Podcast Series with Professor Miles: On Discovering Phenomenology

Rafi: Welcome to another episode of our podcast series. Today, we journey into a topic that quietly shapes much of how we see, feel, and think — even if we don't always name it. Phenomenology is not just a method or a school of thought — it's a way of returning to things as they are, before interpretation, before theory, before explanation. In a time when psychology often reduces experience to categories or symptoms, phenomenology invites us to slow down, to attend, to dwell with the texture of what it means to be. It is, in many ways, the philosophical ground zero for existential therapy.

To help us explore difficult terrains, as always, I'm here with Professor Miles — a friend in thinking and a steady guide through the often subtle landscapes of therapy - a scholar, clinician, and longtime fellow traveler in the world of Daseinanalysis and phenomenological inquiry.

Let me start with a simple but personal question: How did you first encounter phenomenology, and what drew you to it — personally and philosophically?

Prof. Miles: Hello Rafi. Good to be here. I was an undergraduate philosophy major starting in 1965, during my second year. A rogue professor — Carl Wagner Meier — dared to offer a course that deviated from the standard curriculum of logical positivism, which at the time dominated philosophy departments across the United States. That influence still lingers today, by the way.

But this professor broke from that mold and offered a seminar on a book called *The Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger's name appeared often in the Merleau-Ponty text, but he wasn't discussed in our classes. That same semester, just after the course began, I happened to come across a few Heidegger books in the campus bookstore — obscure, unfamiliar, and intriguing.

Rafi: So, this was your first real exposure to phenomenology?

Prof. Miles: Exactly. That seminar opened up a whole new perspective for me. Until then, all my philosophy classes were focused on logical positivism and ordinary language analysis — the dominant themes among the younger faculty, who had been hired to build a department with that orientation. The older professors were more generalists, but they were retiring or being replaced.

That one professor — who, I suspect, wasn't retained because he didn't fit the mold — opened that door. And in *Phenomenology of Perception*, we encountered not only Merleau-Ponty, but also references to Heidegger, but also to Husserl, the Gestalt psychologists, and other sources foundational to Merleau-Ponty's work.

Rafi: That must have been a huge shift in worldview.

Prof. Miles: It was. And I was hooked. I became so interested that I approached the head of the department and asked if he would do an independent study with me — a one-on-one tutorial — on another French thinker whose work also dealt with psychology, philosophy, and literature: Jean-Paul Sartre.

So, in spring 1966, I began studying *Being and Nothingness* with him. That tutorial continued over the summer, and then into the fall. Essentially, I spent almost a full year immersed in Sartre's major work.

Rafi: And was that where your attention began to shift more toward Heidegger?

Prof. Miles: Yes. While working through Sartre, I became increasingly aware of the differences between Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's approach. It took time to sort that out, of course — I was just beginning to understand phenomenology in any form — but my inclination was already leaning toward Heidegger's existential and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Rafi: What specifically drew your attention to Heidegger, rather than Husserl? What fascinated you?

Prof. Miles: What I would later come to understand was the fundamental difference between Husserl's phenomenology of conscious experience and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of Dasein. That distinction became more and more significant to me.

Now, Husserl is often regarded as the founder of phenomenology — though the term itself appears earlier, in writers like Hegel. But as a formal discipline, phenomenology is usually dated to 1900, with the publication of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. His rallying cry was: *"Back to the things themselves!"* — or in German, *Zu den Sachen selbst*.

This phrase is often translated as just "to the things themselves," but another possible reading is *"to what matters."* And for Husserl, what mattered — the *phenomena* — were accessed by examining consciousness in action. He was interested in what it meant to have an experience of experience itself.

Rafi: So, phenomenology, for Husserl, is rooted in consciousness?

Prof. Miles: Exactly. But Heidegger — who was initially Husserl's student and assistant — took a radical turn. While Husserl wrote massive volumes on the structures of consciousness, Heidegger asked a deeper question: Where do we find consciousness? Who is the "we" that encounters consciousness? Where does that happen?

Heidegger began to explore these questions hermeneutically, drawing on the tradition of biblical exegesis, but now applying it not to sacred texts — but to being itself. And his focus wasn't consciousness, but Dasein — the being that *we ourselves are*, the human being.

Rafi: So, for Heidegger, consciousness doesn't come first?

Prof. Miles: Right. Heidegger never considered consciousness as a starting point. Instead, he argued that we must begin with the world — the total context in which human being unfolds. There is no isolated subject separate from an object; there is always already *world*.

And what allows for any discussion of consciousness or experience is the fact that there is a being — the human being — who constitutes and discloses the world through its very being.

In that sense, Heidegger breaks from traditional philosophical dualisms — subject/object, mind/body, etc. and says: each of us "is" being-in-the-world. Not merely on the earth, nor floating above it like divine beings, but in a strange *in-between* — between nature and divinity — and it is this in-between that he calls *world*. The bearer of an understanding of this in-between is Dasein.

Rafi: Dasein is this in-between, this openness to being?

Prof. Miles: Yes. Heidegger tries to understand this peculiar being — the human being — which has characteristics that are not found in any other being. And perhaps this anticipates your next question, but let me say it here: one of the most profound features of this being is its capacity to question what it is.

No stone, no tree, no animal — not even the divine — questions what it is. They just are. But the human being — Dasein — asks what in the world it is, and that question becomes the heart of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. And, I might add, the human being is the only being that thinks. Even God does not think.

Rafi: So Dasein is the being that questions being — not just a creature that exists, but the one for whom existence itself becomes a matter of concern. In Heidegger's words: *"Dasein is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it."* (Being and Time, §4)

This means Dasein doesn't simply live — it cares, it reflects, it suffers, it wonders. It lives always in relation to its own possibility, always thrown into a world already underway, and yet always called to respond. In asking, „What does it mean to be?" Dasein is already revealing itself as the one who cannot escape the question — because it is the question.

Prof. Miles: Exactly. That's what sets us apart. Heidegger dedicates most of *Being and Time* to investigating what this means. Unfortunately, we only have the first two parts of what was supposed to be a much longer work — but even there, his philosophical revolution is clear: the question is not "What do I know?" or "What am I conscious of?" but *"What kind of being am I who can ask about being?"*

Rafi: Let's bring this into the realm of therapy and daseinanalysis. How does the phenomenological attitude change the way we are with people in a therapeutic situation — the way we listen?

Prof. Miles: It changes everything. In daseinanalysis, when I sit with another human being — this embodied voice sitting next to me — I don't see a body with a mind and soul attached to it, which is the traditional view inherited from psychology and natural science. Nor do I approach him as a case, or as an object of study.

Instead, I encounter another Dasein — another instance of what *I myself* am. A being-in-the-world. Not an organism with added features like consciousness or a soul, not something to be interpreted through models or diagnostic categories but another opening where being can show up.

Rafi: So… you're telling me it's not just "one malfunctioning unit reporting to the repair technician"?

Prof. Miles: Exactly. In medicine, you go to a liver specialist or an eye doctor — someone with expertise on a particular part of the body. But in daseinanalysis, there is no expert on Dasein. The analyst, like the analysand, is a being continually working out his relation to the world.

That levels the field completely. It shifts the experience of the other person from being an object to be examined — a body to be treated — to being a co-exister, a fellow participant in this strange condition called existence.

Rafi: And what about those techniques we often hear — especially from philosophers or trainers steeped in classical phenomenology — things like epoché, the phenomenological and eidetic reduction? *(A quick glossary on the go: epoché — bracketing or suspending presuppositions; phenomenological reduction — turning toward how things are given in experience; eidetic reduction — identifying the essential structures of that experience through imaginative variation.)* Do these methods have any real place in therapy, or are they more philosophical tools than clinical ones?

Prof. Miles: Those terms — *epoché*, *phenomenological reduction*, *eidetic reduction* — come from Husserl's version of phenomenology.

Heidegger was quite critical of these. He didn't believe we should suspend judgment or bracket parts of our experience. Quite the opposite: he insisted we face the situation, step into it, and include as much of it as possible.

In daseinanalysis, we don't want to limit anything. We don't narrow the world through a conceptual aperture. We want to open the world — as fully as possible — and *leap into it*, as Heidegger puts it.

Rafi: A leap — that's a striking image. I picture standing at the edge of a dark lake at dawn. You don't know how deep it is, or how cold, but you hear the calling: jump. Not to escape, but to enter.

Prof. Miles: Yes, and Heidegger meant it seriously. A leap implies not knowing where you'll land — and that's precisely the point. It's how life is. We never really know where we'll land — and therapy is no different.

When a session begins, I have no idea where it will end. I don't aim for a conclusion, a goal, or a fixed result. I'm not trying to interpret what the analysand says, or help him change his thoughts as in CBT, or soothe him as in common-sense empathy.

Of course, I am kind. I support. But that's not the core of the work. The core is this: the analysand leaps, and the analyst follows him. There's no prescribed direction. No desired outcome.

Rafi: So the analyst doesn't direct the process?

Prof. Miles: Exactly. The lead always belongs to the analysand. And yes, the analyst is present, responsive, attentive — but also profoundly open to the unknown.

The analysand might say something for the first time in his life. He might think or feel something entirely new. And that's the opening — that's the phenomenological moment we welcome. It may happen during the session, or after, when he returns to his everyday world.

The point is to make room for that possibility, not to steer it or control it.

Rafi: Freud, in his 1912 paper "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis," wrote that "the physician should be opaque to his patients and, like a mirror, should show them nothing but what is shown to him."

Do you really think that's possible? That we can be nothing for the person who comes to us — without desire, without expectation, without even a quiet pull toward a certain outcome?

Prof. Miles: As a daseinanalyst, the only genuine expectation I have is this: that somehow, through our encounter, the freedom of the analysand is enhanced. But that freedom cannot be forced or demanded.

We can provide conditions where freedom can be exercised, where previously foreclosed possibilities might open up. But we're not there to cheer them on, to say "Come on, you've got to be free!" We're not coaches. We're not cheerleaders. We're also not gurus or clairvoyants. We can't — as Freud imagined — fully fathom the experience of another human being.

Rafi: You are touching on something essential, because so much of psychology is built on the deeply rooted, almost dogmatic belief that we can understand the other.

Prof. Miles: Exactly. That's the myth. And if there's one thing daseinanalysis — following Medard Boss — is clear about, it's this: we cannot fully understand the experience of another person.

Poets and writers have said this for centuries. It's not a new insight. But we tend to forget it. And perhaps even more striking: we don't fully understand our own experience either. That is especially important to remember.

Why should I presume to understand someone else's life when I don't even fully grasp my own?

So at best, what we reach is what I'd call an asymptotic approximation — we may get close, but never fully there. And by the time we get close, *the analysand has changed*, and *I have changed*, and the distance remains.

We should also avoid becoming teachers, advisors, helpers, or models. We should also resist filling that space in the therapeutic setting with our own ego, identity, or will.

If we take seriously the idea of Dasein as without sex, without age, without nationality — but rather as an openness, a space where being shows up — then the meeting of two Daseins can be potentiated the more anonymous the analyst remains.

Now, obviously, I have a body. My voice has a certain pitch. My age, height, race, gender are all apparent. And we speak the same language, the analysand and I, and we notice each other's "details." But I can strive to be neutral, or better, neuter. As in grammar — where there's masculine, feminine, and neuter-- I want to be as *neuter* as possible.

Of course, this is an ideal. Descriptions and projections will still come into the scene. That's okay — that's part of the work. And I must be open to strange, unexpected, even uncomfortable descriptions from the analysand.

But I let the strange things come as they may and roll off as they will. Though sometimes, yes, a drop of water gets between the feathers and gives you a chill. We all have our vulnerabilities.

The best indicator that I'm approximating this ideal, by the way, is if I don't think about the analysand between sessions.

Rafi: That's radical. A lot of therapists dwell on their patients between sessions — they think about them, revisit conversations, and especially in supervision, they analyze what might have been missed or misunderstood.

And this is often seen as a *virtue* — a sign that the therapist truly cares that they're deeply attuned, invested, empathic.

Prof. Miles: Yes. And that's a warning sign. I should have no lingering thought of the person who's just spent an hour with me — until the next hour comes.

And in daseinanalysis, unlike in psychoanalysis where sessions build toward a reconstruction or interpretation, every session is the first — and possibly the last.

Each meeting is a fresh encounter with this being, this world, at this moment.

Rafi: Earlier we talked about empathy, and I want to circle back to that — because what you're saying now really flips it around. You're not just saying empathy is impossible — you're also saying it might not even be necessary. Why?

Prof. Miles: Because we are already in contact. The task is not to effect some inner emotional resonance with the other, but to discover the nature of the contact that already exists — the *Mitsein*, as Heidegger called it — the being-with.

I don't have to "empathize" with you to be with you. I am always already with you. We're are already *in the world*. We're already co-constituting it. And it's not that I observe you from the outside and try to feel my way in to what you feel — that's a distortion. Instead, I start with the fact that *there is no such thing as a solitary Dasein*. Dasein is always plural. There are always two — or more — instances of being-in-the-world.

Rafi: That's a lot to take in — and I feel very aligned with what you're saying. But I also wonder: how have you dealt with the pressure?

Because the contemporary therapeutic world — with its emphasis on manualized treatments, DSM diagnoses, measurable outcomes, and "evidence-based" methods — places real demands on therapists to *believe* in a certain framework. We're expected to believe in empathy as a technique, in the goals of therapy as fixable outcomes, in the method as the path to healing.

How did you handle that tension — or find a way to stand outside it?

Prof. Miles: I've been lucky. I began as a psychoanalyst, but I quickly found it wanting. Except for perhaps a year or two early on, I've never practiced therapy full time. I always had other work, and in my case that was teaching. That kept me afloat financially and intellectually.

I also never participated in insurance schemes, third-party payments, or other forms of reimbursement. I followed Thomas Szasz, who saw therapy as a human exchange: I offer my time and attention, and the other person sets a value on that. They decide what it's worth — not an institution or bureaucracy.

Rafi: That's an incredible freedom — and not a common one. Especially in a field so entangled with the systems of power that Szasz relentlessly criticized. He saw psychiatry not as a branch of medicine, but as a mechanism of social control — a way to enforce norms under the guise of care. For him, therapy was something radically different: a free, voluntary encounter between two people. And it's striking that you've managed to live out that vision.

Prof. Miles: Yes. And I think it's more difficult now to remain free from the tentacles of the system than it was during most of my lifetime. The pressure to conform to clinical protocols, structure practice according to outcome-based metrics, or therapeutic branding is immense. But if therapy is to remain authentic — if it's truly to be a form of attention to the other — then it must undergo a radical re-envisioning.

And I see daseinanalysis as precisely that: a philosophical, therapeutic, and existential counterexample to what the system demands of psychotherapy and counseling and psychiatric management.

Rafi: One last question for today. Do you think we can understand suffering through a phenomenological lens — rather than through the medical or psychological model? What would that even mean?

Prof. Miles: That's a beautiful and important question. Let me begin with a story.

I was in Brazil a couple of years ago, speaking at a conference. A fine daseinanalyst there — Guto Pompeia — gave a paper in the same series. He's written quite a bit about suffering, and his talk was very moving. The audience responded positively, saying, "Here is someone truly devoting his life to helping others live better."

But afterward, I had a conversation with my host. I asked, *What's the difference between physical suffering — like pain — and the suffering Guto spoke about?* He paused and said, "There are two kinds of suffering being discussed here."

I think he was right. Most people, when they hear the word *suffering*, immediately think of pain — physical pain, and extrapolate that to psychological symptoms. "He suffers from depression." "She suffers from anxiety." But that's the medicalized model that has insinuated itself into psychotherapy!

But the kind of suffering Guto — and I — are interested in is closer to what the Buddhist tradition describes: the inescapable suffering of life itself.

Life is suffering — not in a morbid way, but in the sense that disappointment, loss, misunderstanding, rejection, failure — these are not anomalies. They're fundamental to human existence. They can't be eliminated, and they shouldn't be.

Rafi: It's as if contemporary psychology presses it flat — ironing out the texture of existence into something diagnostic, predictable, and easy to code.

Prof. Miles: Yes. It reduces suffering to symptoms. "He suffers from willfulness." "She suffers from a mood disorder." But that's a misreading. Suffering, rightly understood, is ontological — not pathological.

And I would go further and say: this isn't something to "heal." Some suffering is necessary — it gives depth to human experience. And with any luck, much of it is mild, or episodic. But even in severity, we must approach it with dignity, not pathologization.

Rafi: There's something narrowing about the word suffering, isn't there? It tends to compress everything — grief, sadness, even despair — into a single dimension. But those experiences can carry beauty, depth, even a kind of dignity. Calling it all suffering risks losing the complexity.

Prof. Miles: Yes — exactly. I'm not sure *suffering* is always the right word. I've had physical pain — a bad back — and emotional pain — the heartbreak of losing someone close to me. But I wouldn't necessarily call that *suffering*. It's part of being human.

Rafi: I want to share some thoughts I had while running today. I've been thinking about trauma. People often say you can "heal" from trauma — that it's a wound that can be repaired. But in most cases, I don't believe in that.

Most often, trauma reveals a truth — a level of existential perception — that you can't *unsee*. When you lose an illusion, you can't get it back. Humpty Dumpty cannot be made whole again.

Trauma opens a layer of existence that was hidden from us. And as Alice Holzhey-Kunz writes, suffering comes from openness — you cannot suffer from what you're not aware of. We're protected by a kind of defense mechanism — something that helps us *not* see. But trauma takes that protection away. And once it's gone, there's nothing to heal — because the wound *is* the truth.

Of course, this isn't true in all cases. There are traumas that shatter, not awaken — acts of cruelty and violence that stand as raw facts of evil, beyond any existential appreciation. Some wounds are not revelations, but violations.

And I believe — deeply — that as Daseinsanalysts, we carry not only a responsibility to witness, but a responsibility to respond. To help reduce the number of such horrors. To make this world, however fractured, more livable — and less brutal — for those who dwell within it.

Prof. Miles: That's powerful. I agree. The analogy of trauma as a fracture, like a broken bone, has misled us. When something awful happens — something obscene, evil, or simply shattering — it used to be understood as part of life's inevitable harshness. Now, we pathologize it and rush to cure it.

But I think — and you've said it well — trauma may strip away illusions. And maybe that's not something to fix. Maybe it's something to live with. Something that gives us more capacity to feel, to see, to know.

I think what we're both circling around is this: trauma isn't just a wound. It's a different kind of opening — and what it opens us to is often something we don't want to see but must see.

For earlier generations, the fact that evil exists in the world — that people are capable of terrible things — wasn't a surprise. It was known. Perhaps now, we are so invested in wishful thinking that when reality punctures our illusions, we call it trauma. But maybe it's just the *truth*.

Rafi: Exactly. That's why I think we need to add trauma and evil to our episode list. It deserves its own deep dive.
Thank you, Professor. Truly — thank you for this conversation.

Prof. Miles: Thank you, Rafi. Take care.