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The changing face of Australia: From secular to post-secular identity

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Chapter 2. Hermeneutic Phenomenology

This chapter will explore the phenomenological tradition from which hermeneutic phenomenology arose. It will outline the definition of phenomenology and the key phenomenological traditions. It will then focus on one of these traditions as a research method, and why I view it as the most appropriate method of inquiry for this dissertation. Although I will primarily rely on Max van Manen's text, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* to direct my research approach, in this section I begin by outlining the historical development of hermeneutic phenomenology to add richness to the proceeding discussion.

Phenomenology is a term that encompasses both a philosophical tradition and a basis for social research methods. There are a number of theorists who were key architects and developers of this philosophy, including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Each of these theorists took phenomenology in a different direction, developing ideas that covered new ground. Hence, there are a range of broad schools in phenomenological thought. The branches of phenomenology developed by these theorists hold that phenomenology can penetrate deeply into human experience and trace the essence of a phenomenon, expressing it in its original form as experienced by individuals.

Ajjawi and Higgs argue that, 'the main focus of phenomenology is with pre-reflective experiences and feelings (the essence of a phenomenon)'.¹¹⁷ Essence, in the sense intended by Ajjawi and Higgs, is defined by van Manen as 'the very nature of the phenomenon, for that which makes a "thing" what it is – and without which it could not be what it is'.¹¹⁸ He

¹¹⁴R Ajjawi and J Higgs, 'Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology to Investigate How Experienced Practitioners Learn to Communicate Clinical Reasoning', *The Qualitative Report*, 12/4 (2007).p. 616.

¹¹⁸Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990).p. 10.

also notes that ‘the term essence may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon... so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way’.¹¹⁹ By means of this phenomenological perspective, I aim at uncovering the essence of the post-secular, and the structures that underpin and make manifest experiences of the post-secular.

The broad phenomenological traditions and key figures are recognised and introduced here. I will also discuss the historical development of hermeneutic phenomenology from its early beginnings in the work of Husserl and Heidegger, to the later work of Gadamer.

Phenomenological schools of thought

TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Transcendental phenomenology originated in the thinking of Husserl with personal prejudices suspended, or ‘bracketed’, allowing the reality of phenomena to be known through pure consciousness.¹²⁰ In this type of research, personal opinion needs to be suspended in order to discover and describe the lived world of experience in its essence. This line of thinking positions the lived world as discoverable and knowable, as phenomena are regarded as pre-existing and unalterable.

EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

In contrast to transcendental phenomenology and its focus on knowing, existential phenomenology is a broad term applied to a branch of phenomenology that rejects Cartesian rationalism. Largely influenced by the work of Heidegger, it instead posits that phenomena cannot be understood from a detached perspective, and sees engagement as the key to

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Susann Laverty, ‘Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2/3 (September 2003 2003), 29.

understanding both being and essences.¹²¹ With its focus on ontology rather than epistemology, existential phenomenology is different from other branches of phenomenology as it is situated in opposition to Husserl's idea of complete reduction. This phenomenological approach positions experiences as perceivable and describable by the individual's consciousness. Consciousness here refers to a 'co-constituted dialogue between a person and the world'.¹²²

HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Hermeneutic phenomenology emerges in the writings of Heidegger and presents a departure from the other branches. Moving from descriptive to interpretative, this branch of philosophy rejects the idea that personal opinions and understandings are barriers. Instead, it sees these as part of subjective experience on which to build understandings of the nature of things as experienced by the individual. The world can be known and experienced by the individual and their subjectivity. Understandings are generated that are viewed as interpretations of phenomena.¹²³ This process requires careful attention and an understanding that, although new meanings may arise, these are continuously 'on the way' and may never be complete.

Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is concerned with human experiences, but not with experiences that are thought to be universal and shared by all people. The meanings uncovered in phenomena are indeterminate and incomplete, always seeking to question assumptions by returning to lived experience itself, the beginnings of phenomenological inquiry.¹²⁴ It is, however, the application of the hermeneutic approach in qualitative

¹²¹Art Sloan and Brian Bowe, 'Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy, the Methodologies, and Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology to Investigate Lecturers' Experiences of Curriculum Design', *Quality & Quantity*, 48/3 (2014), 1291-303.p. 1296.

¹²²Paul Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology', in Robyn Barnacle (ed.), *Phenomenology* (RMIT University Press, 2001), 16-37.p. 20

¹²³ Lavery, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 9.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p.10

phenomenological research that underpins the process of uncovering a range of understandings and interpretations, rather than a defined set of universal truths.

Key authors

The philosophical tradition that has come to be known as hermeneutic phenomenology has developed over the last century and is influenced by the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. These theorists each contributed aspects to the larger field of hermeneutic phenomenology developing a range of perspectives that will be explored in this section.

HUSSERL

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is seen as the father of modern phenomenology. His influence in this field of philosophy, as encapsulated in his maxim ‘to the things themselves’, is foundational.¹²⁵ Through this approach, Husserl sought to shed fresh light on experienced phenomena by changing the method of investigation from a ‘natural attitude’ to one that is more reflective and aware of presuppositions. This methodological device was termed ‘reduction’ and involved ‘bracketing out’ the existence of the world and, consequently, the commonsense beliefs that exist about it.¹²⁶ This allowed for prejudices and presuppositions to be reduced and phenomena to be revealed as freely as possible, without conceptual hindrances.

Husserl argues that the ‘lifeworld’ is understood pre-reflectively, without the need for interpretations.¹²⁷ Grasping the essential features of a phenomenon needs to be done as freely as possible, without an individual’s culture and existing knowledge impacting

¹²⁵Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'.p. 2.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Maura Dowling, 'From Husserl to Van Manen. A Review of Different Phenomenological Approaches', *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44/1 (1// 2007), 131-42.p. 2.

understanding. As Moran explains, ‘Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within’.¹²⁸ Understanding the phenomenology of Husserl is based on this assertion.

Husserl attempted to describe the relationship between consciousness and experience with his approach to observing phenomena. His description of ‘bracketing’ preconceived notions in order to view phenomena as purely as possible underpinned his focus on the essence of a phenomenon. The essence of a phenomenon is the core meaning of an individual’s experience. From these earliest theorists, the purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence, ‘a grasp of the very nature of the thing’.¹²⁹ Husserl believed that the essence of a thing could be seen and felt clearly once the mind was cleared of values, beliefs and ideas.

Other foundational ideas emerging from Husserl’s writing include *Anschauung*, intentionality and bracketing. *Anschauung* refers to ‘looking at’ a phenomenon; intentionality to the process of the mind being directed towards the object of study; and bracketing to the holding back of pre-existing ideas and beliefs.¹³⁰ By bringing together mind and object, Husserl’s approach focused on the recognition of the link between human perception and reality.¹³¹ This was a critical step in the development of transcendental phenomenology, and the movement towards an acceptance of phenomenology as a scientific method.¹³²

HEIDEGGER

Building on this approach, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), as Husserl’s student, redefined phenomenology by moving closer to the core question of metaphysics – the question of

¹²⁸D. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

¹²⁹Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, p. 175.

¹³⁰Lavery, ‘Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations’, (pp. 4–6).

¹³¹*Ibid.*

¹³²*Ibid.*

being. He argued phenomenological questions ultimately seek to answer questions about the meaning of being, or *Dasein*. Like Husserl, Heidegger argues in his earlier work *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* for the central importance of reduction in the phenomenological method. Heidegger's individual contribution to this field of inquiry, however, moves beyond this agreement with Husserl to uncover the deeper implications of phenomenological inquiry – *Dasein*.¹³³ This ontological concept of the human being sees the human person as capable of self-questioning and self-reflection and as co-constituted with the world.

Dasein is a central concept of Heidegger's work as it considers the problem raised by Husserl's focus on understanding phenomena through bracketing, and situates understanding as inextricable from personhood. For Heidegger, being includes one's standpoint and background and these are inseparable from being.

Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus, to work out the question of being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of being; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about – namely, being.¹³⁴

Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* focuses on the ontological problem of phenomenology and its relationship to being. Being cannot be understood as separate from human experience in the Cartesian sense; instead, it is an *a priori* of existence. For phenomenology this is a primary point, as it determines the investigation into a phenomenon through the use of some key steps. These include dispensing with the need to maintain objectivity, but also how this lack of objectivity influences understanding. Heidegger argues that human beings have the capacity to comprehend their own existence.¹³⁵ He explains that

¹³³Ibid.p. 7.

¹³⁴Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

¹³⁵Ibid. p. 96.

Dasein allows for making sense of being-in-the-world and raises the questions of what lived experience is.¹³⁶ In order to ask these questions, Heidegger claims that the concept *Dasein* has some pre-knowledge or pre-understanding of the answers.¹³⁷ These answers come from what is already known, or has been experienced, as beings are always in the world, sharing and interacting and influenced by the social norms in which they live.

Understanding, or *Verstehen*, is another important concept, as it links to the central idea of *Dasein*. Heidegger viewed understanding as a basic form of existence¹³⁸ and argued that human experience is hermeneutically meaningful.¹³⁹ The starting point is our pre-understanding of being, and reaching these pre-understandings and uncovering a phenomenon is a phenomenological process. The inseparability of understanding and being influenced my work throughout this research as it continually offered me opportunities to reflect on my understandings, as well as those raised by the participants.

GADAMER

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) was a student of Heidegger and further developed phenomenology within the hermeneutic approach, focusing on language as the means by which being is understood. The relationship of language to being, understanding and existence is critical, as it is linked to our tradition, our historically effected consciousness.¹⁴⁰ If that is the case, coming to terms with this historicity is key to a phenomenological approach, as knowing that we are historically conditioned beings says something about our being, as well as our knowing. This is why Gadamer's approach incorporates a number of ways to understand this historicity, such as through acknowledgment of prejudices and how

¹³⁶Ibid. p. 49.

¹³⁷Ibid. p. 88.

¹³⁸Ibid. p.186.

¹³⁹Ibid. p. 450.

¹⁴⁰Laverty, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 10).

they determine our horizons, or ‘range of vision’.¹⁴¹ As one of my key theorists, I explore Gadamer’s work further in the next section of this chapter.

Hermeneutic phenomenology: Philosophical foundations

Hermeneutic phenomenology captures two meanings integral to my research process. Firstly, hermeneutics was the discipline that exegetes used to interpret biblical texts.¹⁴² This expanded, through the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), to encompass dialogue as well as written texts.¹⁴³ As part of the interpretivist tradition, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasises the processes of revealing meaning at the place where the question of being arises for *Dasein*.¹⁴⁴ According to Heidegger, and later Gadamer, it is impossible to escape one’s own fore-conceptions when engaged with texts; hence, the researcher is also revealed through the research process.¹⁴⁵

Secondly, phenomenology is the study of essences or meanings to Heidegger, ‘the science of the being of entities’.¹⁴⁶ Heidegger asserts the inextricability of ontology and phenomenology, placing the primary focus of philosophy on ontology. Heidegger’s fusion of hermeneutics and phenomenology was developed ‘in order to clarify under what conditions understanding occurs for the purposes of ontology’.¹⁴⁷

LOGOS AND PHENOMENA

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes phenomenology as being characterised by two aspects, logos and phenomenon. Logos refers to language and to Heidegger, meaning is

¹⁴¹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. p. 301.

¹⁴²Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics', *Theory, culture & society*, 23/1 (2006), 29-56.p. 29–32.

¹⁴³Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'.p .20.

¹⁴⁴Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences : Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (New York Cambridge University Press, 1981). p. 54.

¹⁴⁵Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. p. 397.

¹⁴⁶Heidegger, *Being and Time*.p. 61.

¹⁴⁷Maura Dowling, 'Hermeneutics: An Exploration', *Nurse Researcher*, 11/4 (2004), 30.p. 32.

revealed through discourse and is ‘something that can be seen through speaking’.¹⁴⁸ In hermeneutic phenomenology, word and meaning are inseparable. ‘Phenomenon’ is also defined by Heidegger as signifying ‘that which shows itself in itself, the manifest. Accordingly, the *phainomena* or ‘phenomena’ are the totality of what lies in the light of day or can be brought to light’.¹⁴⁹ Phenomenology, therefore, ‘focuses on explaining how the primordial thing-in-itself is ‘rooted’ in the events of life and understanding what is signified by logos’.¹⁵⁰ Language imparts meaning to the phenomenon and is the vehicle that reveals the hidden aspects of the phenomenon.

FROM PHILOSOPHY TO METHODOLOGY

What began as a philosophical approach became a research method under the influence of researchers such as Max van Manen, who developed the link between the philosophy and the practice of it in the social sciences and the humanities. Van Manen identified that, in the areas of the applied human sciences, hermeneutic phenomenology provided a methodological basis to examine lifeworlds.¹⁵¹ As my area of investigation in this research involves a focus on religion and changes to how it is experienced within the framework of the post-secular, it entailed entering an aspect of the lifeworld of others. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows me to enter this world and understand how experience forms a part of being. What is unique about hermeneutic phenomenology is that the researcher is engaged in the research from the inside, so to speak, not as a dispassionate observer and so the activity of researching becomes a journey entered into and lived.¹⁵² Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that life is rich and complex and that meaning is not limited to the formations constructed by

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Regan, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concepts of Reading, Understanding and Interpretation', *Meta*, 4/2 (2012), 286-303.p. 287.

¹⁵¹ Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. p. 11.

¹⁵²Ibid. p.8

the natural sciences.¹⁵³ As this research is framed by changing religious experience and contexts, the need to explore hidden meanings through interpretation is the concern. The orientation offered by hermeneutic phenomenology facilitates this search for meaning.

Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* is critical to the hermeneutic phenomenological method, as it focuses on the question of the meaning of being.¹⁵⁴ *Dasein* is the notion of the self 'in its being', and is what and how we are – the essential constitution of *Dasein*.¹⁵⁵ For hermeneutic phenomenology this concept is crucial, as it seeks meanings beneath the human sciences in an attempt to excavate the ontological construction and thus lay bare the foundations for clarification.¹⁵⁶ Heidegger affirms that the meaning of being must be asserted before any ontological research takes place.¹⁵⁷ For Heidegger, this notion is ineluctable: 'Dasein... is ontological'.¹⁵⁸ The implications of this for the field of phenomenology are striking, as Heidegger establishes *Dasein* as key to this philosophy and implicit in any considerations. This is a break from the earlier position of Husserl regarding the relationship between subject and object, and the bracketing of one's biases in order to connect to phenomena. Heidegger moves away from Husserl's epistemological orientation in favour of the hermeneutic. As Ricœur explains, Heidegger stepped beyond *being-with* to *being-in*, so that understanding is not about duplicating our subjectivity, but is essentially about the relationship of *being-in-the-world*.¹⁵⁹ This shifts the realm of investigation from subject/object to existence itself, its ontological forerunner.¹⁶⁰ What this means for my research is that it is not so much about the subject-object relationship, as it is about my own understandings and how these influence and develop over the research process.

¹⁵³Ann Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7/2 (September 2007), 1-12.p. 3.

¹⁵⁴Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences : Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*. p. 54.

¹⁵⁵Heidegger, *Being and Time*.pp.26°28; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p. 257.

¹⁵⁶Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences : Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*.p. 54–55.

¹⁵⁷Heidegger, *Being and Time*.p. 31.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid*. p.32.

¹⁵⁹Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences : Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*. p. 56.

¹⁶⁰Heidegger, *Being and Time*.p. 34.

Echoing Heidegger, Gadamer regards the understanding of texts as not limited to the field of science, but belonging to the ‘human experience of the world’.¹⁶¹ Texts emerge out of the world of human experience and are appropriately understood within that context. To both, it was impossible to stand outside one’s history and pre-understandings. Gadamer further recognised the embeddedness of being-in-the-world within language and history, extending the philosophy of understanding through his exploration of these aspects. Knowledge does not lie outside the realms of experience and existence but is intimately tied to life experience. Understanding ‘is inextricably linked with one’s being-in-the-world’.¹⁶² Even though being is limited by human finitude, this is not viewed as a constraint by Gadamer; instead, it allows humanness to be fully implicated in understanding. Interpretation moves beyond a cognitive activity or random act of assigning meaning to a ‘deep and genuine engagement... open to the possibility that “something else might be the case”’.¹⁶³ Gadamer draws on Heideggerian foundations, with understanding in its fullness as constitutive and characteristic of life itself.¹⁶⁴ Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology supports a way of uncovering meaning through interpretation, underpinned by the philosophy of understanding. Knowledge of a phenomenon is not ‘out there’, waiting to be predicted or identified; instead, it is part of the complex realities that emerge through the investigator’s interactions with meaning making.¹⁶⁵ Nor is it a predefined methodological venture, but rather a ‘path of experiencing’.¹⁶⁶ In constructing this research using Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology, I have found it imperative to uncover my pre-understandings, prejudices and historical embeddedness in order to be open to something new.

¹⁶¹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p.xxi.

¹⁶²Dowling, 'Hermeneutics: An Exploration', (p. 36.

¹⁶³Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. p. 17.

¹⁶⁴Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p. 259.

¹⁶⁵Lavery, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 13.

¹⁶⁶ Gadamer, in Andrzej Wiercinski, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', *Analecta Hermeneutica*, /1 (2009), 3-14.p. 8.

The work of Gadamer further resonates with my research as he calls into question the ‘intellectual control’ and objectiveness of the human sciences, which tend to close off the possibility of changing understandings and knowledge.¹⁶⁷ Relevant to this research, it can be postulated that this is what has occurred with the secularisation theory, emerging as it did from the discipline of sociology. The widespread acceptance of the theory has allowed certain claims about religion to flourish, such as that religion is a dying phenomenon and is unsustainable in the modern age. The increasing acceptance of this theory did not account for the possibility that questions would emerge about its continued applicability, or that there existed alternative positions. Further implications are that the individual experience of religion in the modern era is ultimately a negative one. As this is the result of sociological research applying scientific methodology to the study of religion, incorporating an analysis of statistics and data, the results of such studies have often facilitated the wider acceptance of the secularisation theory. In doing this, it has denied deeper insights into the role of religion and silenced many opposing voices, until the more recent rise of post-secular discussions.

In order to challenge the long-held understandings of the secularisation theory, such as the expectation of the eventual extinction of religion, it needs to be examined through what Heidegger and Gadamer call the hermeneutic circle. Heidegger described the hermeneutic circle as the anticipated movement of fore-understanding.¹⁶⁸ Within this circle, understanding moves beyond the use of subjective or objective interpretations. Instead, what is offered is the interplay of movement between tradition and interpretation, allowing for a questioning of ‘popular conceptions’. The hermeneutic circle allows for the possibility of an evolving understanding, one that forms and reforms as different aspects come into view. The hermeneutic circle is a place I have entered into throughout this research. It has allowed me

¹⁶⁷Charles Taylor, 'Gadamer and the Human Sciences', in Robert Dosta (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126-42, pp.126-28.

¹⁶⁸Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', (p. 4.

to explore a range of perspectives, positions and interpretations, questioning often long-held understandings. To Gadamer, it is the place where we must ‘understand the whole in terms of the detail and the details in terms of the whole’.¹⁶⁹

From Gadamer’s perspective, the knowledge and understanding of the sciences is imbued with historical finitude.¹⁷⁰ In his use of the hermeneutic circle, this historical finitude is overcome by openness to the discovery of different perspectives and understandings and the full realisation that understandings change. According to Gadamer, finitude is tied up in recognition of the limits of language and method, calling into question the truth-claims made by scientific methods.¹⁷¹ Though he did not deny the benefits of the scientific method, hermeneutic phenomenology emerged from Gadamer’s concern with the limits and reductionism of the scientific method, as a corrective that could recognise finitude.

From a phenomenological perspective, questions such as how religion is lived and experienced involve the way the world is experienced, and an understanding of what it means to be in the world.¹⁷² In the context of this work, this means that the use of the hermeneutic phenomenological method is consistent with understanding the phenomenon of the post-secular in the context of how it is experienced. Gadamer, as one of the leading theorists of this methodology, concerns himself with ‘the modes of experience that lie outside science... that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science’.¹⁷³ The need to explore this perspective through the use of a philosophical stance is the purpose of Gadamer’s reflections in *Truth and Method*, and is an aspect that also resonated with me. I was concerned that any reflection on the topic of religion and religious experience not be limited to scientific scrutiny alone, but also allow for further reflection and interpretative possibility

¹⁶⁹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p. 291.

¹⁷⁰Ibid. pp. 4–5.

¹⁷¹Ibid. pp. 404, 491.

¹⁷²Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*.p. 5.

¹⁷³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p.xxii.

without limitation.¹⁷⁴ The purpose is thus shifted to the opening up of ideas and understanding, not to come to an objective, prescriptive result but, rather, to engage in interpretative, reflective processes that allow for genuine insights.¹⁷⁵ This position is underpinned primarily by Gadamer's philosophical concern with understanding. As Grondin states, 'to understand, in Gadamer's sense, is to articulate (a meaning, a feeling, an event) into words, words that are always mine, but at the same time those of what I strive to understand'.¹⁷⁶

I was initially drawn to using hermeneutic phenomenology by the intersubjective manner in which the understanding of an object or question emerges. As much of the existing research in religion involves sociological methods, dependent on quantitative approaches, I was more concerned with being sensitive to the 'lived' experience of religion, which those methods are less suitable for addressing. Hermeneutic phenomenology, with its philosophical positioning, allows for this deeper interpretative stance. Additionally, I have always found my research more productive in dialogue with others; with mutual engagement a central tool of hermeneutic phenomenology, its appropriateness became more apparent to me. I decided that utilising a methodology that actively encourages this dialogue could be of great benefit to this work and could capture the changing currents that religious understandings may be undergoing. Hermeneutic phenomenology is in itself actively engaged in and continuously experienced, adding to the dimensionality of the research.

I also envisaged a dynamic engagement with subjectivity, both my own and that of those involved in the research. Subjectivity is not bracketed out, but allowed to inform and form the research itself, as it exists even before the research begins. Holroyd affirms this use of

¹⁷⁴Ibid. p. 298.

¹⁷⁵Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. pp. 16–17.

¹⁷⁶Jean Grondin, 'Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding', in Robert Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). p. 9.

subjective pre-understanding in the hermeneutic phenomenological method, arguing that understanding and interpretation ‘can never be presuppositionless’.¹⁷⁷ This draws on Gadamer’s discussion of fore-understanding as our entry into understanding. Understanding is always historical; ‘we understand the world before we begin to think about it’. Understanding encompasses our existing perspectives and finds its basis in our historical existence. As Gadamer argues, ‘the most basic of all hermeneutic preconditions remains one’s own fore-understanding’.¹⁷⁸

There are a number of challenges in using the hermeneutic phenomenological method, as it is understood as a philosophy rather than a methodology.¹⁷⁹ As a consequence, methodology is not predetermined or clearly evident on first embarking on the research.¹⁸⁰ In this sense each researcher creates their own methodology, allowing for a certain amount of creativity but also a corresponding uncertainty. Another challenge brought to my attention was that in the many texts I have researched on this methodology, the overwhelming majority dealt with health-related issues and educational contexts. This made me uncertain whether my choice would ultimately be a fruitful one. Nonetheless, I wanted to engage with the phenomena of religion under the influence of the post-secular, not using statistical or demographic means as is most frequently undertaken, but by moving beyond them to the essential meanings that may be harboured in post-secular notions.

Van Manen is a leading contemporary exponent of hermeneutic phenomenology, with his research situated in the area of nursing. This is exemplified in his seminal text *Researching Lived Experience*.¹⁸¹ Van Manen is one of the first contemporary researchers to offer a comprehensive approach to the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as an ‘engaged

¹⁷⁷Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', (p. 3.

¹⁷⁸Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., p. 293.

¹⁷⁹Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. p. 16.

¹⁸⁰Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., p 295.

¹⁸¹Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*.

philosophy'¹⁸² and suggested six elements to reflect on and apply, as I have done in this thesis.¹⁸³

1. The nature of lived experience.
2. Investigating experience as we live it.
3. Identifying and reflecting on essential themes.
4. The art of writing and rewriting.
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to lived experience.
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

The challenge lay in understanding how to 'uncover' rather than discover the phenomenon, while growing in the knowledge throughout this process that there may be many possible perspectives available. My perspective illuminates the research area to open up some of what may have been previously hidden, to uncover meaning and create understanding.

Ontology and epistemology in hermeneutic phenomenology

The process of engaging myself in research raises a number of issues that require discussion, particularly the questions of ontology (i.e., what is the form and nature of reality and what can be known about it)¹⁸⁴ and epistemology (i.e., how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known).¹⁸⁵

ONTOLOGY

Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on Heidegger's view of the nature of reality and being-in-the-world. He erased the distinction between the individual and experience by viewing

¹⁸²Narayan Kafle, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research Method Simplified', *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5 (2011), p. 190.

¹⁸³James Magrini, 'Phenomenology for Educators: Max Van Manen and "Human Science" Research', *Philosophy Scholarship*, 32 (2012), p. 4.

¹⁸⁴Y. Lincoln and E. Guba in Laverty, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 12).

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

them as ‘co-constituting’ each other and as mutually dependent.¹⁸⁶ The interviews for this research offer the opportunity to co-constitute understandings with others. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as an ontological position, situates understanding as ‘a basic form of human existence in that understanding is not a way we know the world, but rather the way we are’.¹⁸⁷ The understandings that will arise in this research have the potential to offer knowledge about myself as well as the world around me.

Heidegger viewed the human person and their pre-understandings as indissoluble, determining that we cannot step outside of our historicity. In the research process, I will remain at the centre of the reflection process; my historicity is as much a part of the research as it is for the other participants in this research. As this historicity is pre-cognitive, pre-conscious and pre-understanding, it cannot be fully understood through the use of quantitative methods. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a qualitative, method acknowledges this pre-understanding and uses it to guide the research. Gadamer further develops this and notes that this historicity plays a positive role in the search for meaning.¹⁸⁸

EPISTEMOLOGY

In contrast to phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is considered non-foundationalist, as it does not seek a valid or correct answer but looks for true meanings as they arise. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the interpretative interaction between the researcher and the texts. In contrast to how methodology is used in most research, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is not a set of rules to follow in a linear sequence; rather, it is cyclical, personally reflective and dialectic.

¹⁸⁶Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁸⁷Ibid. p. 8.

¹⁸⁸Ibid. p. 11.

Characteristics of hermeneutic phenomenology

1. All understanding is self-understanding.

In the thought of Heidegger, and as further developed by Gadamer, understanding is not something we acquire in a moment of cognition, nor are its concerns limited to the sciences.

Heidegger argued that understanding was less about cognitive processes and more about the possibility of our existence.¹⁸⁹ For this reason, understanding cannot be approached through method; it goes deeper than that and requires an exploration of existence itself. In its fullness, understanding is 'Dasein's mode of being' before 'any differentiation of understanding into the various directions of... interest'.¹⁹⁰ Here, understanding is existential, closer to basic human experience than the ideal of the scientific method offers, as it transcends method.¹⁹¹

Far beyond recognition between the knower and the known, understanding is the possibility of understanding self.¹⁹² Gadamer insists that 'self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other'.¹⁹³ This is fundamental to Gadamer's work, as only by seeing understanding as a human experience can I begin to appreciate how it is applied to certain kinds of meaning in my research situation.¹⁹⁴ This allows Gadamer's work to be appreciated as an applied approach to understanding, one that is, in a sense, more practical than Heidegger's.

As the researcher, I am not positioned autonomously outside the object of my research. Using the hermeneutic phenomenological method, I myself become a 'quasi-subject of interrogation and participation'.¹⁹⁵ In this respect, Gadamer was clear; examining and being aware of one's

¹⁸⁹Grondin, 'Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding'.p. 3.

¹⁹⁰Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, p. 259.

¹⁹¹Wiercinski, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', (p. 4.

¹⁹²Grondin, 'Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding'.p.3

¹⁹³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p.97

¹⁹⁴Grondin, 'Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding'.p.4

¹⁹⁵Jason Robinson, 'Practical Reasonableness, Theory, and the Science of Self-Understanding', *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 13/6 (2008), 687 - 701.p. 692.

own historical finitude is not an auxiliary part of his method, it is foundational to self-understanding.

2. Understanding begins with one's own pre-understandings.

Pre-understandings, or fore-meanings, are 'the meanings or organisation of a culture that are present before we understand'.¹⁹⁶ Gadamer discusses how fore-meanings 'that are not borne out by the things themselves' may distract from the understanding of those things.¹⁹⁷ So understanding, for Gadamer, is the task of examining 'the origin and validity' of the fore-meanings we already have in our encounter with the text.¹⁹⁸ The implications of this are, once again, ontological. They involve an encounter and awareness of ourselves, coupled with the acceptance that meanings exist in 'fluid multiplicity'.¹⁹⁹ Gadamer explains that there is an expectation of meaning present due to our prior relationship with the subject matter itself.²⁰⁰ Understanding is directed primarily to understand content, and secondarily to understand the other's meaning.²⁰¹ Gadamer's example of letter reading explains this further.

On first receiving a letter we read it to understand the news therein, according to an expectation of meaning and prior relation to the writer. It is only after we discover that there may be a problem with 'peculiar opinions' or soundness that we begin to question our understanding.²⁰²

While it is only after initial understandings that a problem may arise, it is Gadamer's assertion that we need to be made conscious of our pre-understandings so that the awareness of our projections can assist towards revising meanings.

¹⁹⁶Lavery, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p .8.

¹⁹⁷Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, p. 267.

¹⁹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹⁹Ibid.p. 268.

²⁰⁰Ibid. p.294.

²⁰¹Ibid.

²⁰²Ibid.

Related to this is Gadamer's exposition of prejudice, which is not a negative force closing off possibilities but, rather, a positive part of ourselves that allows for an opening up to further experiences of understanding.²⁰³ If pre-understandings are what we bring to the text we are scrutinising, then these pre-understandings are bound to our historicity. As historical beings, our knowledge is situated by this position and may require revision. Gadamer hopes to rescue prejudice from its post-Enlightenment definition, as he views it as judgement rendered before all determinants of a situation have been examined.²⁰⁴ Prejudice here is not necessarily a 'false judgment' but an unfounded one.²⁰⁵ In the encounter with the text, these judgements can be found false or upheld, but they are always present as part of our ontological and historical consciousness. Understanding is, in fact, always at risk of misunderstanding.²⁰⁶

The problem hermeneutic phenomenology poses – in sidelining epistemology and, consequently, objectivity – for Gadamer's ontological position is that these prejudices must be dealt with. This decoupling of objectivity from knowledge raises the question of whether understandings can actually be uncovered, as prejudice is a continuous influence. Gadamer's position here attempts to move beyond the negative associations of prejudice to seeing it as a tool with which to engage with the study.²⁰⁷ According to Gadamer, the only way in which these understandings can be rescued from arbitrariness or 'fancy' is the constant awareness of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices.²⁰⁸ Gadamer sees these as always present as part of our historical reality, while prejudice can either facilitate or confine our understandings.

For this researcher, this has meant embarking on this research with an examination of my own pre-understandings while beginning to live the research question as central to the

²⁰³Ibid. p.270.

²⁰⁴Ibid.

²⁰⁵Ibid.

²⁰⁶Thomas A. Schwandt, 'On Understanding Understanding', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5/4 (December 1, 1999 1999), 451-64.p.459.

²⁰⁷Laverty, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 17.

²⁰⁸Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, pp.268–69.

process of understanding itself. The examination of my prejudice is not simply one reflective moment in the entire research process, but a natural progression throughout and the catalyst that drives the search for meaning.

3. Understanding is a movement to and fro, between the world/text and the self-play.

Gadamer's reflections on play and its relationship to understanding are formed on the basis of how crucial engagement with, and response to, a phenomenon is to understanding it. He likens this engagement to the playing of a game. For the game to be played, there must be a subject playing, yet over and above this something happens while playing; the subject almost naturally engages in the play. In a sense, the player becomes 'lost' in the play.²⁰⁹ The object of the play, then, is less about what one is doing and more about engagement, to the point that the line between subject and object is blurred.²¹⁰ Gadamer's view on play and its link to understanding is that the game is 'being-played-by' and is not just a 'playing with'.²¹¹ As Sharkey notes, the outcome of genuine play is associated with 'none of the participants and all of them at the same time'.²¹² This leads to the location of a 'middle space' (*Zwischen*) in which interpretation is not the result of the moment/s in which the subject interprets the text as object; rather, it is in this liminal space that common meaning is found.²¹³ In a way, the play surpasses the individual and the spectacle of it, and is only a part of the meaning of the whole.²¹⁴ Holroyd refers to meaning making as 'akin to a game in which a to-and-fro-movement characterises the encounter',²¹⁵ while Sharkey states that play points to the 'human capacity for engagement and responsiveness that lies at the heart of the phenomenon of

²⁰⁹Ibid. p. 105.

²¹⁰Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. p. 24.

²¹¹Ibid. p.23.

²¹²Ibid. p.24.

²¹³Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, p. 292.

²¹⁴Ibid. p.109.

²¹⁵Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', (p. 4.

human understanding'.²¹⁶ So research, like play, is a dynamic encounter reliant on engagement and an awareness of the horizons that may arise.

The analogy of play relates to my research in a number of ways. First, my encounter with the object of my research – the phenomenon of the post-secular – is one in which meaning opens up in a 'playful', and hence dialogic, sense. This acknowledges that meaning is not fixed and already waiting to be discovered but instead is found in the engagement. Second, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks insights that occur in the middle space between subject and object. Hence, my interview process involves engagement between myself, the participants and their texts to uncover ongoing meanings arising from their reflections on religion in Australia and the post-secular phenomenon. Third, my role as researcher is productive when I am immersed in the process of research, not as subject viewing object, but fostered by hermeneutic phenomenology, a way-of-being-in the research.

4. Understanding is historically and culturally shaped – horizons.

Understanding is produced through encounter and interaction with others. This is explored through Gadamer's concept of horizons. Gadamer examines the concept of the horizon as marking the limit of what can be understood from our own particular position as an historical being in an historical context.²¹⁷ Hermeneutics requires an entering into other horizons of the text or life expression for the purposes of understanding. This does not mean that in transporting ourselves into another historical horizon and then reconstructing it we achieve understanding. Instead, we transport *ourselves* in the fullness of what this means, while not suspending or escaping our own horizon. Gadamer emphatically states that it is not possible

²¹⁶Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. p. 23.

²¹⁷Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, p. 302.

to disregard our own horizon.²¹⁸ He notes how horizons are never fixed points, or bounded positions; instead, they move with us. Gadamer claims that to see history as tethered to a horizon separate from our own is a mistake that separates us from our own historical consciousness and our awareness of how this determines understandings.

If an examination of the past is required, it must be acknowledged that we are implicated with it and that simply ‘putting ourselves into someone else’s shoes’ will not be sufficient.²¹⁹ On the contrary, Gadamer notes that a *fusion* of horizons opens up understandings of value to those involved. The encounter that occurs here creates something new and valuable, not based on restating original understandings but on producing new dialogue on the phenomenon. Gadamer uses horizons to assist the range of what can be seen, through such exercises as looking beyond what is close at hand, to see it as part of a whole. Although this appears to be an idealistic vision, Gadamer’s approach to understanding offers cautious reminders that our own position and that of the text are linked in a historical relationship. These interactions produce understandings that are genuine insights, shared by the researcher and the research partners.²²⁰

5. Understanding often arises from negative situations and experiences, requiring openness.

Gadamer writes of a hermeneutically trained consciousness, indicating the need for a certain posture towards the text. It is not a matter of accidental meanings to be found in the text; rather, the researcher needs to be prepared for the text to tell them something.²²¹ The researcher does not rely on their fore-meanings but requires a certain sensitivity, which is

²¹⁸Ibid. p.305.

²¹⁹Ibid. pp.303–05.

²²⁰Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'.p. 28.

²²¹Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*, p. 269.

neither neutrality nor a distancing of the self. The text needs to be presented in its otherness.²²² This otherness is found not only in the text but in the experiences and people that may be encountered. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires a particular openness to this otherness. In order to find meaning, a researcher needs to hear what is being said, as meaning is not found in an arbitrary way. Gadamer notes that we must:

remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it. Now, the fact is that meanings represent a fluid multiplicity of possibilities...and of what a reader can find meaningful and hence expect to find.²²³

For this to occur, the hermeneutic experience must be an open process, with the experience fulfilled in openness to new experience.²²⁴ The person who is experienced is not characterised by the quantity of experience but by this openness.²²⁵ If the experience runs counter to expectations, and is possibly a negative one, this is a necessary part of the search for meaning. When understanding occurs involving the other, this is an event that transforms the way we see ourselves and the other.²²⁶ In fact, we change our mind.

6. Understanding is a participation in meaning through language.

Gadamer's emphasis on language is reinforced throughout *Truth and Method*. For him, being is understood through language.²²⁷ His dictum 'Being that can be understood is language' is fundamental here. Additionally, phenomena have a language and it is in the relationship with beings that interpretation of meanings occurs. So language holds two significations: one of the ontological, the other of being.²²⁸ For Gadamer, being's relationship to the world is verbal, and thereby universally understandable. This underpins his position that hermeneutics

²²²Ibid.

²²³Ibid. pp. 268–69.

²²⁴Wiercinski, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', (p. 6.

²²⁵Ibid. p. 7.

²²⁶Ibid.

²²⁷Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., p. 474.

²²⁸Ibid.p.475.

has a fundamental basis in philosophy over and above that of a methodology.²²⁹ If it is the common experience of being that we seek to understand and experience through language, it is entirely understandable that language is intrinsic to meaning and interpretation. Nonetheless Gadamer is not a linguist; he is a philosopher who views language as the conduit to reality, as language mediates our experiences and understandings of reality. This is why hermeneutic phenomenology is so centred on dialogue. As it is concerned with avoiding fixing meanings in history, Gadamer's preoccupation with language and meaning seeks to condition understanding as a continuous dialogue and new possibilities.²³⁰ According to Wiercinski, Gadamer's exploration of language highlights that 'hermeneutic truth is a matter of mutual agreement between partners engaged in dialogue and seeking common understanding'.²³¹

Hermeneutic phenomenology – questions

Linda Finlay poses six questions relevant to a researcher when contemplating the use of phenomenology.

(1) How tightly or loosely should we define what counts as phenomenology? (2) Should we always aim to produce a general (normative) description of the phenomenon or is idiographic analysis a legitimate aim? (3) To what extent should interpretation be involved in our descriptions? (4) Should we set aside or bring to the foreground researcher subjectivity? (5) Should phenomenology be more science than art? (6) Is phenomenology a modernist or postmodernist project, or neither?²³²

More specifically, when considering hermeneutic phenomenology as my methodology, these questions challenged me to reflect on possible answers.

²²⁹Ibid.p.476.

²³⁰Wiercinski, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience', (pp. 9–11.

²³¹Ibid. p.11.

²³²Linda Finlay, 'Debating Phenomenological Research Methods', *Phenomenology and Practice*, 3 (2009), 19.p. 7.

First, in terms of defining hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a consensus in the literature that it is concerned with uncovering human experience and achieving understanding.²³³ At its most basic level, it seeks to both understand and interpret human experience via an ongoing historical process of dialogue. According to van Manen, '[p]henomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretative (rather than purely descriptive as in transcendental phenomenology)'.²³⁴ According to Crotty, this type of research must be grounded in its philosophical roots. Without this grounding, it is not truly phenomenological in nature.²³⁵

Second, both a description and an idiographic analysis are possibilities. I aim, in fact, at uncovering some underpinning principles, but also at finding out whether more unique insights could be revealed. On embarking on this research, this question was not an either/or one.

In relation to the second question, my response was clear: this work is about interpretation. It is interpretation that my research worked towards and the interviews facilitated this process. As Finlay notes, '[i]nterpretation is not an additional procedure: it constitutes an inevitable and basic structure of our "being-in-the-world". We experience a thing as something that has already been interpreted'.²³⁶ Coupled with this, subjectivity was foregrounded for this approach and central to my use of hermeneutic phenomenology.

As to the question of the approach to hermeneutic phenomenology as a science or art, I saw these as intertwined – again, not an either/or response. Hermeneutic phenomenology is critiqued for not being as rigorous as some quantitative methods, but for the purpose of my

²³³Ibid.

²³⁴Max Van Manen, 'Phenomenology Online', <<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/hermeneutical-phenomenology/>>

²³⁵Michael Crotty, 'Doing Phenomenology', in Peter Willis and Bernie Neville (eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice in Adult Education* (Victoria: David Lovell Publishing, 1996), 272-82.

²³⁶Finlay, 'Debating Phenomenological Research Methods', (p. 11).

research, which inherently focuses on the study human experience, I opted for the use a qualitative approach as I regarded it as more appropriate to uncovering the possible depths of such experience. This is something for which quantitative and strictly scientific approaches are of limited value.

The question of this research as modern or postmodern in origin is again a salient question. For me, it holds elements of both epochs but fails to sit neatly in either. This answer to this question is also very reliant on how modern and postmodern are defined. To assist my research process, I decided to follow Finlay's description of hermeneutic phenomenology as sitting 'beyond the modernist–postmodernist divide'.²³⁷ In a similar fashion, Gendlin asserts that hermeneutic phenomenology is able to 'go beyond the lines drawn by both modernism and postmodernism, embracing both and neither'.²³⁸

Conclusion

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy that arose in the European context and has now gained popularity worldwide. It has had a significant influence on how we perceive phenomena and continues to evolve and develop further applications. It is now used across disciplines including education, science and health, where it assists in gaining intimate perspectives on a range of topics. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a branch of this, assists in this interdisciplinary approach, as it allows engagement with a phenomenon as a central concern. For me, this engagement is the chief strength of this philosophical and methodological approach, bringing a strong focus to the topic of the research and allowing me as the researcher to discover unique perspectives.

²³⁷Ibid. p. 17.

²³⁸Gendlin in *ibid.* p. 17.

The phenomenological approach that informs this research requires the researcher to engage with its philosophical framework in order to search for meaning in the text or life expression that is at the heart of the research. The tradition of phenomenological research originally conceived by Husserl has been significantly influenced by Heidegger and, later, Gadamer. The focus on the phenomenon, which Husserl expressed through his maxim ‘to the things themselves’, also drove the work of both Heidegger and Gadamer. Husserl was interested in remaining focused on understanding phenomena and bracketing one’s own biases to attain proper understanding of the phenomena. Heidegger emphasised ontological issues as signified by the concept *Dasein*, ‘the situated meaning of a human in the world’, concerning himself with how the individual is implicated in the entire search for meaning. Heidegger then brought together philosophy, phenomenology and ontology, redirecting the relationship to the object of study. The development of *Dasein* moves beyond the subject–object paradigm used in many research techniques to a retrieval of what it means to be human, a concern often neglected in post-Cartesian research. *Dasein* assumes that the world and the human person are co-constituted and that this unity is inseparable. Later, Gadamer’s exposition of the processes of understanding built on the centrality of *Dasein* and moved further towards a clarification of the conditions under which understanding takes place.

Gadamer’s concern is what happens to us ‘over and above our wanting and doing’. For me, this concept is central, as each characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology draws me closer to a new understanding of myself as the post-secular self I am seeking. As according to this method, ‘all understanding is self-understanding’, I stand to gain a unique insight into myself as the post-secular self. This has become a growing realisation for me.