

Phenomenology, Organisation and Technology:
An Account of the Phenomenological Method of Investigation and an Illustration of
Its Application

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Abstract¹

A century old, phenomenology is still very much attached to its philosophical origins, namely the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Its deep philosophical roots, dense and complex terminology, and the apparent absence of precise methodological procedures have contributed to impair a more relevant usage of phenomenology in the social sciences, namely in information, communication, organisation and the social study of technology fields of research. We hope this paper might contribute to overcome this state of affairs. Relying both on the philosophical and the interpretive traditions, I argue that phenomenology can be used either as a method of investigation or as theory in which new findings can be grounded. Within the practice of interpretive research, the latter procedure is a relatively unproblematic one. Yet, the former one, perhaps where the greatest potential of phenomenology resides, the researcher faces real challenges as to what she/he should do while proceeding the investigation. This paper addresses head on this latter issue, presenting and detailing the phenomenological method of investigation – much in the traditional form of the method, as developed by Husserl and further on extended by Heidegger –, detailing its several phases and techniques, in a manner, I hope, both rigorous and useful for contemporary research. Very briefly, I illustrate each of the phases by referring to the phenomenon of information technology (IT). If the reader is willing to dig deep into the application of the method, I offer an online piece of research of mine where the method is applied in depth. The paper concludes by arguing that although the method presented is not an empirical one in the traditional sense, its results might have important implications for the empirical world.

Key Words: phenomenology, phenomenological method, information, communication, information and communication technology, information systems, computer, interpretive research, Heidegger, Husserl.

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1. Introduction

A century old, phenomenology is still very much attached to its philosophical origins, namely the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Its deep philosophical roots, dense and complex terminology, relative newness and the apparent absence of precise methodological procedures have contributed to impair a more relevant usage of phenomenology in the social sciences (e.g. Sanders 1982), namely in information, communication, organisation and technology fields of research. We hope this paper might contribute to overcome this state of affairs. It fits in the growing openness of the above fields towards interpretive and qualitative approaches; it also takes advantage of a new growth period that phenomenology seems to be experiencing (e.g., Moran 2000; Moran and Mooney 2002; Sokolowski 2000).

Relying both on the philosophical and on the interpretive traditions of research, phenomenology can be used either as a method of investigation or as theory – or theories, e.g., Husserl (1970) Heidegger (1962, 1977), Merleau-Ponty (1962) – in which new findings can be grounded upon. Within the practice of interpretive research, the latter procedure is a relatively unproblematic one. Yet for the former route, perhaps where the greatest potential of phenomenology resides, the researcher faces real challenges as to what she/he should do while proceeding the investigation. This paper addresses head on this latter issue.

Phenomenology's cardinal works, namely Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (1995), and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962), and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), do not give explicit and systematic accounts of the phenomenological method applied. To a great extent the phenomenological technical terminology and central notions are presented only in their application within specific research issues. This critique is valid for the works of the phenomenological movement as a whole, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a contemporary researcher to have a sound and precise phenomenological method of investigation to base his investigations without thoroughly have gone through at least a few phenomenological chief works.

I offer here a clear account of the phenomenological method of investigation, much in its traditional form, as developed by Husserl and further on extended by Heidegger. I describe and characterise each of its central phases and techniques and, very briefly, illustrate them, one by one, referring to the phenomenon of *information technology*. There are of course other methodological possibilities in phenomenology: on account of the phenomenon investigated or the purpose of the researcher, some phases of the method and some phenomenological techniques may be emphasised or just skipped; in the account I suggest and illustrate with an online example (Ilharco 2002), I do not use all the phenomenological techniques as well, and the method presented is slightly adapted on account of ontological and epistemological considerations.

Phenomenology, as a method of investigation, is a manner in which what is investigated is handled (Husserl 1995, 1970; Heidegger 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962). This manner aims at reaching phenomena, as they already are in consciousness, in

their grounding and essential meanings; as what they are in-the-world. Phenomena researched are taken phenomenologically as *intentional objects of consciousness*. To use a non technical language we might say the following on this aspect: the object of a phenomenological research are the notions or ideas of the specific researched phenomenon *as such*, as we already have experienced it, intuitively and most often in non thematic manners. These basic ideas or notions are the primary intuitions or criteria on the basis of which we recognise something as the kind of something it is, disregarding its empirical existence, e.g., a tree as a tree, a mermaid as a mermaid, a computer as a computer, IT as IT, and so forth. These boundaries and limits of the investigation only can be pointed out in a clear way by presenting in detail the phenomenological method of investigation.

My account of the phenomenological method is very briefly illustrated by referring to a concrete example – the phenomenon *information technology* as such. While trying to uncover or to point out the uniqueness of the phenomena of IT, a phenomenological investigation does not need to give an account of the many situations, in our assumed empirical world, in which in organisations or in day-to-day life we involve ourselves with computers, televisions, phones, that is, with IT as collection of devices and objects. As referred above, the object of a phenomenological investigation into IT as such is not any particular situation but rather the idea or criteria that enable us to recognise particular IT devices as belonging to that very same notion of IT – that is, *ITness* as such is its object.

This does not mean that phenomenology would be unable to account of our involvement with IT in particular empirical situations, but rather that the example I present here has a different direction: IT as such, as intentional object of consciousness, as the grounding notion against which a PC, a printer, a TV, or a mobile is recognised as IT. The reader of this paper, and the researcher who applies this method, should keep in mind these aims and boundaries of the phenomenological approach. In the Western scientific tradition, phenomenology is just one of the many possible ways of phenomena being researched. Furthermore, while approaching phenomenologically a specific issue we obviously acknowledge that we only pursue one of the many possible phenomenological ways into that experience, object, event, state of affairs.

The investigator that applies the phenomenological method should not expect definitive questions and definitive answers to arise. Phenomenology is not looking for final definitions and formulas, but rather to bring readers into a path where they can experience new contours and deeper meanings of phenomena, in many cases recovering their own personal experiences, as the questioning and answering advances and insights make sense to them as they are shown fully in their pertinence and relevance.

In a phenomenological manner, striving to get rid of assumptions, presuppositions or *a priori* notions about the phenomenon under inquiry (e.g., Husserl 1964, 1970, 1995), the researcher should pass over already in place theoretical positions and explanations that address the phenomenon. This is a methodological procedure that implies nothing on the relevance or not of those

positions. Phenomenology tries to look *things* anew; tries to recover that which makes one to recognise such a thing as the thing it is.

In this way I hope to show the potential and possibilities of this approach in providing an interesting and to some extent a novel basis for research. After presenting and illustrating the phenomenological method, phase by phase, I conclude the paper briefly arguing that although the method presented is not an empirical one in the traditional sense, its results have implications for the empirical world.

2. The Phenomenological Method

That some relevant texts on phenomenology begin with the question “What is phenomenology?” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:vii; Dreyfus 1991:30; Hammond et al. 1991:1; Boland 1985:195) is an interesting clue on the deepest nature of phenomenology: a method. It is because phenomenology has no typical intellectual construction that it is in order to start addressing its nature by the fundamental question ‘What is phenomenology?’

Phenomenology began to take shape with the impact of the first works of Husserl, in the early 1900s. Since then, phenomenologists have shared the principle that intuitive experiences constitute the ultimate foundation of all our concepts and beliefs. Phenomenology strives to be a method aimed at the foundations of knowledge, based on nothing but pure evidence and necessary *primary-ness*. To phenomenologists, any data, distinction or difference is of interest, provided it appears intuitively in consciousness, that is, either originating in sensory experience or in mental processes.

Phenomenology attempts to describe phenomena faithfully and presuppositionless, without expecting to arrive at an understanding from any starting point other than the *facticity* of an always and already experienced world (Heidegger 1962, Husserl 1970, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Phenomenology strives for an essential description of phenomena, as they are in consciousness, in their own terms. *To the things themselves*, the famous phenomenological motto, means a turning towards phenomena that might have been locked from sight by the taken-for-granted assumptions, or by the prevalent common sense of our daily coping, or indeed by philosophical or scientific theories or explanations already in place (Husserl 1982).

As Merleau-Ponty (1962:viii) noted: “Phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or a style of thinking”, that is, as a method, not an epistemological or ontological theory:

“Phenomenology? does not subscribe to a ‘standpoint’ or represent any special ‘direction’; for phenomenology is nothing of either sort, nor can it become so long as it understands itself. The expression ‘phenomenology’ signifies primarily a *methodological conception*” (Heidegger 1962: 50) *italics* and quotations marks from the original?.

Heidegger noted that the meaning of phenomenology is quite different to other similar expressions ending with ‘-logy’, such as theology, sociology, and biology. These expressions designate the subject-matter of their respective sciences.

Phenomenology, on the contrary, “merely informs us of the “*how*” with which *what* is to be treated in this science, gets exhibited and handled” (ibid.:59).

Phenomenology does not designate its subject-matter because its object is not a subject-matter but a *how*. Phenomenology does not subscribe to a standpoint or represent any special direction of research – it is not an epistemological or ontological theory. Phenomenology “signifies primarily a *methodological conception*” (Heidegger 1962: 50); in itself it is no theory or doctrine, but a method of investigation, whose object is *the way* in which phenomena are treated; “*such a way* that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly” (ibid.:59). This directness is reached by the phenomenological method, which addresses the phenomenon as it is in itself for itself? in terms of its *thinghood* (ibid.:59). This thinghood is the *is-ness* of a being, the humanness of humans, the treeness of tress, the *ITness* of IT.

This paper presents, I hope, a rigorous, clear and hard to find account of the phenomenological method of investigation. Our working out of the method, focusing it upon its central and most distinctive phases, intends to make it as clear and powerful as I can, so that it might be more often applied in the information, communication, computer and system’s fields of research.

Besides focusing the method on its most distinctive phases, the main adaptation I introduce to the traditional phenomenological method, as developed by Husserl and extended into a last phase by Heidegger, as it was synthesised by Spiegelberg (1994), concerns the traditional etymological critique of this kind of investigation. I consider the phenomenological account of the etymology of the words that identify the phenomenon as not merely a step of the first phase of the method, but rather as a whole second phase in its own right. Such an adaptation, to some extent, is only recognition of an important and recurrent phenomenological practice (e.g., Heidegger 1962, 1977, 1978).

Hence, the phenomenological method I present is structured in the following six phases:

- (1) Describing the Phenomenon
- (2) Analysing the Etymology
- (3) Performing the Reduction
- (4) Investigating the Essence
- (5) Watching Modes in Which the Essence Appears
- (6) Interpreting Concealed Meanings

In specifying these six sequential phases, as we use them in this investigation, it is important to stress their implicit unity and essential connections. The phases are united in the basic purpose of “giving us a fuller and deeper grasp” (Spiegelberg 1975:57) of the phenomenon, which can only be achieved if all six phases are fully applied. The following sub-sections present a succinct account of each of the phases that constituted the method I applied.

The presentation of the phenomenological method is very briefly illustrated by referring to the phenomenon of *information technology*. If the reader is willing to dig deep into the application of the method, I offer complementing references to an online piece of research of mine where the method is applied in depth (Ilharco 2002).

2.1. Describing the Phenomenon (Phase 1)

The first phase of the method is devised broadly to articulate the phenomenon under analysis, setting its contours as ‘free as possible from presuppositions’. Its objective is to address what appears, setting up the horizon, expressing the comprehensive context, and describing contours relating to the ways in which we address the phenomenon in our daily living.

In this phase, the investigator deals with appearances of the phenomenon, that is, with modes and perspectives through which the phenomenon announces itself. The phenomenon itself is approached by providing a first description of its most intuitive appearances. This initial description is not devised to achieve an explanation of the phenomenon, nor to look for some specific kind of data; neither does it try to conform to some preliminary hypothesis, or previous intellectual construction in which the phenomenon makes sense. The aim of the investigator is not to explain, but just to describe what firstly and intuitively appears in the addressing of the phenomenon. To secure the most benefits from this first phase of the method, one may organise it in the following three sequential steps: *intuiting*, *analysing* and *describing*.

a) Phenomenological Intuiting. Firstly, the investigator characterises the ways in which the phenomenon appears by identifying its most obvious features and properties, such as its elements, shapes, sizes, colours, usage, functionality, purposes, aspects, and so forth. He or she tries to grasp intuitively the phenomenon in his or her own words and ideas, as they already are in his or her mind.

Once this is done, she should contrast the phenomenon with intuitively related ones, comparing their similarities and differences, and describing their contexts. The context in which the addressed phenomenon appears should be initially circumscribed and articulated. All these tasks of the first step should be performed while having perceptual access to the intentional object in question, for example, holding and looking at a mobile phone, recalling its usage, or reading texts on a specific concept or idea under analysis and recalling its applications, and so forth.

b) Phenomenological Analysing. In this step, the investigator needs to distinguish the constituents of the appearances of the phenomenon: What are its elements? What kind of entities are they? How do they constitute the phenomenon? How do they relate to each other? Then, the connections between the particular analysed phenomenon and adjacent ones should be addressed: How are intuitively related phenomena connected to the addressed phenomenon? In what ways?

This second step concludes by reviewing the new results and those of the first step, in their togetherness. They should intuitively appear as belonging to the phenomenon under investigation.

c) Phenomenological Describing. This third step is aimed at achieving a new richness of the analysis of the phenomenon. Here, the investigator must review and familiarise herself with the results so far achieved, and should progress towards an indication of the irreducibility and uniqueness of the phenomenon. In doing so, she might attempt to describe the phenomenon by negation, by analogy, and by metaphor.

Some kind of classification of the phenomenon might be proposed, for example, a framework of class names, or the ‘location’ of the phenomenon regarding an already developed system of classes. This kind of suggestion should be unambiguous in relation to whatever concerns the concepts used, which should be the terms of ordinary language or of a well known and agreed domain of technical terms; in the information and communication domains, for example, the terms ‘data’, ‘screens’, ‘symbols’, ‘information systems’, ‘media’, and so forth. These words should be used in the same way as in day-to-day activities, not dependent on, or over-emphasising, any technical meanings. This kind of classification does not bias one to their underlying assumptions, because they serve only as a way into the phenomenon, not as a substantive analysis of the phenomenon.

The investigator should try to put aside assumptions or pre-given interpretations when performing this last step of the first phase of the method. Describing the phenomenon in question is a process of “stripping away pretence, prejudice and unexamined assumptions ?which? can be a painful process” (Boland 1985:199). This intuitive and direct description of the phenomenon outlines its most obvious and apparent characteristics and set the grounds on which the next phases of the method proceed.

2.1.1. Describing the Phenomenon of Information Technology. In describing IT we noticed that IT devices deliver relevance, while collecting our attention and grounding our actions. IT is a set of devices that informs and acts upon us, and with which we inform and act upon others. IT shows up relating to us, and we as such relate to it. IT is entities that attract our attention and our physical presence as well. We experience IT as we transparently use it going on as we are in the world. As useful and transparent entities, delivering relevance into our continuous acting in the world, IT devices belong to the realms of language, that is, we speak, hear, see with/in/trough/within IT (this phase’s in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:170-8).

2.2. Analysing the Etymology (Phase 2)

The task here is to trace back the origins of the words identifying the phenomenon. This analysis is not destined to bring back the meaning of words *per se*, but rather to bring forth the meaning of the thing, “in the ante-predicative life of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:xv).

The meanings of words in ordinary language, and their evolution through time and space, are a second beginning of the phenomenological analysis. Ordinary language does not have to reveal the complexity of phenomena, it is not its purpose and for sure it is not its achievement (Spiegelberg 1975). What counts is the “reliance on the early meaning of a word and its changes, to catch sight of the realm penetrating to the matter in question into which the word speaks” (Heidegger 1977:159).

This kind of phenomenological work shares some concerns with linguistic analysis, but goes beyond it. What is at stake here is the recalling of all the relationships of our experiencing of the phenomenon, that is, bringing back the *things*, as things themselves. It is a looking for what is a fact for us, before any thematisation, even before any articulation in language. “In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:xv).

The work done in this phase is expected to lead to contours of the phenomenon that are close, or complementary, to the ones achieved in the previous phase—strengthening the characteristics of the phenomenon, and adding and clarifying further meanings. This could be important for a deeper grasping of the phenomenon under analysis. Still, the investigation may turn out to be one in which the results of the descriptive and the etymological phases are quite different. The clue to take into account in that situation is, possibly, that the reasons for that discrepancy are in themselves a clarification of what the phenomenon essentially is.

2.2.1. Analysing the Etymologies of Information and Technology. Information has been an accepted English word since the 14th century. It means “what is told; news”; the “communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence”; the gathering of data “obtained from investigation, study, or instruction: intelligence, news, facts data”; or “a signal or character (as in a communication system or computer) representing data” (referring to common dictionaries). The Latin verb *in-formo*, at the origin of the word information, joins the expressions *in* and *forma*. The verb *formo* meant to shape, to fashion, to form. It can indicate giving form to a thing by shaping, moulding or fashioning it. *Formo* could also mean to formulate an idea of a thing; to represent, sketch, instruct, or educate. The Latin preposition *in*, in *in-formo*, means “within, on, upon, among, at, into”; it denoted “either rest or motion within or into a place or thing” (Crane 2003).

The English *in* comes from this Latin root: a preposition used as a function word to indicate inclusion or position within limits. The Latin word *informare* is a derivation from the verb *in-formo*, meaning the imposition of a form on some thing, particularly on the mind, in order to instruct and improve that same thing. In this process, a thing or an idea receives a form, a shaping, a contour, which is set “within limits” that are, is, to the one who is making the forming (Crane 2003). For Boland (1983:363), the essence that unites all of these notions of information lies in its name: “Information is an inward-forming.” These limits are *we*, as we ourselves are.

The contemporary word technology has its roots in the ancient Greek words *techné* and *logos*. A rigorous tracing back of these origins shows us that the essential

meaning of the word technology is a revealing, a grounding. In the ancient Greek word *technologia*, the word *logos* allows to appear the possibility of truth as ground – I defend, I believe, soundly, in the online referred to piece of research of mine. This is quite interesting if we note that the oldest meaning of *logos* is computation (Crane 2002). *Logos* evolved from computation, to ratio, reason, subject-matter to the Word of God as creation. That *computation* is the oldest meaning of *logos* and the central device of IT received the name of *computer* is a clue into the possible sameness of the subject-matter addressed by these notions. As such *technologia* might embody ontological contours; its mode of revealing shows up in that it is a *what-to-do*, thus, a *what-to-be* (this phase's in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:152-8; 179-182).

2.3. Performing the Phenomenological Reduction (Phase 3)

The phenomenological reduction, as applied in the phenomenological method I suggest in here, is strictly a methodological phase for investigating the phenomenon. Its objective is to detach the researcher from the 'everyday naive or natural living' (Spiegelberg 1994) while preserving the phenomenal content as fully and as purely as possible. This detachment process suspends judgement on the existence or non-existence of the phenomenon addressed. No judgement is made in this third phase about the issues of empirical relevance to the phenomenon questioned.

The investigator's objectives here are to build on the consolidation of the results of the first two phases—description and etymological analysis—by performing the reduction, *bracketing out* the features, aspects, and characteristics of the actuality of the phenomenon, that is, its particular presence in time and space. References to the existence of particular manifestations of the phenomenon in an 'outer world' should be put aside. The phenomenon starts to be directly addressed in its *generalness*, by being reduced to a phenomenon in consciousness.

This technique facilitates genuine intuiting, analysing, and describing, so enables the concentration on the *what-ness* of the phenomenon putting aside its actual dimension, or its *this-ness* or *there-ness*. Having performed the reduction, the investigator achieves a description of the phenomenon that relates only to its features in consciousness, not the characteristics of its examples as they appear in the usually assumed empirical world.

2.3.1. Performing the Phenomenological Reduction Upon IT. When performing the phenomenological reduction upon IT we came to the conclusion that the entanglement between IT devices and our going on daily action in the assumed empirical world is the reduced phenomenon of IT. Taking into account the analysis performed thus far, this entanglement is indicated as an ontological revealing. As such IT is included in our mode of being what we are in our epoch. As such, beings come to be accessible *as* something, that is, ontologically, on grounds of IT (this phase's in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:182-6).

2.4. Investigating the Essence (Phase 4)

Once the reduction is performed on the consolidation of the findings of the descriptive and etymological phases of the methodology, the way is cleared for the investigation to advance into the essence of the phenomenon, which is the central phase of the phenomenological method.

This phase focuses on reaching the elements strictly necessary for a phenomenon to be what it is. These elements are invariant from one appearance to another, constituting the criteria that enable the phenomenon to be recognised as what it is. The particular appearances of the phenomenon can only be distinguished *as particulars* against a background of *generalness*, which is what is to be addressed in this phase.

Two specific techniques are applied to achieve this objective. Firstly, common elements of the appearances of the phenomenon are identified through generalisation, thus establishing a common ground. Secondly, freely varying the elements of this common ground, the investigator strips out characteristics of the phenomenon that are not necessary, despite being common features, thereby leaving us with an essential account of the phenomenon. The technique of generalisation could proceed by (i) distinguishing ‘natural affinities’ in particulars; (ii) lining up particular examples in a continuous series based on the order of their similarities; and (iii) identifying common patterns shared by these examples.

As we see the particulars *as particulars*, we see the common as universal, entering the grounds of essence as the irreducibility of the phenomena. Yet, this *common-ness* is not yet the essence of the phenomenon. To uncover what is essential to the appearances of the phenomenon—“what one can and what one cannot imagine” (Hammond et al. 1991:76)—one has to discover what elements cannot be taken out of the established common ground of the phenomenon.

The second technique in this phase—‘methodical variation’, or Husserl’s (1964, 1982) *free imaginative variation*—is devised to proceed from the grounds of generalisation to the realms of the essence of the phenomenon. It consists on varying elements of an example to reach its non-variant elements. At each step, we take out one element of the example—for instance, in imagination we take the foliage out of a tree, asking: ‘is this element a necessary feature for this phenomenon to be the phenomenon we recognised before? Is foliage a necessary element for a tree to be recognised as a tree?’

If the investigator finds after several attempts that it has become impossible to subtract more elements without affecting the recognition of the phenomenon, he reverses his questioning, asking now: ‘What are the necessary features an example must have in order to be recognised as the example we recognised before?’ By varying elements of an example in these ways, the investigator reaches the essential elements of the phenomenon and the essential connections between them, that is, the investigation reaches what the phenomenon strictly is: its essence.

The investigator does not need empirical observations to provide answers because, in every new variation, the object described will be an object of the same kind if the investigator recognises it as such. Thus, the implicit criterion of

recognition—*my* ability to recognise the object—is decisive in this essential reduction of the example. By applying this technique, the example opens us to the essence of the phenomenon.

The last procedure of this fourth phase of our method is one of uncovering essential relationships between the elements of the essence investigated, and between that same essence and closely related phenomena. This step is an attempt to refine the essence through *a priori* insight, studying how given elements, appearances, or essences relate to each other. This can be done by using identification, negation, simultaneity, or other approaches. For example, we can decide on grounds only of logic that the statement ‘every colour is extended’ is correct, and ‘every extension has colour’ is incorrect. Empirical observation does not affect these conclusions; it is just a matter of establishing logical relationships between the concepts of colour and extension (Kant 1985).

2.4.1. Investigating the Essence of IT. When performing the reduction upon IT we came to the conclusion that the entanglement between IT devices and our daily coping in the world is the reduced phenomenon of IT. This entanglement was indicated as an ontological revealing. As such IT is included in *being-in-the-world*, to use Heidegger’s (1962) phenomenology ontology, or in Husserl’s (1970) *lifeworld*. IT permeates the world in which we are, and beings come to be accessible *as something*, on ontological grounds. It is because IT devices are transparently used in performing our professional, personal and social activities, that is, because they are ready-to-hand beings (Heidegger 1962), and because IT is what it is within the human community, within ‘the they’ (Heidegger 1962), in everydayness, that IT comes to be revealed in its essential contours as a *replacement* of what matters, affects us and is relevant. The pervasiveness, both in depth and scope, of IT devices in human activity, and their readiness-to-hand are fundamental for IT transparency, that is, for IT backgroundness to enter our mode of being, thus becoming *replacement*. In these basic conditions the ready-to-hand of IT grounds our age in that it becomes the background against which that which is appears. Technological information allows an embodied conception of that which is to unfold (this phase’s in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:187-220).

2.5. Watching Modes in Which the Essence Appears (Phase 5)

The fifth phase of the method is devised to explore ways in which the phenomenon investigated essentially unfolds, ways in which it *essences*; it certainly does so in the phenomenon’s most obvious appearances—the ones addressed in phase 1 of the method. Yet, phenomena hide to a lesser or greater extent behind appearances – a symptom is an appearance of a disease, but not its essence. An essence can show itself as that which *it is not* in many different appearances more or less intuitively connected. Thus, having identified the essence, the task of the investigator is to pay attention to the ways in which the essence unfolds: its appearances, aspects, perspectives, contexts, and modes in which it indirectly shows itself.

That which shows itself (the essence) as what itself *is* not (the appearances) is now to be investigated precisely in what concerns its appearances, that is, its actualities. This phase has the following main steps: (a) Pay attention to the aspect of a given object from which we know it as a whole, and be aware at all times of what we experience or see, and imply or assume; for example, we can never see the whole of a tree, but always imply some of its aspects; (b) Pay attention to the appearance of the thing and to the relevance of the ‘deformation’ of the perspective, as it shapes the object given; for instance, to take notice of the way in which a side of a cube appears as a trapezoid; (c) Note the degrees of clarity and of distinctiveness of the thing that appears, as well as taking notice of the relevance of the context to the perception of the thing; for example, when seeing through fog or at unrest (Spiegelberg 1994:703).

This phase of the method clarifies the ways in which the essence of the phenomenon shows to us, either as aspects of the phenomenon in question or as appearances that, at face value, show themselves as diverse entities. One of the main values of this phase is the way it shows us how diverse events in which we are involved, and that matter to us, are essentially connected and logically interdependent.

2.5.1. Watching Modes in Which the Essence of IT Appears. The essence of IT, pointed out in our application of the phenomenological method, as *replacement*, is a letting-presence of what appears within an ontological transformation in which the ‘letting’ itself is let be in a particular way. By affecting the ‘letting be’, moving in language, the modes in which humans essentially couple themselves to each other and to environment, IT pushes towards the stabilisation of its own unfolding. I argue elsewhere that this is firstly shown in the appearance of IT that globalisation is (this phase’s in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:220-236).

2.6. Interpreting Concealed Meanings (Phase 6)

This last phase of the phenomenological method, introduced by Heidegger’s cardinal work *Sein und Zeit*, 1927 (Heidegger 1962), is designed to give access to phenomena whose essence has concealment within itself. This phase involves decisive ontological and epistemological claims because the nature and beingness of that which is doing the phenomenological investigation, that is, we as we ourselves are, is taken into account for the analysis of that which is given in that same phenomenological investigation, that is, the essence of the phenomenon addressed, and so on in hermeneutic movements.

By re-analysing the findings of the phenomenological investigation in the light of the ontological constitution of the being, of *who*, is performing the investigation, this phase aims at an uncovering of particular meanings that might not immediately be manifest to our intuiting, analysing and describing. This last phase of the phenomenological method is particularly relevant to the examination of the phenomena of IT.

2.6.1. Interpreting Concealed Meanings of IT. I pointed out the essence of IT as *replacement*, an ontological revealing that brings *Ge-stell*, the essence of modern technology (Heidegger 1977) into language, that is, into our essential mode of being in the world. Yet, *replacement* as such, i.e., as a process, a movement, a proceeding, gains its meanings against that which it is about to replace, a real already grasped in its worldhood (Heidegger 1962).

As a background against which what is appears, IT is an ontological *informing* that orders meaning in that it captures it in a system – a global system of information and communication – replacing the real, and letting *Ge-stell* strengthen its path towards an efficiency whose ultimate aim, I claim in the online material that has been referred to, is the very mortal condition of man. *Beings-towards-death* (Heidegger 1962) is thus the real that grounds the primary meaning of replacement. It is in these realms that I argue (Ilharco 2002) that the hidden meaning of the essence of IT shows up as immortality. The conquest of immortality is the concrete articulation in the phenomenon of IT of the hidden meaning of modern technology, uncovered by Heidegger (1977) as *the danger* as such, which is nothing less than the threat of becoming what we essentially are not (this phase's in depth investigation of mine in Ilharco (2002) <http://is.lse.ac.uk/research/ilharco.pdf>, pp:236-240).

3. Conclusion

Since the early 1900s, when the phenomenological movement began to take shape, phenomenologists have shared the principle that intuitive experiences constitute the ultimate foundation of all our concepts and beliefs. Phenomenology strives to be a method aimed at the foundations of all knowledge, based on nothing but self-evidence and necessary *primary-ness*. To phenomenologists, any data is of interest, provided it appears intuitively in consciousness, that is, either originating in sensory experience or in mental processes.

Phenomenology attempts to describe phenomena faithfully and presuppositionless, without expecting to arrive at an understanding from any starting point other than the facticity of an always and already experienced world (Heidegger 1962, Husserl 1970, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Phenomenology strives for an essential description of phenomena, as they are in consciousness, in their own terms. *To the things themselves* means a turning towards phenomena that might have been locked from sight by the taken-for-granted assumptions, or by the prevalent common sense of our daily coping (Husserl 1982). Yet phenomenology does not subscribe to a standpoint or represent any special direction of research – it is not an epistemological or ontological theory. Phenomenology is first a method of investigation, whose object is *the way* in which phenomena are treated. Its method was detailed and briefly illustrated in this paper.

This paper gives an account of the phenomenological method of investigation, focusing its core phases, in a way I consider both rigorous and useful for contemporary research in information, communication, organisation and technology fields of research. I do not claim that the phenomenological method, let alone its articulation presented in this paper, is the only or the most correct way to address

either IT or any other phenomenon. In the Western intellectual tradition, phenomenology is just one of the many possible ways of phenomena being researched. I also do not claim that the application of the method in the way it is suggested in this paper exhausts the investigation of a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology itself and the method applied dismiss that kind of assertions. What I claim is that the rigorous application of the method in the way I worked it out follows a phenomenological path that, I believe, can open up some of the contemporary phenomena in new, useful and meaningful manners.

Phenomenology is a search in which one can never know what will be found. Its strengths have been stressed over and over again by its tradition and by its many applications in different areas of human understanding. Its method of research calls for thinking as that which is the most human of the human activities. As such, as a thinking that thinks, that proceeds by approaching the issue from different perspectives, from different angles, with different agendas, backgrounds and aims, phenomenology hopes at recovering our own personal and primary experience of the phenomena, attempting at improving our understanding of them.

The phenomenological practice I suggest here, much in the methodological ways in which Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl have used it, strives to indicate formally that most initial and fundamental experience of each one of us, when as individuals, we already are engaged in-the-world, and in so doing to enhance understanding of the phenomena under inquiry, hoping to transform us and so to change our coping in the world.

Phenomenological findings base its legitimacy on the tradition of its approach, on the rigour of the method applied, and on the potential readiness-to-hand (Heidegger 1962) of its findings. The central empirical relevance of phenomenology relies on the self-evidence, intuitiveness and appropriateness in which its findings appear for those we engage in sharing them.

In accordance with the phenomenological method applied, and with its ontological implications, namely on account of the presented above phase 6 of the method, the findings presented in an investigation of this kind have their chief empirical relevance in their very readiness-to-hand (Heidegger 1962). Having been apprehended, that is, understood and arrested within us (OPDT:32), embodied (Dreyfus 1991, Merleau-Ponty 1962), the findings of a phenomenological investigation that follows the method I offered in here, might unfold intuitively and instinctively within our ongoing action in-the-world. Once found pertinent and appropriate, phenomenological findings make sense for us and thus they might change us. In so doing they shape and transform our action in-the-world, so that we not only respond but indeed correspond to a much deeper and wider involvement with the phenomena investigated.

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