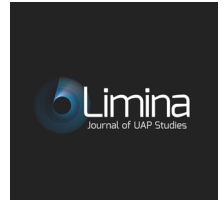




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The Importance of Phenomenology for UAP Studies

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology as a research method is rooted in rigorous examination of first-person experiences, and identifying that which is essential to the appearance of the object. Phenomenology offers several important strengths that make it critical to include as a supplemental method to more empirical approaches. Strengths of phenomenology include the restoring of the lived world as the foundation of knowledge, moving beyond the extraterrestrial hypothesis, the exploration of absences, the discrimination between sensory perception and non-ordinary perception, exploring UAP as intersubjective experiences, and drawing similarities between UAP and other anomalous phenomena.

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1. Introduction

As we approach the important task of clarifying and introducing methods for studying UAP, I argue that it is imperative that phenomenological approaches play a critical role. I use “phenomenological approaches” in the plural because phenomenology refers to a diverse field of thinkers who have differences in their methods. However, they all begin with the same process: taking the lived, first-person, conscious experience of the experiencing subject as our only natural access point to reality and thus, the starting point of all inquiry.

As it has struggled to be taken seriously within the academy, the study of UFOs has historically relied on the

physical sciences as its primary methodology. There are several reasons for this. The physical sciences have had immense success in many domains in our society, leading to advancements in medicine and technology. Scientific evidence is now seen as the primary determinant of producing the boundaries of truth and reality in modern western democracies. Thus, in order for the reality of UAP to be taken seriously, evidence that was physical, observable from the third person perspective, and to some extent repeatable under controlled conditions was necessary.

What witnesses report as occurring during UAP encounters, however, often takes us quite far from the limits of what we understand does and does not occur in our world, challenging the boundaries of scientific understanding.

Jacques Vallée has emphasized this since 1969,¹ and while empirical, experimental science is very important, it also has limitations when it comes to studying baffling human experiences with UAP. Thus, a rigorous examination of first-person experience of UAP is also needed, even when what is reported seems incompatible with current scientific understandings.

2. The Method

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology began with Edmund Husserl and progressed in the work of thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. Husserl (1983) argued that the starting point of all inquiry must be the world as it is experienced by an individual conscious subject. He introduced a method of bracketing, in which one suspends the assumptions of the natural attitude, or the everyday practical attitude through which we approach the world. Carefully examining what appears to the witness, a phenomenological analysis identifies the types of *intentionalities* present, or the relationship of consciousness to the objects it experiences.² For example, objects can be experienced through the intentionalities of sensory perception, memory, anticipation, or imagination. Later phenomenologists continued to build on Husserl's method, arguing that ontological distinctions can be made by rigorously examining first person experience and how being discloses itself to the subject. One commonality for all of these thinkers is that being or essence discloses itself through its appearance to the perceiving subject. In other words, how objects appear in experience reveals aspects of how objects are. According to phenomenology, then, how UAP appear to consciousness reveals something about *their essence*.

To apply phenomenology as a research method, we take a step back and suspend our assumptions about how the world is and carefully consider what appears to the witness, a process known as transcendental reduction. Husserl describes the reduction as bracketing the assumptions of the natural attitude, or the everyday attitude through which we experience the world, including the preconceptions of the natural sciences. “We put out of action the general positing

which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being.”³ The phenomenological researcher examines the report of the witness carefully, articulating what appeared and in what modalities, and how the experiencing subject formed judgments about it. This could include the meaning the experience has for the experiencer. After carefully examining individual accounts, the researcher then performs a process of eidetic reduction, or identifying key characteristics that are common to the experiences. The goal is to identify characteristics that are so *integral* to the experience that if we removed them it would no longer be the kind of experience or object that it is. Identifying patterns that are integral to the experience gives us knowledge about aspects of reality. Thus, through careful examination of the experiences of witnesses of various types of UAP accounts, we identify core aspects of these experiences that make them what they are.

Phenomenological approaches have already been put to use in UAP studies. Even though he never explicitly used the term phenomenology, abduction researcher John Mack (1994) employed a phenomenological approach when working with abductees, suspending judgment on the source or origin of their experiences and looking for commonalities in what appeared in the experiences.⁴ In *The Super Natural*, Jeffrey Kripal (2017) identifies the phenomenological cut between what appears and the thing in itself as an important starting point for the study of all anomalous or paranormal experiences.

The fundamental idea here is to begin any inquiry by taking a set of experiences on their own terms and setting aside, for the time being, the question of their external source, cause, or truth value. The method encourages us to “make a cut” between the appearances themselves and what may or may not lie behind them.⁵

However in his later book *How to Think Impossibly* (2024), Kripal makes an important clarification. While bracketing as a starting point involves suspending the question of the truth

1 Vallée (1969/2014).

2 Husserl (1983), pp. 57-61, 131-143; Sokolowski (2000), p. 50.

3 Husserl (1983), p. 61.

4 For example, Mack explicitly wrote that he did not take an approach of dismissing aspects of abduction encounters that seemed too far “out there” or deviated too far from what we understand to be physically possible. He writes, “My criteria for including or crediting an observation by an abductee is simply whether what has been reported was felt to be real by the experiencer and was communicated sincerely and authentically to me” (Mack 1994, p. 31).

5 Kripal (2017), p. 44.

value or source of the appearance, Husserl's method itself was very much focused on establishing the truth of being.

Husserl's phenomenological method, for example, begins by refusing or "bracketing" (the famous *epoché*) what he called the "naturalistic standpoint" of the science and their naïve sense-based positivisms about the "fact-world." He calls this apophatic move the "phenomenological reduction" and considered it the necessary secret of obtaining genuine philosophical truth. One cannot arrive at absolute consciousness until one has let go of *all* sensual and materialist assumptions...⁶

This is an important distinction that often gets lost in the application of phenomenology. While the starting point is to look only at the structure of appearances, Husserl's ultimate aim for the method was to uncover truth. Understanding the structure of conscious experience reveals something about the nature of being itself.

Further application of the phenomenological tradition to UAP studies can be found in both Diana Pasulka's *American Cosmic* (2019)⁷ and James Madden's *Unidentified Flying Hyperobject* (2023).⁸ Engaging the work of phenomenological thinker Martin Heidegger, both focus on Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology," (1977).⁹ Both Pasulka and Madden read Heidegger as considering technological advancement a particular human attitude towards being itself, which determines what aspects of our surrounding environment we are attuned to. In other words, technology serves as a way of being-in-the-world and framing our understanding of the life-world, introducing systemic categorization regarding what is important or unimportant, real or not real. The danger of such an attitude is that we become hyperfocused on the technological lens and miss out on other important ways that being is disclosed to us. This contributes, in Madden's view, to why the conversation about UFOs has been dominated by technological and scientific approaches, at the expense of other aspects of the phenomenon.

The fact that we think of the UFO most naturally in terms of the nuts-and-bolts technology,

even as the phenomenon is clearly more uncanny than all that, is symptomatic that our default conditions for thinking (techno-science) are hampering our understanding of the situation.¹⁰

I am in agreement with Madden and also think that beginning with a Husserlian starting point of reconsidering everything that appears can help correct this imbalance and provide a more holistic understanding of UAP. While there are, of course, weaknesses to relying on phenomenology *alone*, the method also has several important conceptual strengths. Elucidating these strengths will comprise the remainder of the article.

3. The Strengths of Phenomenology

- a. *Phenomenology argues that the world as conceived of and studied by the mathematical sciences is not 'more real' than the lived world of experiences.*

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl (1970) argued that the modern human desire to turn the world into something that is fundamentally knowable at the mechanical level of cause and effect had led to a modern *ethos* that no longer knows how to deal with fundamental questions of human experience and meaning. The process of reducing the world of experience into something that is observable in the third person and knowable through the measurements of our instruments or in controlled settings, led to the idea that the true, real world, is the world as conceived in terms of individual atoms, protons, neutrons, neurotransmitters, etc. and through the processes of cause and effect. The world of colors, shapes, smells, sounds, etc. that we experience in the first person, the lived world or life-world, is classified as "subjective" and consequently, "less real." Referring back to Madden and Heidegger's essay on technology, knowing the world through technological means has become our default attunement to reality. The problem Husserl identifies is that the "real" world as articulated by the sciences is not a world that we can directly experience. It is ultimately an abstraction from the life-world.

The contrast between the subjectivity of the

6 Kripal (2024), p. 126.

7 Pasulka (2019).

8 Madden (2023).

9 Heidegger (1977).

10 Madden (2023), p. 129.

lifeworld and the “objective,” the “true” world, lies in the fact that the latter is a theoretical-logical substruction, the substruction of something that is in principle not perceivable, in principle not experienceable in its own proper being, whereas the subjective, in the life-world, is distinguished in all respects precisely by its being actually experienceable.¹¹

Husserl argued that the hyperfocus on science as the only way of gaining access to ‘true’ reality had led the dominant modern mindset to forget that the world as conceived scientifically is always fundamentally rooted in the world of first-person experience. It is only through our first-person perspective and direct interaction with the world as it appears to us that we can enter into the scientific attitude and engage in the scientific process. Husserl argues that even mathematical concepts such as perfectly straight lines or perfect circles, that some historical philosophers have claimed are given *a priori*, are actually created through our experience of lines and circles in the life-world. Through the engagement with phenomenologically real, physical lines and circles, we abstract and create the idea of a perfectly straight line or perfect circle, even though we never encounter them experientially.

[O]bjective theory in its logical sense (science as the totality of predicative theory...) is rooted, grounded in the lifeworld, in the original self-evidences belonging to it. Thanks to this rootedness objective science has a constant reference of meaning to the world in which we always live.¹²

Science ultimately makes our understanding of certain aspects of the life-world more precise. However, scientific knowledge only emerges through our experiences in the first-person. When scientists communicate shared judgments and findings, and come to agreements regarding what it means, they enter into a new and more refined understanding of our experience.

The knowledge of the objective-scientific worlds is “grounded” in the self-evidence of the lifeworld. That latter is pre-given to the scientific worker, or the working community, as ground; yet as they build upon this, what is built is something new, something different.¹³

The world as understood through the precision of the mathematical sciences is ultimately something removed from the life-world, from the world as we experience it. We do not encounter individual protons and neutrons or electrons in our everyday experience of the world; they are not phenomena that are presented experientially. While the world as understood through the lens of the physical sciences is *different* from the life-world, it is not *more real or more true*. The study of the abstract version of the world (the data collected by science and its instruments) is a study of the *enabling conditions for human experience*. The suggestion that this version of the world is more real is to confuse these enabling conditions for that which they enable (first person experience of the world).¹⁴

For example, in close encounters of the fourth kind, or abduction encounters, the majority of the verification is presented in the first-person point of view only, in the world as it is experienced and lived by human beings. John Mack acknowledged that much of the evidence left in the aftermath of abduction encounters would not convince a western scientist of its validity. Experiencers of abduction accounts often have small scars and scoop marks on their bodies or find that electronic equipment now malfunctions in their presence. Many wake up with their pajamas on backwards or inside out. Mack reports two subjects who were returned to the wrong cars. They also experience ongoing nosebleeds and sometimes remove solid objects from their bodies.¹⁵ Further, witnesses often experience external validation through the shared experience of other witnesses, for example, a multi-witness report of a UAP in the area while they are having their abduction experience.¹⁶ Or, in the abduction case of Amy Rylance, she was witnessed as she was being levitated into the UAP.¹⁷ The evidence of such encounters is given in the lived world only, in the conscious life of individuals.¹⁸

11 Husserl (1970), p. 127.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

14 Thank you to philosopher Dr. Michael E. Zimmerman for pointing out this distinction to me in feedback on a different version of this essay.

15 Mack (1994), pp. 41-43.

16 *Ibid.*, 36.

17 For a discussion of the Amy Rylance abduction, see Masters (2022), “Case Study 14: Amy Rylance.”

18 I acknowledge it is possible that physical evidence, such as non-human craft or biologics, could emerge that verifies these encounters in ways desired by the sciences. At the moment, we do not have access to such evidence.

Or consider encounters that *do* leave some kind of physical evidence, such as the Rendlesham Forest Incident, which included landing indentations, scrape marks on trees, and odd radiation levels at the landing sight.¹⁹ This physical evidence only becomes relevant and persuasive *in light of the lived witness testimony*, most notably, Jim Penniston's description of seeing and touching a landed craft, as well as Charles Halt's audiotape in which he describes the UAP as it appears to him and other military personnel in real time. Halt is heard on the recording describing the object, "Directly north, we've got two strange objects, ah, half-moon shape, dancing about, with colored lights on em... The half-moons have now turned into full circles as though there was an...eclipse." And later, "Now we're observing what appears to be a beam coming down to the ground!"²⁰ It is the combination of the physical evidence left behind with the descriptions of lived experience that makes Rendlesham such an important and compelling encounter. Through the combination of what appeared and what was detectable when officials on site entered into the scientific attitude and obtained measurements and readings, a coherent account of the incident emerges.

b. The phenomenological method liberates us from the constrictions of the extraterrestrial hypothesis and better allows us to consider all that appears.

It is in suspending the assumptions of the ETH that we can perhaps most clearly see the benefits of phenomenological reduction. The idea that UAP must be piloted by extraterrestrials is very much a product of the cultural and historical moment in which UFOs first emerged into modern consciousness. UFOs surged into popular culture in 1947 following the Second World War, at a historical moment in which human beings were undergoing considerable technological advancement and considering very seriously the possibility of sending human beings into space. Thus, the appearance of unidentified technological objects in our own skies was naturally interpreted through this lens, and the idea that they were piloted by travelers from another planet who had succeeded at the endeavor we ourselves were attempting was a natural assumption. It was however, still an assumption, and one which Husserl's phenomenological reduction prompts us to suspend. Consider this passage from Husserl (1983) regarding the phenomenological process:

In the first place, it is immediately understandable that, with the exclusion of the natural world, the physical and the psychophysical world, all individual objectivities which become constituted by axiological and practical functionings of consciousness are excluded, all the sorts of cultural formations, all works of the technical and fine arts, of sciences (in so far as they come into question as cultural facts rather than as accepted unities), aesthetic and practical values of every form. Likewise, naturally, such actualities as state, custom, law, religion. Consequently all natural sciences and cultural sciences, with their total stock of cognition, undergo exclusion precisely as sciences which require the natural attitude.²¹

Consequently, in applying the phenomenological attitude to UAP encounters, we must suspend all cultural assumptions and values. This includes even the assumptions of the natural sciences, which for UAP, have often led to the dismissal of experiences and appearances that appear to violate the understood laws of physics.

To illustrate this point further, the idea that UFO= extraterrestrial is so deeply embedded in cultural consciousness that it is the go-to explanation for UAP once traditional explanations have been eliminated. Often this leads to the cultural discourse on UAP getting bogged down in questions of how "they" get "here", how ETs would ever find us, and why ETs would care about us. I am not ruling out the possibility that we could find answers to these questions, but the bigger conceptual problem is that using the extraterrestrial hypothesis as the default framework of interpretation often leads to the dismissal of characteristics of UAP experiences that *do not fit* the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

For example, in *Passport to Magonia*, Jacques Vallée (1969/2014) describes the Eagle River, Wisconsin incident of 1961, in which farmer Joe Simonton was confronted with a strange silvery saucer-shaped object in his yard. Inside the craft were three men who appeared to "resemble Italians." In an encounter lasting only about five minutes, the occupants of the object signaled to Simonton that they needed water by holding up a jug, which he filled for them. The occupants were frying something inside the craft, resembling pancakes, which they shared with Simonton. The occupants then closed

19 Pope (2014), pp. 27-29.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

21 Husserl (1983), pp. 131-132.

the craft hatch, and the object hovered and departed. When the pancakes were later analyzed in a lab, they were found to be of terrestrial origin.²² Nothing about this encounter reflects what we would expect from advanced lifeforms coming from another planet. Why would they resemble human beings, need a jug of water after traveling all the way across the galaxy, or feed their confused witness terrestrial foods?

Visitors from the stars would not be human or humanoid. They would not dare come here without receiving a polite invitation from our powerful radio-telescopes. For centuries, we would exchange highly scientific information through exquisite circuitry and elaborate codes... But perforated, cardboard-tasting, pancake-shaped buckwheat cakes? How terribly rural, Mr. Simonton!²³

Additionally, Anne Strieber observed that many of the letters sent to Whitley Strieber in the aftermath of publishing *Communion* included sightings of the human dead alongside the alleged ‘alien’ visitors. “One reason that I doubt that aliens have flown here from someplace like Zeta Reticuli to study us is that the contact experience includes two seemingly disparate aspects: encounters with the dead, and encounters with non-human beings.”²⁴ Strikingly, the night he had his infamous abduction encounter that he details in the book, Strieber also witnessed the appearance of a college acquaintance in his room. It was only after the encounter was over and he attempted to contact him that he learned this person had died several months before.²⁵ This is especially interesting considering the appearance of this individual could not be written off as “wishful thinking” on Whitley’s part or his brain misinterpreting an ET as his deceased friend—he did not *know* that this person was deceased at the time. Traditional ufology has struggled to include these observations when studying the content of eyewitness accounts, as it makes no sense to the rationalist mind why apparitions of the dead would appear alongside ETs from outer space. And yet, such witness accounts persist.²⁶

When we apply the phenomenological reduction, we bracket out any particular cultural or theoretical interpretation about its source or origin. This means that

we must examine *all that appears* and *only what appears*; strange encounters with human-like beings who serve pancakes and Whitley’s sighting of his deceased friend alongside the NHIs in his room are integral parts of the phenomenon that cannot be dismissed or ignored. Moreover, the fact that such witness observations are common in the letters that the Striebers received, *even though he left the sighting of the dead friend out of his original book*, lends credibility to the idea that apparitions of the deceased are an integral part of UAP encounters that a satisfactory theory must be able to explain.

When we include abduction accounts, a plethora of high strangeness emerges. The phenomenology of eyewitness accounts includes occupants who very often resemble human beings, speak our languages, play tricks on us, have sex with us, and – most provocatively—procreate with us, absolutely none of which bodes well for the idea that UAP are alien spacecrafts occupied by advanced extraterrestrials. As phenomenology must look at everything that appears to a conscious subject, we are liberated from the need to dismiss accounts that do not support the extraterrestrial hypothesis. It allows us to be fully open to all possibilities regarding what we may be interacting with—ultraterrestrial, extratemporal, interdimensional, or something else entirely. Taking the full scope of what appears to witnesses into consideration is vital for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different proposals.

c. *The phenomenological method acknowledges that objects continue to be experienced by consciousness in their absence.*

One of Husserl’s, and future phenomenologists like Sartre’s, key insights was that objects can be present to consciousness even when we are not physically experiencing them. For example, if I am in my office ruminating over an argument I had with my co-worker, my co-worker and her words are present for me as the object of my intention, that toward which my consciousness is directed. Sartre (2018) explained how our expectations create presences and absences for us. For example, if I am expecting to see my friend Pierre at the café, if he is not there when I arrive, his *absence* will be experienced as a type of presence. Pierre’s *not-being* in the café is the object of my experience.²⁷ Anyone who has ever

22 Vallée (1969/2014), pp. 35-36.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 41.

24 Strieber (2017), p. 37.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

26 Rice University Archives of the Impossible (2023).

27 Sartre (2018), pp. 41-42.

been stood up for a date understands the particular sense of presence that a person's absence can have when we are expecting to see them.

UAP are rarely physically present in front of us. Most encounters last only a few minutes or sometimes only a few seconds, but the UAP becomes an object of conscious experience long after the original encounter. First, the UAP gives itself in incompleteness and vagueness, and the experiencer must fill in the parts of the UAP that are absent, as well as fill in the unknowns surrounding its presence. But the effects of UAP encounters often linger long after the initial sighting. The UAP continues to present itself in the experiencer's consciousness. They may obsess for weeks or months over what they may have seen, reliving the experience and bringing it back to life in memory. Additionally, experiencers often have strange dreams and visions about the UAP in the aftermath of the encounter. Experiencers often start to experience strange synchronicities, the malfunctioning of electronic equipment, and strange psychic phenomena such as telepathic communication or the receipt of vast downloads of information.²⁸ While it is difficult from the viewpoint of the physical sciences to definitively prove that such phenomena are directly caused by the UAP encounter, the individual experiencer rarely has trouble seeing the connection. In their conscious experience, the events flow together to form a coherent understanding of what has occurred; they are states of affairs that connect logically in their experience.

In phenomenology, "evidencing" is the bringing about of the truth, or the bringing forth of a presence. It is the articulation of a state of affairs, how objects are manifested and disclosed to consciousness. The individual subject (Husserl's Ego, Heidegger's Dasein, or Sartre's For-itself) is the one to whom things appear. The individual subject is capable of interpreting a state of affairs, formulating judgments about it, and integrating it into an understanding of the world. This is an active process; we bring things into being by our articulation of them. When experiencers bear witness to a UAP, and the events in their aftermath, they make these experiences and happenings intelligible, they bring them into the realm of discussion and intersubjectivity; they manifest as part of the lived world.²⁹ While we understand that once we

enter the scientific attitude the "rules of the game" shift, so to speak, phenomenology recognizes that not all experiences are verifiable in these terms.

Similarly, phenomenology provides us a framework to take seriously the vast changes in identity, worldview, and values that occur in the aftermath of UAP encounters. Both John E. Mack (1994) and Kenneth Ring (1992) found that profound changes in individual values and worldview are common in the aftermath of UAP experiences.³⁰ I found similar results in my 2023 human subjects study on experiencer worldviews and values.³¹ The experiencers directly credit their UAP encounters as leading to their changes in worldview, articulating that the impossible quality of the events they witnessed led them to reconceptualize the world as they previously understood it. If phenomenological research identifies this as a pattern in individual experience, then this reveals something about the essence of UAP. The UAP continue to be present in the individual's lived conscious experience as they formulate a new understanding of the life-world.

The relationship between the individual's expectations and the UAP becomes especially important when examining Close Encounters of the Fifth Kind, referred to colloquially as CE-5s. In a CE-5 event, the individuals put out a direct conscious intention in meditation *asking for or welcoming contact*. This is allegedly followed by the appearance of orbs or flashing lights in the sky.³² The interpretation of these orbs and flashing lights as contact with extraterrestrials or non-human others cannot be divorced from the individual's expectations and hopes of making contact. Carefully examining what actually appears to consciousness, the judgments formed about it, and how it confirms or thwarts the individual's expectations is a vital step in establishing the relationship between CE-5 events and other types of close encounters.

d. The phenomenological method allows us to distinguish different modalities for encountering UAP, including the receipt of information through means other than the five senses.

When we examine the content of UAP eyewitness reports, Vallée documented as early as 1975 that aspects of these

28 Vallée (1975/1977) documents examples of cases in which witnesses report a psychical component either during or in the aftermath of a UAP encounter.

29 Sokolowski (2000), pp. 159-161.

30 See Mack (1994), pp. 46-50 and Ring (1992) pp. 173-193.

31 This study is currently under peer review for pending publication.

32 Descriptions of these events remain colloquial and informal, as rigorous empirical research on CE-5s has not yet been conducted.

encounters include psychic phenomena, both during the encounter and in the aftermath.³³ In phenomenology it is extremely important to differentiate *how* objects interact with consciousness. For example, one of the most important distinctions in phenomenology is the differentiation between real and ideal objects. Real objects are physical, like a book, table or desk. We have direct experience of them and process them through the senses. Objects like the concept of beauty or justice, a perfect circle, or the value of pi are not given in sensory experience; they are part of our conscious experience only, built on our experience of the life-world, but never directly encountered. UAP encounters include phenomena that are not ideal objects, but also are not given directly in sensory experience. Many experiencers report non-local receipt of information, such as seeing in their “mind’s eye,” telepathic communication from UAP occupants, or vast telepathic “downloads” or images that flash through their minds during or after the encounter. Additionally, experiencers report aspects of experiences that appear to be taking place in an altered sense of reality, or experience leaving their bodies during the encounter.

Fleshing out different intentionalities or modalities of how something is experienced is critical for a phenomenological analysis. Traditional phenomenologists did not focus much on psychic phenomena or non-ordinary states of consciousness, however Husserl was not oblivious to their possibility. For example, in his lectures on the lived experience of time (1964), he explicitly refers to a “prophetic consciousness” as “conceivable” although it’s unclear if this is referring to experiential instances of precognition.³⁴ Hedwig Conrad-Martius (1957), another early phenomenologist of the 20th century explicitly incorporated psychic phenomena into her work, although her writings are still not translated and widely available in English.³⁵ While the focus of much, but not all, of traditional phenomenological work did not center psychic phenomena, a contemporary phenomenology of UAP encounters must take up the task of differentiating between different types of non-ordinary forms of perception, as such perception is integral to the experience of UAP.

In doing so, there are at least four things to consider:

a) the receipt of information from sources other than the five senses, b) experiences that seem to be taking place in an

altered or non-ordinary sense of reality, sometimes referred to as the “imaginal” realm, c) experiences that take place out of body, where the witness feels themselves leaving their body and can see their body below them, and d) experiences that take place in vivid dream states. If we are going to study how UAP manifest within the life-world, it is crucial we address these presentations of the phenomenon. They disclose something about the essence of what UAP are.

At the same time, we must carefully differentiate witness testimony that involves psychic phenomena from experiences that happen through the five senses only. The blending of the modalities of sensory perception with non-ordinary or psychic perception is an integral component of the UAP experience, and research and hypotheses will be stronger if a) they carefully differentiate what is received through the senses and what is received through non-traditional means, and b) they can account for the psychic or non-ordinary dimensions of UAP experiences in a meaningful way. Omitting the psychic aspects of these experiences is a failure to consider all that appears, and relegating these aspects to a category like “hallucination” fails to account for the consistency, prevalence, and meaning of non-ordinary consciousness in the lived experience of UAP.

e. The phenomenological method introduces the realm of intersubjectivity, which is crucial to examining our experience with another conscious intelligence.

Various accounts of intersubjectivity and our encounter with the Other have emerged from phenomenological thinkers, but they all share some general premises. First, when we encounter another subjectivity, an Other, we recognize that we share an experiential field with them, and that they can see things from their vantage point that we cannot see from ours. Thus, they have a view that transcends ours, and we realize the situatedness and relativity of our own perspective.³⁶ We also recognize that while the Other is a perceptual object that appears for us, we too are perceptual objects that they can perceive. We thus become aware of our physical bodies and how we appear in the presence of another human consciousness. Third, we recognize that the experiential field is not just there for us and our goals, but for the ends and

33 Vallée (1975/1979), pp. 25-47.

34 “But as a matter of principle, a prophetic consciousness (a consciousness that passes itself off as prophetic) is conceivable; that is, a consciousness for which every characteristic belonging to the expectation of what is coming to be lies within view” (Husserl 1964, p. 58).

35 See for example Conrad-Martius (1957).

36 For example, Husserl says, “If, with my understanding of someone else, I penetrate more deeply into him, into his horizon of ownness, I shall soon run into the fact that, just as his animate bodily organism lies in my field of perception, so my animate organism lies in his field of perception and that, in general, he experiences me forthwith as an Other for him, just as I experience him as my Other” (Husserl 1982, pp. 129-130).

goals of the Other as well. Thus we understand a field of shared intentions and practical possibilities. Last, through interaction with the Other, we are able to engage in shared exploring of the world we inhabit, communicating judgments and conclusions, and come to shared understandings regarding the life-world.³⁷

Husserl (1982) thought that intersubjective experience was essentially empathetic experience, that is to say, when we encounter another subjectivity we assume that they experience the world in a similar way that we do and are capable of putting ourselves into their shoes. We assume that the Other experiences the world through similar intentional acts as we do. Additionally, we assume the Other will behave similarly to us in similar circumstances.

It is quite comprehensible that...an “empathizing” of definite contents belonging to the “higher psychic sphere” arises. Such contents too are indicated somatically and in the conduct of the organism toward the outside world for example: as the outward conduct of someone who is angry or cheerful, which I easily understand from my own conduct under similar circumstances.³⁸

Husserl also thought that the more we empathize and understand another person’s inner psychic world, the more we learn about ourselves and our own processes of understanding. Through understanding the motives, values, beliefs, and thought processes of others, we highlight and reflect on our own inner conscious life.

Higher psychic occurrences, diverse as they are and familiar as they have become, have furthermore their style of synthetic interconnexions and take their course in forms of their own, which I can understand associatively on the basis of my empirical familiarity with the style of my own life, as exemplifying roughly differentiated typical forms. In this sphere, moreover, every successful understanding of what occurs in others has the effect of opening up new associations and new possibilities of understanding; and conversely, since every pairing association is reciprocal, every such understanding uncovers my

own psychic life in its similarity and difference and, by bringing new features into prominence, makes it fruitful for new associations.³⁹

Husserl is referring here, of course, to our ability to empathize and relate to another human consciousness.

As many UAP appear to be under intelligent control, we can understand UAP not only as a scientific study of a physical object, but as an experience with another conscious subject. One key difference of course, is that while we have a general understanding of how human consciousness encounters the world, and thus as Husserl argues, have a general sense of empathy and expectation regarding how they will perceive and respond, we do not know how the UAP intelligence or intelligences encounter the world or what kind of sensory capabilities or perspectives they have. Indeed, when we examine witness accounts, it becomes apparent how little we can anticipate about the potential NHI viewpoint and behavior. The NHIs reportedly appear in physical and non-physical ways and communicate through non-local methods (methods not involving the traditional exchange of information through physical space) subverting the conditions of intersubjectivity as we generally experience them. Experiencers who report sightings of entities are subject to the gaze of a non-human Other, experiencing themselves as both seen and controlled by them.⁴⁰

At the same time, this intersubjective process refers us back to ourselves and can reveal things about our own subjectivity and perspective. Many experiencers report not only that the entities associated with the craft have the ability to present in physical or non-physical ways and communicate non-locally, but that *they too* experience temporarily being out of body or receiving information non-locally. Thus the intersubjective experience with the UAP intelligence reveals something about our own capabilities and that of which our own bodies and cognition are potentially capable. Through the experience of a radically different intelligence, we are able to explore new aspects of our own inner conscious life and rethink the boundaries of our conscious viewpoint.

f. Phenomenology allows us to identify commonalities between the lived experience of UAP encounters and the experience of other anomalous phenomena.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

40 This is explored in depth by Zimmerman (2003), in which he analyzes the effects of the ‘alien gaze’ on abductees, including the feelings of helplessness and loss of control that occur when abductees are forced to gaze directly into the big black eyes of the NHIs.

One of Vallée's (1975/1979) more important analyses of UAP events was his overview of the miracles at Fatima, and his careful attention to detail regarding *what the witnesses described*. Even though apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary are traditionally interpreted as having nothing to do with UAP encounters, Vallée's investigation revealed that when we examine exactly what appeared to witnesses, the events at Fatima become almost indistinguishable from UAP encounters. For example, on July 13th, 1917, Fatima witnesses reported "a buzzing or humming sound" and "an explosion." A month later, on August 13th, they reported "falling flower petals that melt away" and "a luminous globe spinning through the clouds." During the primary "miracle" at Fatima on October 13th, witnesses reported "a weird disk that turns rapidly," "a flat disk [that] plunges in a zig zag fashion" and that "the clothes of the witnesses were dry in spite of the rain."⁴¹

Despite the fact that the Fatima miracle was never understood in popular consciousness as having anything to do with UAP, Vallée shows that it is undeniable that the descriptions from the witnesses resemble the phenomenology of UAP accounts. Vallée refers to several cases in his Magonia investigation in which witnesses reported objects producing a humming or buzzing sound. He compares the "flowers with petals that melt away" to the angel hair fibers often reported as falling in the aftermath of UAP encounters. In Magonia case 321, the witness stated that "a disk three times as large as the sun, red and purple, spinning rapidly, was seen descending swiftly towards the ground."⁴² And in Magonia case 292, a similar experience of the ground being dry in spite of the rain was recorded. "When the object left, a cloud of dense smoke was forming under the rain. The witness found the trees, grass, and ground perfectly dry."⁴³ Vallée thinks the similarities in the phenomenological structure of these reports is simply too strong to deny.

The final 'miracle' had come at the culmination of a precise series of apparitions combined with contacts and messages that place it very clearly, in my opinion, in the perspective of the UFO phenomenon. Not only was a flying disk or globe consistently involved, but its motion, its falling-leaf trajectory, its light effects, the thunderclaps, the buzzing sounds, the strange fragrance, the fall of

"angel hair" that dissolves upon reaching the ground, the heat wave associated with the close approach of the disk, *all of these are constant parameters of UFO sightings everywhere.*⁴⁴

Vallée's discussion doesn't end at Fatima, and he examines several other encounters with the Blessed Virgin that have commonalities with what witnesses describe as appearing during their experience of UAP. Importantly, this does not mean that a) religious events were really just "aliens" all along, or b) UAP are of divine origin. Both of these conclusions interpret what appears in light of an existing worldview or assumed conclusion, which phenomenology prompts us to suspend. Phenomenologically, what we can conclude is that the patterns of phenomena observed by witnesses in UAP encounters are extremely similar to patterns of phenomena observed in religious miracles such as the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima, and that these phenomena may have a shared identity. This allows us to potentially include a wider range of lived experiences in UAP studies. A phenomenon does not have to be interpreted by witnesses as a "UFO" or "aliens" in order to be included in the formal study of UAP, and religiously interpreted experiences in particular should be rigorously examined for similarities.

4. Conclusion

This paper serves only as an introduction into what phenomenology as a tradition has to offer UAP studies. I emphasize that I am not arguing that phenomenology should replace the work being done in the natural sciences, but that with a phenomenon as elusive, evasive, and mysterious as UAP, we must include the lived perspective of the witness as revealing an integral piece of the puzzle. As neuroscientist Charles Yokoyama recently stated to me in conversation, in phenomenology, human beings serve as the "sensors" or "instruments" through which we collect data. While human beings do not serve as perfect sensors, and we must carefully bracket out assumptions the witness may be making about their experience in our analysis, it adds something useful to our understanding of UAP.

Understanding the lived world as the foundation for the world as articulated by the sciences, moving beyond the extraterrestrial hypothesis, examining the modalities of

41 Vallée (1975/1979), p. 183.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, p. 154. Vallée's emphasis.

perception and receipt of information, understanding the intersubjective dimensions of the encounter, and including the lived experience of other anomalous events are vital to generating a robust understanding of UAP.

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