoured detergents, toothpastes and deodorants but not in the discovery of men and women...It is foolish,” he muses, “to insist on unambiguous and logical answers. We must listen to all they say and then try to make sense of what we have heard.” (1992: 7.)

Seeking to enable such listening by avoiding the imposition of theoretical presuppositions, interviews are seen to be phenomenologically informed to the extent that they are conducted with minimal theoretical preconceptions, allowing for unexpected intrusions of the richness of lived experience to inform the research findings. In contrast to quantitative statistical surveys of the sort that Leung’s interviewer was hoping to conduct, “qualitative” phenomenological interview methods allow for in-depth understanding of both explicitly articulated, as well as implicitly understood, pre-thematic interpretive moments to infuse the interview process.

Typically, no more than 15-25 interviews are conducted with “key informants” – although some argue that neither the number nor the type of informants necessarily needs to be specified in advance. Utilizing a “flexible research design,” the researcher “starts out with a general idea of which people to interview and how to find them, but is willing to change course after the initial interviews.” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998: 92.) In the end, one is expected to use

one's judgment to determine when adding additional interview subjects would yield no genuinely new insights. (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998: 93.)

Interview transcriptions are subsequently analyzed as part of the interpretive research process to determine both spontaneously-emerging commonalities amongst plural perspectives of interview subjects, as well as unique perspectives and insights that are allowed to emerge in individual cases, given the open-ended interview structure. Sophisticated tracking techniques are often utilized through computer programs such as NVivo, allowing for the grouping of ideas that surface through the narratives.

Clearly, such unstructured interviews and interpretations that draw upon judgment calls of the researchers themselves call for a different sort of academic rigour than specified in quantificational methods of enquiry. On the one hand, the researcher "as recorder and editor" of the interviews "has a heavy hand in their production." (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998: 135.) At the same time, the aim is to not arbitrarily project one's own interpretation upon the enquiry but, on the contrary, to be open to the world, to listen carefully and gather information about a phenomenon that exceeds the parameters of rigidly pre-defined conceptual borders, in the hope of ensuring original and hopefully uniquely informative and nuanced findings.

At times, social scientists draw from Husserlean notions – experimenting somewhat controversially in my view, with the notion of epoché and bracketing. Phenomenological data analysis is said to proceed "through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all [sic] possible meanings. The researcher also sets aside all prejudgments, bracketing (see epoché) his or her experiences...and relying on intuition, imagination and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experiences." (Creswell, 1998: 52.) To be sure, phenomenological philosophers will find much that is problematic in such statements, from the notion that "all" meanings are ever accessible to the notion that we can ever fully "bracket" one's experiences. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that references to Husserl's notion of "bracketing" and intentionality are frequent within the qualitative research literature.

Altogether, the unstructured, "qualitative" interview process employed within the social sciences is said to build upon a phenomenological sensibility that avoids positivist categorizations, essentializing theoretical constructs and reified research findings. Instead, by attending "to the things themselves," the aim is to hear and interpret in a more fluid, open-ended

fashion how unique life experiences are reported and understood within a context that is unconstrained by speculative constructs. Whether or not philosophers themselves see the merit in this exercise, the fact is that social scientists have built an extensive library of publications around such qualitative methods and, to my mind, those approaches would not have arisen without the contributions of phenomenology in the first place.

That phenomenology is core, then, to both the discipline of philosophy as well as other qualitative, social science research perspectives is clear. In these cases, phenomenology is seen to be less a distinctive, linear methodology than a sensibility toward interpreting lived experience – one that remains open to the unexpected, to plural realities and to temporality and change in understanding such experience.

A case in point emerges through an ongoing study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC.) The title for the project is “Interpreting Interdisciplinarity: The Case of Environmental Studies.” It was motivated by an interest in understanding and helping to resolve challenges relating to interdisciplinary teaching and research collaborations, particularly in the field of environment, which presents its own set of “wicked” problems that defy disciplinary parameters. (Brown *et.al.*, 2010.) It was also very much inspired by phenomenological and hermeneutic interests, which ensure that we seek to understand both explicit as well as implicit perceptions and worldviews that drive environmental decision making. (Stefanovic, 1987; 2012.)

In the case of this particular project, some standard information was collected in order to develop an inventory of Canadian university environmental units and to survey some general impressions about program offerings across the country. In addition, however, several activities were undertaken that were explicitly informed by phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. On the one hand, a set of interviews were undertaken, following the qualitative approach described above. On the other hand, we were also curious about paradigm shifts that may have occurred from the 1970s, when many university environmental programs were developed, and so a hermeneutic exercise guided that set of activities.

Interviews were scheduled with just over 20 leaders of environment programs in universities from coast to coast. A short set of questions was prepared in advance in order to help to kick-start each conversation. For instance, in addition to asking respondents to briefly describe

their own offerings, the conversations typically included a question about perceptions of the meaning of “environmental studies” and shifting interpretations over time. The interviews were conducted in a way that was spontaneous, unstructured and allowed for the respondent to lead the discussion in directions that they themselves felt to be significant. These narratives were then transcribed for purposes of interpretation and analysis. Even a survey that we sent out to about 100 university administrators and leaders (with just over a 30% response rate) was organized in such a way that questions allowed for extensive comments to be inserted, ensuring that a normally “quantitative” survey invited spontaneous, “qualitative” reflections from respondents.

In addition, a second strategy aimed to elicit evolving paradigms of interdisciplinarity and environmental programming. Drawing from hermeneutics, we were interested to see how language variations and changing interpretations of environmental concepts emerged over the decades, from the 1960s/1970s, when many university programs were launched. As phenomenologist Stephen Smith points out, “what we experience is inseparable from the linguistic framing of experiences such that what is seen, felt, tasted, touched, heard and smelled is already loaded with sense-making structure.” (2011: 7.) By collecting and comparing the language emerging from course and program descriptions a decade apart, we were hoping to identify how different modes of expression reflected distinctive paradigm shifts in the interpretation of “environmental studies” (as the broad, interdisciplinary field was originally called.) Eight universities were selected from across Canada, ensuring that: (1) their programming roots extended at least from the early 1970s to present day; (2) there was a certain prominence (quality and quantity) of environmental programming, compared to other schools; and (3) the study was geographically representative, not only drawn from the west to east coasts but also including francophone offerings from Quebec, given that both French and English are official languages of Canada.⁷

In this part of the project, we were inspired by similar work undertaken some years ago, where researchers aimed to identify paradigm shifts in water research through the framework of language shifts within a range of international environmental treaties. (Bielak and Mount, 2011.) Beginning with the 1972 landmark “Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations Conference on

⁷ The eight universities were the University of British Columbia; Simon Fraser University, BC; University of Manitoba; University of Toronto; York University, Ontario; University of Waterloo, Ontario; Sherbrooke University, Quebec; and Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia.

the Human Environment,” eleven treaties were explored, ending with the Dushanbe Declaration on Water in 2010. Acknowledging that language shifts were often non-deliberate, the authors were able to identify not only a growing prominence of water issues within environmental treaties over the decades but also novel ways of understanding water security with respect to newly emerging issues such as gender equity and health. They were also able to critically reflect on meanings embedded in key terms: “sanitation”, for instance, is a word that may well distance us from the genuine, lived realities of lack of plumbing and inadequate toilet facilities that plague the developing world.

Drawing from a similar intuition that linguistic changes reflect implicit paradigm shifts, we analyzed transitions of language within university curricula over the decades, in an effort to understand how environmental concepts are differently understood and expressed today than when university-level programs emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Course as well as program content was evaluated over all five decades using a variety of methods. Analysis was done on the complete course listing as well as subsets of the data, including examining only those courses that spanned at least four decades, exploring changes in wording across introductory courses, and examining changes in required course requirements at the program level. Finally, a holistic approach was taken to identify courses that reappeared over the lifetime of a program, meaning that not only the course content but other factors – such as whether they were required or optional, whether they were prerequisites and so on – were taken into consideration when identifying salient courses as research focii.

All courses were reviewed and coded, using key subject themes for all decades and all disciplines. Word frequency over time revealed the top 100 words used, within each decade, helping us to identify changing environmental priorities as revealed through shifts in curriculum content and design.

A number of findings emerged from the interviews and the hermeneutic deconstruction of programming shifts over the decades.

First, there were definite signs that the term “environmental studies” has come to signify something different today for most – albeit not all – research participants. Significantly, when the term “environmental studies” emerged in the 1970s, it was explicitly defined as an interdisciplinary approach that integrated the humanities, social sciences, sciences and the

professions. For instance, page 13 of York University's Faculty of Environment Handbook for the academic calendar year 1970-1971 states that in establishing the Faculty of Environmental Studies, the “focus of concern of the Faculty is upon man [sic] in relation to his physical, biological, cultural and social environments.”

In contrast, today more than in the 1970s, we hear university leaders actually distinguishing between “environmental studies,” on the one hand, and “environmental science” on the other. One interviewee described environmental *studies* bluntly as “a mixture of courses from a BA program.” Others used the word “policy” to characterize the field. A number of interviewees remarked that environmental *studies* is broader than environmental *science*, focusing more on the intersection between the “physical” and “social components of the environment” rather than merely the “physical component.”

This emerging distinction is also reflected in the course content and arrangement within programs. Where Environmental Science courses were previously (and briefly) included as part of the Environmental Studies program, they eventually separated into their own degree or program. Environmental science courses are now largely focused on earth systems, biology and other natural science disciplines, while Environmental Studies courses are focused on the human-nature relationship. In one case, a respondent felt that environmental *studies* has changed in the public eye. “I believe they [the public] often see it as a non-specialized degree in which students are opting for an easy path – they do not see it as a real subject.” Environmental *science*, by contrast, was described more narrowly by reference to such terms as “biophysical,” “technical” and “quantitative.”

The fact that this broad notion of interdisciplinary “environmental studies” from the 1970s has come to be understood as privileging the humanities and social sciences more than environmental *sciences* is perhaps not surprising, given that this large, “holistic” and in some sense universalizing notion of environment that emerged decades ago has shifted in other ways as well.

Since the 1970s, both the notions of “environment” and “interdisciplinarity” have become far richer, more mature, complex, problems-based and pluralistic in nature. For instance, broad-based courses in “Environmental Planning” were offered in the early days at York University in Toronto. By the late 1980s, nuances begin to develop through offerings in “Urban and Regional

Planning,” “Recreation Planning,” and “Theory and Planning of Rural Land Use.” By 2009-10, there is an even larger variety of entries that include “Landscape Ecology in Planning,” “Community Planning and Housing,” “Land Use Planning and Law”, “Politics and Planning” and “GIS Applications in Planning and Resource Management” – indicating not only a greater *quantity* of offerings in the broad area of Environmental Planning but also a far *richer*, and more nuanced diversity of courses, reflecting the need to explore these issues in greater *depth*.

In the words of one respondent, program changes over the decades reflect that “a change has occurred in how environmental change itself is understood.” While previously environments were perceived as “largely stable, predictable and manageable,” today there has been a paradigm shift that recognizes that “complex systems are unpredictable and hence more challenging.” As a result, “discourse has broadened” and become more “complex.”

In addition, interdisciplinary courses have become more *applied and problems-based*, focusing less on abstract *theory* and more on *skills-based learning*. For example, course offerings in Environmental Impact Assessments of GIS skill-sets became commonplace across most programs in later decades. This shift to more applied or career-focused course was also reflected in the surveys and interviews: one survey respondent felt that “the holistic goals of environmental studies have been increasingly supplemented by more *career-directed outcomes* based in environmental science.” In our interviews, respondents expressed their views that a problems-based approach was “the best way to bring students from diverse backgrounds into dialogue with one another.”

To be sure, the reorientation of academic courses to incorporate more learning outcomes and objectives that align with career needs may not be unique to Environmental Studies/Science, but rather, it may reflect a broader academic shift that emphasizes closer relationships between the academic community and industry and a desire to produce students that are “job ready.”

Finally, “interdisciplinarity” itself seems to be understood today in unique ways, when compared to earlier decades. Interdisciplinary systems thinking seems to be less about constructing universalizing, integrative syntheses and more about acknowledging and respecting plurality, complexity and *difference*. As one interviewee put it, becoming an interdisciplinarian involves “challenging the discourse or the way you articulate ideas.” Our survey revealed that over half of the respondents identify modest to considerable *shifts* in the meaning of

interdisciplinarity over the decades. While it has come to mean “blending social and natural sciences to answer bigger, more complex questions,” one participant felt that “the questions are no longer the ones being asked 50 years ago.” In fact, our hermeneutic work confirms that new issues, from a growing international focus, to questions of sustainable development, environmental impact assessment and environmental ethics – have emerged only recently in the interdisciplinary environmental arena of university course offerings.

The qualitative analysis of the full range of data collected on this project is still in progress. However, what is clearly emerging is the importance of both the phenomenological approach to interviews – which has allowed for a rich set of narratives to emerge – and the hermeneutic analysis of curriculum content shifts over five decades. Both have been essential tools that enabled the study of environmental programming at universities in a particularly meaningful way.

III: Final Reflections

Traditional philosophers may find fault with these sorts of descriptions of phenomenology as it has arisen within the social sciences and qualitative research methods. In fact, as is the case with many cross-disciplinary experiments, there are instances when social scientists exhibit an obvious misunderstanding or overly superficial conception of phenomenology, particularly in terms of its Husserlean roots.

Nonetheless, we remain convinced that phenomenology has much of value to offer, beyond the confines of philosophy proper. Or perhaps better put – phenomenology signals the need to redefine the role of philosophy in practice. Bob Frodeman’s recent book, *Sustainable Knowledge*, presents a compelling argument in favour of “Field Philosophy” – a “problem-oriented form of philosophical practice that treats knowledge production and knowledge use as dynamically integrated.” (2014: 108.) Such an approach to philosophy signifies the need for replacing “investigator-initiated, discipline-based research with research that is problem-focused, interdisciplinary and socially engaged.” (2014:109.)

Environmental problems today are more than merely theoretical. There is no living being on this planet that remains unaffected by global environmental changes. Those changes consist of more than explicitly articulated events that we can quantify and scientifically describe. They

require a deep understanding of the human-environment relation as lived. In that sense, phenomenology has an even more central role to play in helping to elicit taken-for-granted judgment calls and assumptions that affect the policy advice that we seek, and the scientific questions that we ask in the first place.

It is time to take phenomenology beyond academic, disciplinary borders into a more meaningful interdisciplinary engagement with the lived world. Should philosophers feel that social scientists may not have got it quite right in their interpretations of phenomenology, then this is only all the more reason for philosophers to enter that interdisciplinary conversation themselves. After all, as Plato himself said in Book VII of the Republic, the place for philosophical discourse is “in both public life and philosophy”, rather than in simply one or the other.

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