

Phenomenology as a Therapeutic Method

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Over the past five decades, philosophical counseling has emerged as a growing field worldwide. A central question in this movement concerns how philosophy can be effectively applied in counseling and therapeutic settings. This article emphasizes philosophy as a method and examines whether Husserlian phenomenology can serve as a practical and effective methodological tool for philosophical counselors in the therapeutic context.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative, theoretical-analytical approach, focusing on key concepts of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology in relation to the aims of philosophical counseling. Core phenomenological notions—such as epoché, phenomenological reduction, suspension of judgment, intentionality, and lived experience—are analyzed to evaluate their relevance and applicability within counseling practice.

Results: The analysis indicates that phenomenology helps client's distance themselves from the natural attitude and adopt a reflective, phenomenological perspective toward themselves, their everyday experiences, and their thoughts. Through this process, clients come to understand the philosophical notion of the self as intentional consciousness—consciousness that is always directed toward something. With the support of a philosophical counselor, clients can use phenomenological techniques to suspend presuppositions and engage more directly with the essential structures of their lived experiences.

Conclusions: Phenomenology offers a coherent and effective methodological framework for philosophical counseling and therapy. However, as this field continues to develop, it faces challenges arising from the gap between philosophical expertise and counseling practice. Research in philosophical counseling should therefore be written in a way that remains accessible and practically useful to both philosophers and counselors.

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Introduction

Phenomenology means suspending whatever one knows little about or does not know at all; it means refraining from judgment and evaluation. It is a journey that begins from our empirical self and continues toward the transcendental self. This is precisely where Peter Raabe believes that employing phenomenology in philosophical counseling can be helpful to both the counselor and the client.

In this article, by unpacking the main ideas of phenomenological philosophy (with emphasis on Husserl's views) and explaining its method, we will see that phenomenology—both consciously and unconsciously—opens possibilities for the counselor and the client that other philosophical schools may be less capable of providing.

From the time of Epicurus and the ancient philosophers until today, many philosophers have attempted to explain the world, dedicating their philosophical being to understanding it. Yet before Descartes, few philosophers paid attention to the thinking “I” that was engaged in thinking about the world. In his article titled *The Conceptual Framework of Philosophical Counseling*, Ran Lahav writes: “A large portion of the issues in Western philosophy have traditionally been abstract problems that have had little or no application in everyday life [...] But in the ancient world things were different. For example, the Pythagoreans combined philosophical theories with mystical ideas in order to offer a proper way of living.” (Ran Lahav, 1995). Edmund Husserl spoke of the thinking self not merely as something that exists because it thinks, but as something that exists because it thinks about something and is conscious of something. Drawing on the works of Franz Brentano and the psychologist Carl Stumpf, Husserl produced the *Logical Investigations*, which are considered the first major work in the field of phenomenology. For instance, his theory of intentionality was influenced by Brentano, though it became richer and more developed in Husserl's own formulation. Among the various definitions of phenomenology, this article relies on those that can be more useful in philosophical counseling. The philosophical counselor guides the client on a phenomenological journey toward the essence of beliefs, thoughts, and things.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical–analytical approach in order to examine the relevance of phenomenological philosophy to the practice of philosophical counseling. The research is based

on conceptual analysis and interpretive reading of primary and secondary philosophical sources, with particular emphasis on the works of Edmund Husserl and key texts in the field of philosophical counseling. The study focuses on several central concepts of Husserlian phenomenology, including epoché, phenomenological reduction, suspension of judgment, intentionality, and lived experience. These concepts are analyzed philosophically to clarify their meanings and methodological implications, and to explore how they can inform the process of philosophical counseling.

Through a close conceptual examination of these notions, the research seeks to identify the ways in which a phenomenological perspective can contribute to the interaction between counselor and client. The analysis aims to show how phenomenological reflection can open space for deeper self-examination, critical awareness, and clarification of beliefs and experiences within the counseling context.

Results

Reflection on the Transcendental Self

While the pre-Socratic philosophers turned their attention toward the external world and attempted to discover what the fundamental principle of the universe was made of, Socrates, with the statement “I know that I do not know,” returned to himself and began from the self. For centuries afterward, the “self” had little place in philosophical reflection until the modern period, when Descartes initiated his project with “I think” and claimed to have found a certain foundation. In other words, “the pre-Socratic philosophers shared the concern of seeking first principles to explain the whole of nature. In today’s language, they were equally attentive to ‘cosmology’ or ‘science’ on the one hand and ‘philosophy’ on the other. Socrates deliberately revolted against them because he believed that what we most need to know is how we ourselves ought to live, not how nature operates; therefore, it is necessary to address ethical questions before anything else.” (Bryan Magee, 2006)

In sessions of philosophical counseling, we can begin from the self in the Socratic sense, continue with the Cartesian self or ego, and eventually reach a higher level—the transcendental self of phenomenology. In this sense, the client may doubt everything, yet cannot doubt that they are thinking. They rely on a self that serves as a Cartesian foundation, a self upon which the client can

lean and from which their questions can emerge. This same thinking self, however, appears differently in its phenomenological and transcendental form: “The world that is experienced in this reflective life remains present to me in a certain way; as before, it is experienced with the content that belongs to it in each case. Just as it has appeared to me until now, it continues to appear to me; yet I, as one who reflects philosophically, no longer maintain the natural belief in the existence of the world that arises from worldly experience, nor do I regard that belief as valid, even though this belief itself still remains present and is grasped by the attentive gaze.” (Edmund Husserl). In other words, “phenomenology can generally be described as a philosophy that has learned to be astonished anew and to value wonders in themselves, precisely where other philosophies see only trivial matters or reasons to sweep them aside. Yet not all these wonders are equally important. In particular, for Husserl there was one wonder that stood above all others—what he himself called ‘the most wondrous of all wonders’: the pure self and pure consciousness.” (Herbert Spiegelberg) Indeed, “there is a remarkable ambiguity in the ‘self.’ On the one hand, this self is an ordinary, everyday part of the world—one of the many things that dwell within it. It occupies space and endures through time; it has physical and psychological aspects and interacts causally with other things in the world. If it falls, it falls like other bodies; if we push it, it topples like any other object; if chemicals affect it, it reacts like any other organism; if a beam of light strikes its visual organs, it responds electronically, chemically, and psychologically. I am a material, organic, and psychological thing. If we consider the self only as one of the things in the world, we are examining it as the ‘empirical self.’ On the other hand, this very same self can stand over against the world. The self is the center of disclosure—the center for which the world and the things within it become manifest. The self is the agent of truth, the one responsible for judgment and justification, and the ‘owner’ of the cognitive and perceptual world. If we consider the self from this perspective, it is no longer a part of the world but what is called the transcendental self. An important point regarding the empirical self and the transcendental self is that they are one and the same being considered in two different ways. The distinction between them is not merely a matter of our perspective; rather, the self itself exists in this dual manner. The self can be considered in these two ways because its mode of being allows it to appear in both forms. One cannot predicate the transcendental self of a tree or a cat. The ambiguity of the self lies in the fact that something that is part of the world can also stand before the world and even appropriate it or become correlated

with it. It is as if the self is both part of the world and not part of it. Nevertheless, we should not imagine that the ego can be separated from the world or exist without it. The intentional character of the ego—even as a transcendental self—requires that objects and the world be correlated with it. The ego and the world are ‘moments’ relative to each other. If we consider the ego as something that ‘has a world,’ it is no longer merely a part of the world. In that case, the ego is correlated with the world as the indirect object to which the world is given.” (Robert Sokolowski)

What occurs in philosophical counseling through the phenomenological method is that the client moves beyond their natural ego toward the transcendental ego. Through such an experience, the client distances themselves from their natural self and encounters the world through the transcendental self: “I, as the naïve and simple natural ego who experiences the world, bracket this world entirely for myself. From now on, only my experience of the world—not the world itself—remains, and along with it myself as the subject of that experience. Even my organic body and my human nature are bracketed. The result is that I exist and live these experiences of the world. This experiential life exists and it is my life, even if it has no factual reality or may never have one.”

In Husserl’s view, the “self” in this sense is no longer merely the subject of knowledge but becomes a phenomenon that appears to us in another way and can be questioned like other objects. In this position, the self becomes the object of knowledge. Yet because we require the self as the subject of knowing, we remain, in a Cartesian manner, inevitably certain of it. At the same time, this self is also in the process of being constituted: “It seems that the ego necessarily always is. This continuity is not the absurd idea of a fixed and unchanging mental process; rather, the ego belongs to all mental processes that come and go. Its relation to objective things arises through the practical cogito. This relation differs from one cogito to another: with each cogito it appears and with each cogito it disappears, yet the ego itself remains.”

When we say that the client should explore themselves more deeply, we are in fact referring to the “inner depth” of the self—a depth that exists within us. Depth is a hidden dimension of the person that makes them profound. This depth is a concealed realm of wisdom filled with rich and complex meanings that cannot easily be grasped or defined, yet it manifests itself in a person’s observable behavior and words. The existence of inner depth is not merely a speculative theory; we can experience it within ourselves or directly perceive it as a quality of another person. At times we feel meaningful insights and emotions that arise “deep within” us and then come to the surface of

our awareness. This suggests that there is a hidden domain within us that we experience as a source of meanings and ideas. This source can inspire and motivate us, fill us with insight and wonder, and carry us beyond our psychological self. (Lahav). It is precisely this movement beyond the psychological self that introduces us to the transcendental self—the philosophical self. Thus, “by cultivating inner depth, we transform our attitude toward ourselves and toward reality. The long-term aim of philosophical companionship is therefore the transformation of the self toward broader dimensions of existence and a step beyond ordinary psychological patterns and structures. This does not mean that we hope to free ourselves entirely from all psychological limitations. After all, we are human, and eliminating our psychological dimension is neither possible nor desirable. Yet through continuous work on developing inner depth, we can gradually improve our capacity to move beyond our ordinary self and at times transcend our psychological patterns. This means experiencing inner freedom and inner abundance, like a prisoner who, at least for a short time, steps out of their cell into an open landscape. The aim of self-transformation, contrary to what might appear, is neither imaginary nor unattainable. In fact, it is faithful to the spirit of Western philosophy, which has long believed that philosophy can help us transform ourselves and live a fuller and deeper life.” (Lahav)

Finally, phenomenology assists the particular sciences and the natural attitude. It does so by clarifying the partial character of those sciences, by revealing what is absent from them, and by showing that their findings can be viewed from perspectives that they themselves cannot attain. Phenomenology neither doubts nor denies; rather, it clarifies and reconstructs. By illuminating the partiality of other modes of thinking, it articulates its own sense of the whole. In speaking of the whole, it remembers the self and thus resists both the self-forgetfulness of modern science and the self-denial of postmodernity. Phenomenology helps us reflect on the first and the last questions and ultimately come to know ourselves. (Sokolowski).

Phenomenological Analysis of Consciousness

The concept of intentionality—translated in different ways in Persian as directedness, intentionality, or aboutness—is one of the key concepts of phenomenology. Husserl adopted the term intentionality from Franz Brentano, who himself had drawn it from medieval scholastic philosophy. Herbert Spiegelberg, quoting Brentano, writes: “The distinguishing characteristic of all mental phenomena is what the medieval scholastics called the intentional (or mental)

inexistence of an object. We prefer to call it—though not without some ambiguity—a reference (Beziehung) to a content, a direction (Richtung) toward an object (which in this context should not be understood as something real), or an immanent objectivity. [...] Every mental phenomenon includes something as its object, though not always in the same way. In presentation (Vorstellung) something is presented; in judgment something is affirmed or denied; in love something is loved, and so on. This intentional inexistence is peculiar to mental phenomena alone. No physical phenomenon exhibits such a feature. Thus we may define mental phenomena by saying that they are phenomena that contain an object intentionally within themselves.” (Spiegelberg)

Spiegelberg explains that Brentano used two expressions—“intentional inexistence” and “reference to a content”—to describe mental phenomena. Although Brentano eventually abandoned the term intentionality itself, the notion of reference to a content or object remained central to his theory. According to Spiegelberg, even more important than this classification is Brentano’s methodological path in deriving these distinctions.

Thus, for Brentano, intentionality relates primarily to mental phenomena rather than to physical phenomena. According to this theory, intentionality is the distinguishing feature of mental acts such as judgments, beliefs, meanings, value judgments, desires, interests, and hatreds. In Brentano’s words, an intentional act is always an act “about” or “directed toward” something. I think about something; I desire this or that thing. A distinctive feature of intentional acts is that the existence of their objects is not required. The object of an intentional act may be a mentally dependent entity, such as the imagination of a mermaid; it may be a physical object; it may even be something impossible, such as a round square; or something possible but not actual, such as a mountain of gold. Any mental state—loving, wishing, believing—can have a non-existent intentional entity as its object. By contrast, physical actions that require an object cannot occur with respect to a non-existent intentional entity. Kicking a ball requires a ball, but thinking about a ball does not require the ball’s existence; one may think about a ball that has never existed. Brentano therefore identified the mental with intentional states—states that can be directed toward an intentional object. Husserl adopted this conception of the mental as a presupposition in his *Logical Investigations*.

The theory of intentionality does not concern only objects that are perceived. Consciousness is always “consciousness of something”—of anything to which the mind directs its attention, whether

it exists externally or not. Even when something has no external existence, if the mind attends to it, it still functions as an object of consciousness. In other words, every mental act aims at an object or referent, regardless of whether that object exists or not. As Sokolowski explains, an important teaching of phenomenology is that every act of consciousness, or every experience, is essentially consciousness *of* something or experience *of* something. If I see, I see a visible object such as a tree or a lake; if I imagine, my imagination presents an imaginary object; if I remember, I remember something belonging to the past; if I judge, I consider a state of affairs or a fact. Thus every act of consciousness is correlated with an object, and every intentional act has its corresponding intentional object.

According to Peter Raabe, in the application of phenomenology within philosophical counseling, the counselor encourages the client to reflect upon their perceptions and their thoughts about those perceptions without making immediate judgments. In a phenomenological inquiry, the philosopher invites the client to reflect upon and describe their mental states. The counselor may ask whether these mental processes are intentional—that is, deliberately directed and reflective of the client’s thinking—or non-intentional, meaning more automatic and uncontrolled. Are they temporal, motivational, or emotional? How do today’s processes differ from those of yesterday? Are they oriented toward the past or toward the future? Some philosophical counselors describe their work as participation in a process of “clarification.” Their aim is to illuminate the client’s current way of being by uncovering and examining hidden assumptions within the client’s perspective, the possibilities and implications within their situation, the concepts intertwined in their life, the ideas they pursue, the ethical implications of their choices, and possible alternative actions. The key point in phenomenological inquiry is that the client experiences their attitude toward the world and the events within it from a reflective perspective, seeing them as they present themselves to the client—not in a supposedly neutral way but as that which is intended or meant.

A client who consults a philosophical counselor trained in phenomenology is therefore expected gradually to understand the relationship between their consciousness and ethical, logical, and metaphysical questions. In fact, the client learns that their consciousness does not arise in a vacuum or in an empty world. Consciousness is always consciousness of something—something that, over time, the client learns to discover even in the unseen and unwritten aspects of their life, in the lines between the concepts and meanings that structure their experience. Nevertheless, this awareness

of what is unseen or unarticulated—emerging at deeper levels of understanding—does not imply issuing a definitive judgment. Rather, it means that “we do not advance any positive or negative judgment concerning the existence or non-existence of what is assumed to exist independently of the human mind.”

At this point Husserl introduces the concept of *epoché*. In a sense, epoché responds to positivist views that consider the natural world the discoverer of truth and human beings as neutral observers. For Husserl, the world appears and manifests itself to human beings—and this manifestation occurs in human consciousness. From here arise the notions of “bracketing” and the “principle of pre supposition lessness.” When something appears within our consciousness and we cannot definitively speak about its existence or non-existence in the external world, we must place it in brackets—suspending judgment about it. Our most honest position becomes simply: “I do not know.” Husserl argues that phenomenology, like the philosophical projects of Hume and Descartes, begins with the principle that we have no presuppositions.

In fact, prejudgment is grounded in presuppositions that may lead to unjustified conclusions. For this reason Husserl considers the avoidance of presuppositions one of the key conditions for moving from the natural attitude to the reflective and philosophical attitude. He writes: “I refrain from accepting the validity of all statements that belong to the stream of my life and that go beyond experiential intuition—such as non-intuitive representations, existential or value judgments, the positing of ends and means, and the like. In particular, I avoid taking positions, since such position-taking necessarily occurs within the natural, unreflective, and non-philosophical attitude of everyday life. I abstain from these attitudes precisely insofar as they presuppose the world and thus contain within themselves a belief in the existence of the world.”

Husserl’s aim is to free us from judgment and prejudice in order to approach the truth of things and phenomena themselves. As Lyotard explains, the goal is to seek the “given”—that is, “the thing itself”—which we observe, think about, and speak of, while refraining from constructing hypotheses either about the relation between the phenomenon and the being to which it belongs or about the relation between the phenomenon and the self for whom the phenomenon appears.

Phenomenological Reduction

Reduction (tahvīl or *reduction*) literally means “returning to the beginning” or “bringing something back to its origin.” In this sense, the aim of these principles within Husserl’s

phenomenological teachings is to reach and grasp the essence and origin of phenomena, affairs, and objects.

From Husserl's perspective, reduction is not a theory or a claim but a procedure. As David Bell explains, reduction "is not a theory or a claim; it is a procedure. It is not something Husserl asks us to believe, but something he asks us to do. Therefore, in its purest form it is not expressed in declarative sentences that are true, relevant, justified, or logically self-consistent, but rather in imperative sentences. This makes its philosophical evaluation difficult." (Bell, 1997, p. 283)

From childhood to adulthood we pass through stages that eventually lead us to a mind filled with judgments and prejudices. Our encounter with the world at the beginning of life is free of presuppositions, situated in the present moment and devoid of judgment. Yet along the path of growth and the accumulation of various experiences, we no longer find ourselves alone in the world. We constantly exist in relation to others and amid countless events, and thus we become entangled in innumerable judgments. In other words, "when a child grows and reaches maturity, he becomes a rational being. He has now reached a stage at which he can understand an argument and act according to his own inference. At this stage a human being can act according to ideas rather than merely according to desires and feelings. In the first stage of life, the child is filled with diverse inclinations and motivations and possesses only a rudimentary rationality. Over time he comes to realize that he must understand himself as an individual among other individuals—someone who cannot always and everywhere simply satisfy his own desires. He must understand that others also exist and must be respected. In this way a sense of justice emerges in the child. Early stages of this sense already appear in children, who quickly judge what actions are bad." (Sokolowski, 2015, pp. 211–212)

For example, "whenever Mark Twain wishes to return Huckleberry Finn from corrupt civilization to the carefree state of childhood, he sends him toward the Mississippi River. It is therefore not surprising that Merleau-Ponty, without passing through the intricate difficulties of epoché, resolves many issues—including the problem of intersubjectivity—simply by referring to children's behavior. From one perspective, Husserl's aim in reduction is a kind of return to childlike spontaneity, a pathway toward the pure self, the pure ego, and pure consciousness. This raises a question: if philosophy at its beginning existed in its original state—in Platonic wonder, or in the first intuition of Descartes, or at the threshold of the Delphic temple, in short in its original and

childlike purity—would it still have needed to undergo reduction? Are the many ambiguities and misunderstandings surrounding reduction not due to the fact that reduction is not a judgment, theory, or claim but rather a method that must be undertaken with either hopeful or confident expectation of reaching a destination? And since no set of instructions can be fully understood without experience, can one ever attain a secure understanding of it without practicing it?” (Jamadi, 2009, p. 104).

Warnock further asks: “One might ask what this subjectivity is that remains under investigation even after the completion of epoché—that is, the disclosure which Husserl claims to constitute a new and complete beginning for philosophy. In what remains, there are three components. The first component is the ‘I’ that thinks. This ‘I’ is not a particular person with a specific history living in a particular place; rather, it is that which I must at least have a minimal awareness of in my thinking. This is the ‘I’ that exists as the ‘bearer of all concepts’ in Kant. It is the ‘I’ that Descartes discovered when he looked at the piece of wax and concluded that he knows himself—who judges about the wax—better than the wax itself. The second component is the mental act of this thinking subject. Finally, the third component—inseparable from the second—is the intentional object of this mental act [...] These are objects determined by the transcendental ego.” (Warnock, 2017, p. 64).

Phenomenological Interpretation in Philosophical Counseling

Ran Lahav, in an article entitled *Interpretation in Philosophical Counseling*, argues that interpretation can serve as a key concept that assists the philosophical counselor in unlocking the client’s problems and concerns. Peter Raabe, discussing the place of interpretation in a philosophical counseling session, writes: “Heidegger maintains that the methodological meaning of phenomenological descriptions lies in interpretation (his emphasis). Interpretation is also referred to as hermeneutics, and according to Heidegger, phenomenology is interpretation in what it interprets. However, this apparently paradoxical combination of the two terms is by no means accepted by all philosophers. In many texts on philosophical counseling, interpretation is regarded as a distinct process—although overlapping with explanation—through which a person attempts to understand another’s intention by placing oneself in the other’s position and then striving to develop what may be called ‘participatory understanding on the part of the interpreter.’ Philosophical counseling, therefore, views interpretation as an empathetic effort to interpret or

understand the client's 'text' as it has been lived and is being lived by the client. In other words, interpretation is the counselor's attempt to understand the client by helping them comprehend and articulate their problems, concerns, and issues through a spiral dialectic that unfolds within the parameters of the client's political, social, relational, and personal life contexts—both within the specific context and within the broader context of life as a whole. The use of the term 'text' to describe what the client reveals about their life in dialogue with the counselor follows Paul Ricoeur's extension of the concept of text so that it includes any human action or situation. Ricoeur writes: 'The interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject, who thereafter understands themselves better, understands themselves differently, or simply begins to understand themselves.' He also writes: 'To interpret a social situation is to treat it as a text and then to search for the metaphor that governs that text.' Thus, interpretation in philosophical counseling may be defined as the process in which both client and counselor interpret the client's life itself and the client's life within the context of various social situations or the larger world." (Raabe, 2019, pp. 59–60)

Although not all experiences are easily or directly accessible, phenomenology has long been aware of this fact and has even emphasized that "the focal zones of clarity in our image of the world are surrounded by halos of ambiguity and indeterminacy. Some of these halos are not merely temporary or accidental but intrinsic, grounded in the very structures of knowledge." (Herbert Spiegelberg, Vol. II, 2012, p. 1024). This observation helps clarify the difference between the scientific method and the interpretive method. Science attempts to neutralize or eliminate the activity of the knower in order to achieve objective knowledge of the subject. Interpretive understanding, however, regards itself as the result of the transformative involvement of both the knower and the object of knowledge. The scientist strives to know the object as it is—although only as phenomenon, that is, as what appears to the senses—independent of personal bias or perspective. Interpretation, by contrast, is primarily concerned with understanding the meaning that the subject holds for a person within a specific context of experience. Thus, while the scientific approach to knowledge requires a separation between the knower and the known, interpretive understanding is based on participation.

The interpretive activity of the philosophical counselor involves collaborating with the client in order to "develop an understanding of the hypotheses, guesses, and intuitions that arise in moments

such as indifference or meaningfulness.” The philosophical counselor seeks to uncover and reconstruct the meanings hidden within the deeper layers of the client’s mental processes. Gerd Achenbach, the founder of the modern philosophical counseling movement in Germany, compares philosophical counseling to the Socratic practice of the “responsible interpretation of life.” He further describes philosophical counseling as an interaction with the client aimed at achieving a “philosophical-hermeneutic solidarity with disturbances and sufferings,” while rejecting the idea of providing a “treatment” for them. (Raabe, 2019, p. 60)

Barbara Norman writes: “Philosophical counseling provides an opportunity to explore the art of relationships between individuals—individuals defined through open questioning and empathy. They exist within an ecological relationship [...] Open questioning reflects a willingness to listen rather than to impose. Its aim is to hear messages that are both different from and similar to our own. This process draws us out of our former selves and helps us become new beings. In other words, through a process of reinterpretation and redescribing, we also listen to ourselves.” (Barbara Norman, 1995, p. 53).

In other words, “listening makes speaking easier; it receives speech and brings it into realization. In this sense, the power we initially attribute to the speaker is in fact a self-centered illusion. Meaning is not created solely by the speaker; rather, it occupies an intersubjective space and emerges jointly between the listener’s understanding and the speaker’s intention. If there were no one to receive my speech, I would fall silent. In that case I would not be able to speak—even to myself.” (Harvey, 2009, p. 377).

Peter Raabe further argues that, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the primary task of interpretive analysis is “to clarify what lies at the foundation of our interests,” because we cannot understand “the expression that concerns us unless we recognize our own questions within it.” Yet the necessary presence of the counselor within the interpretive process requires caution. Gadamer’s analysis of the complexities involved in “reading texts” reflects the challenge faced by the philosophical counselor. Gadamer writes that in an interpretive effort, “following the interests that guide us with respect to a specific subject becomes more important than merely interpreting the explicit content of a statement.” He explains that the true nature of the interpretive process includes both the interpreter’s understanding of themselves and the understanding of what is being interpreted. This means that the philosophical counselor must accept that every explanation,

evaluation, or interpretation they provide regarding the client's textual reality also reflects the interpreter's own motivations in meaning-making.

In other words, when the counselor "reads the client's text" in order to understand and interpret it, they simultaneously read themselves into that text and read the text through their own experiences. Consequently, the philosophical counselor must remain aware that in this process of "reading the text," the text that the client attempts to present may become contaminated by the counselor's own biases, assumptions, and prejudgments. In this regard, Jürgen Habermas argues that interpretation teaches us that as long as we operate within the sphere of natural language, we inevitably remain participants in the interpretive process. Therefore, philosophical counseling possesses no universal criterion for determining when it is facing an erroneous interpretation arising from a seemingly natural understanding and when a problem that appears solvable through interpretation actually requires systematic explanation.

Similarly, any form of self-criticism, self-justification, or even self-transformation that the client attempts through an internal interpretive dialogue may be subject to the same distortions inherent in self-understanding. The reason is that a "monologue" with oneself cannot overcome the distortions embedded within the language of understanding and interpretation available to the client at that moment. Habermas therefore argues that such distorted interpretive insight must be complemented by a theoretical explanation of the conditions and causes underlying that meaning. In such cases, the counselor may be compelled to move beyond the threshold of equality with the client within a dialogical encounter and assume the role of a teacher or guide. This raises an important question: does philosophical counseling inherently include an educational dimension? And furthermore, should it?

Discussion

As argued in the present article, a counselor who adopts a phenomenological approach appears to possess a set of conceptual tools through which a philosophical counseling session can be conducted. Attention to the distinction between the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude enables the counselor to guide the client beyond the immediacy of everyday life and encourage them to view themselves and their daily experiences from a broader, phenomenological perspective.

The “self” is, on the one hand, a part of this world and of everyday life—indeed, it is precisely this self that sits in the counseling room. On the other hand, it is capable of distancing itself from its immediate involvement and asking the fundamental question: *Who am I?* Approaching this question through a phenomenological perspective can help the client reflect on a “self” that exists beyond their name, family identity, parental background, or occupation. Instead, the client is invited to consider the “I” that simply *is*—a being whose consciousness is always consciousness *of something* and is directed toward the world.

This thinking self, which always possesses a form of “consciousness-of,” is fundamentally oriented toward self-understanding. It refrains from judgment and suspends prejudice. Through the practice of epoché—bracketing things, objects, and thoughts—it attempts to reach the true essence of phenomena. Such an encounter with the essence of things becomes possible only when we learn to consider them from multiple aspects and perspectives, rather than merely from the single appearance presented before us.

According to Peter Raabe, a philosopher who intends to practice counseling through phenomenological expertise must fulfill several important functions in guiding the counseling session. These functions include:

- Providing the client with the possibility of attaining new perspectives and insights.
- Objectively describing the subjective aspects of the client’s experience, which are often overlooked by the client themselves, thereby increasing the client’s understanding of how they exist in the world.
- Assisting the client in distinguishing and separating interconnected elements of their life, as well as clarifying the problems and concerns they experience.
- Empowering the client to gain distance from significant life events that have often remained unexamined and insufficiently processed.
- Enabling the client to step back from events and view them with reflective distance.

Raabe argues that “the aim of phenomenology is to describe an experience in a way that is as free as possible from prior knowledge, personal bias, and preconceived descriptions. In applying phenomenology to philosophical counseling, the counselor encourages the client to reflect on their perceptions and their thoughts about those perceptions without making immediate judgments. In a phenomenological inquiry, the philosopher invites the client to reflect upon and describe their

mental states. The counselor may ask whether these mental processes are ‘intentional,’ that is, deliberately directed and reflective of the client’s thinking, or ‘non-intentional,’ meaning more automatic and uncontrolled. Are they temporal, motivational, or emotional? How do today’s processes differ from those of yesterday? Are they oriented toward the past or toward the future? Some philosophical counselors describe their work as participation in a process of ‘clarification.’ Their aim is to illuminate the client’s current way of being by uncovering and examining hidden assumptions within the client’s perspective, the possibilities and implications within their situation, the concepts intertwined in their life, the ideas they pursue, the ethical implications of their actions, possible alternative actions, and so on. The key point in phenomenological inquiry is that the client experiences their attitude toward the world and toward objects and events within it from a reflective standpoint, seeing them as they present themselves—not in a supposedly neutral manner but as that which is intended or meant.” (Raabe, 2019, pp. 57–58)

In this sense, phenomenology may not merely be a method or tool for the counselor. In order to understand the client’s difficulties, the counselor must undertake a phenomenological journey into the client’s lived mental world. Through this process, the counselor can assist the client in freeing themselves from presuppositions, revealing their distorted assumptions, and gradually reconstructing them in a clearer and more accurate manner.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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