

## SUBJECT BODY AND EXPERIENCE IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

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**ABSTRACT.** Applying phenomenological philosophy to psychology means to focus on people's perception of the world. Ultimately, this revolves around people's lived experiences. My aim is to identify how philosophical phenomenology can contribute to the development of empirical and hermeneutical methods regarding psychological phenomena. I submit that it does so by analysing the existential dimension and the meaning of human experiences, as they spontaneously occur in the flow of daily life. The first step is to think the body in a subjective way, as a phenomenal, lived body, and to see in what way individual experiences can be linked. Subsequently, I investigate how experiencers occur in space, and show that, unlike things, they must obtain access to space and to self-localization in space in order to be experientially in it.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, experience, body, Husserl.

### Introduction: phenomenology and psychology

Starting with early 1990s, we can see an increasing interest of psychologists regarding the phenomenological research methods concerning human awareness, description and the meaning of a reflective analysis of *life-world* experience. As a result, the phenomenological approach continued to grow, as Ron Valle claimed, and "has taken its place in the philosophical, theoretical, research, and applied clinical circles in contemporary psychology"<sup>1</sup>. The phenomenological methods became plausible alternatives to some of the behavioural methods, and the outcome of this manner of understanding the meaning of human experience can be visible now in many phenomenological inquiries proposed in psychology.

The starting point of this investigation is to analyse everyday experience, not in the manner specific to natural sciences interested in classifying, quantifying,

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<sup>1</sup>Ron Valle ed., *Phenomenological Inquiry in Psychology* (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 1998), see Preface.

abstracting and the like, but in a philosophical exertion, that is, to observe and reflect both on our own and on other's experiences and actions. For day to day experiences and actions, Husserl proposed in his phenomenological approach the metaphor of *life-world*<sup>2</sup>, which is the place of interaction between us, our perceptual environments and the world within which we meaningfully dwell together. In other words, from this perspective, the world appears to us through our stream of consciousness as a configuration of meaning. Husserl's idea of phenomenology examines the description and structural analysis of consciousness, that is to say, the ways in which things appear to us in different forms of conscious experience. In this sense, his phenomenology is a philosophy of the concrete. Consciousness itself is understood as being *intentional*, namely it is always directed toward something, and is responsible of creating the meaning that inheres in the world as experienced.

In *Cartesian Meditations*, consciousness is presented as transcendental, which means that it is constituted in relation to all types of objects. Since our attention is turned away from the objects pertaining to the external world and focused on the mental aspects in virtue of which a world appears to us, we can say that Husserl's project is similar, in some way, to a psychologist one. In fact, Husserl writes that his transcendental phenomenology is closer to psychology than to any other discipline, and the difference between them is a seemingly trivial *nuance*<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Husserl was preoccupied to distinguish his transcendental phenomenology from psychology, particularly from that kind of psychology which shares a belief concerning psychological phenomena, namely that it should focus purely on consciousness:

"Every experience and every other way we are consciously involved with objects clearly allows a *phenomenological turn* (...). In simple perception we are directed toward perceived matters, in memory toward remembered matters, (...). Thus, every such pursuit has its own theme"<sup>4</sup>.

In this point, Husserl introduces the concept of a psychological reduction because, as he declares, we can effect a change of focus that shifts our concern away from the current matters and directs our gaze toward the subjective ways in which they appear. However, this inquiry belongs to a phenomenological psychology and not to a transcendental one, because the natural perspective that presupposes the reality of the world is not abandoned. From Husserl's point of view, the psychological I is still really embodied and very worldly, while the transcendental I is purely in itself and not only constitutes the external objects but also its very own self as worldly.

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<sup>2</sup>Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: North-western University Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> See de beginning of the *Second Meditation* in E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, (Springer Science + Business Media, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> E. Husserl, *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927 – 1931)* (Springer Science + Business Media Dordrecht, 1997), 237.

### **Intentionality and dynamics of life. The hermeneutical component of phenomenology**

The major themes of Husserl's phenomenology, such as *epoche*, imaginative variation, intentionality, the importance of the role of the horizon, the intuition of the essence etc., were continued in a revelatory manner by philosophical hermeneutics. In this regard, John D. Caputo argues that transcendental phenomenology is not opposed to hermeneutic phenomenology and that Husserl's phenomenology has an essentially hermeneutic component, because "it shows how we make our way through the flow experience by means of a certain anticipatory cuts which adumbrate its structure and predict its course, which gave us a reading or interpretation of things"<sup>5</sup>.

Is the essence of hermeneutics, as John Caputo states, inseparable from Husserl's phenomenology? What we refer to as the "dynamics of life" is, in hermeneutics, the continuous flux on which we draw upon when interpreting phenomena. This idea is readily taken up by Husserl as a shield against the uninterpreted world. Since all interpretation presupposes a manner of ordering and regularizing the flow of experience, be it every day or in some way special experience, hermeneutics is actually quite helpful in figuring out how worldly phenomena is constituted. Husserl's merit in all this was first and foremost his noetic – one might say epistemological – attempt to shed light on phenomena constitution. The present section deals with the hermeneutical aspects of conscious experiences and advocates the close relationship between Husserl's phenomenology and some of the later forms of hermeneutics, most notably Heidegger's.

Acknowledging an interpretative stratum to world phenomena has a twofold consequence for philosophy. On the one hand, it provides the necessary prime matter for phenomenology (what to study). On the other hand, it can be approached only by applying a proper framework which structures it (it being continuous and, a realist might add, unaffected by our reflective thoughts and actions). The latter implies that we might never actually have the proof of concept required to say that phenomenology has, indeed, finally provided a constitutive account of phenomena. However, this is a perpetual risk in philosophy in general.

Husserl's "weapon of choice" was to explain phenomena constitution by anticipatory movement. In short, the world is constituted by a series of expectations or anticipations.<sup>6</sup> Although seemingly reductionist, we might sum up Husserl's anticipatory approach as defining experience through anticipatory patterns. Still, there is quite a large gap to bridge between phenomenology and hermeneutics.

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<sup>5</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics. Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 38.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, pages 44 et seq.

Husserl's search was one of unbiased and pure introspection of phenomena, whereas, in hermeneutics, it is taken as given that interpretation supersedes objectivity and pure intuitions are of a utopian nature.

Does this opposition between phenomenology and hermeneutics still hold today? If we see Husserl as the promoter of surpassing the world as the product of continuous interpretation of phenomena, we might answer this question positively. Is it not, after all, the historical goal of metaphysics to elevate one's viewpoint to certainty beyond interpretation?

However, since any approach to hermeneutics is, at its core, an attempt to structure and predict the flow of worldly experience (bring hazardous interpretation to unity and make some sense out of it), phenomenology may be considered, in spite of the above-mentioned differences, some sort of hermeneutics. To back up this idea, let us put forth two arguments: (1) making intentionality explicit is an interpretative act and (2) objects are the result of a constitutional act. Inasmuch as that act differs from subject to subject, that act *per se* may be considered an interpretative act. Let us argue in favour of these two ideas.

The phenomenological exercise of making explicit the implicitness of intentional life implies what would later be called by Heidegger a "pre-understanding" of that life. For the sake of brevity, let us define the pre-understanding of an object as the set of conditions which need to be fulfilled in order to have an experience of that object. This differs from regular scientific analysis of the object (e.g., its chemical composition), inasmuch as potentialities of the object are accounted for in phenomenology: how does the object appear to us in its actuality? How might the object appear to us in its potentiality? Since an object's actuality can never exhaust its potential determinations, phenomenology safely assumes that an object's entirety is always more than what is given in the here and now.

Consequently, there is always an unperceived facet accompanying the present (or present-at-hand, as Heidegger would later put it) object. What is more, the facets of an object differ according to each and every one's pre-understanding of worldly phenomena. For example, a cow is a regular animal to which most Westerners are accustomed; it is nothing surprising in itself. But if we were to all of a sudden see a herd of cows in the central streets of a metropolis such as Bucharest, we would most surely be surprised. Such a banal example becomes even more revelatory when considering the different contexts in which a common mammal such as a cow is perceived by different people, ranging from animal rights activists to farmers and industrialists. An immense wealth of viewpoints (or potentialities) and feelings appears with regard to what seems to be the same object. But it is not the wonder before the countless possibilities of an object's manifestation that is at stake here. Rather, of interest to us should be how the potentialities we are accustomed to most provide our pre-understanding of phenomena.

In short, intentionality depends on pre-understanding the object. To the extent in which the intentional object is predetermined by our pre-understanding of it, the continuous negotiation between expectation and surprise (revisions of expectations) is what lifts objects from the never ending flux of experience and makes intentionality possible. But how is this negotiation *not* hermeneutics? On the contrary, I would argue it very much is. The corollary of this condition of possibility for intentionality is that phenomena which fall beyond *any* possible interpretation (i.e., fall neither in expectations, nor in our reassessment of expectations) do not exist for us. Luckily, it is quite hard to imagine a situation in which conscious encounters with phenomena (and, thus, with intentional objects lifted from the mere flux of experience) do not require at least some sort of interpretation. Were it not for the hermeneutical aspect of phenomenology, surprising acts, such as biting a chunk of plastic when mistaking it for meat (because it looked like real meat, although it wasn't) would leave our consciousness in chaos. Interpretation intervenes to re-assess our expectations and bring under control the troubling event of biting plastic.

All previous remarks revolve around re-construing the nature of phenomenological objects: the bottom line would be that they are not given as such to intuition<sup>7</sup>, but rather come to being through a process of interpretation. From here stems the hermeneutical component of phenomenology.

### Experience and the phenomenological method

The first step in my research was to articulate the notion of intentionality in providing us with a conception of human experience. In this section I want to see in which way individual experiences can be linked together in one shared experience, especially because Husserl's phenomenology never seemed to go around this question.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenology elaborated by Husserl and his followers, especially the French ones, remains based on the grounds of experience, more precisely, on what can be experienced as reality. Intentional objects bear a special meaning in Husserl. Although these can be both authentic (actual, real, objects) and inauthentic (something that does not really exist, but of which we have a manner of perceiving or imagining it), the latter mode of "objects" still commands intent. So the dispute regarding an internal or external existence of the intentional object is superseded.<sup>9</sup> What remains

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<sup>7</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (1)*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983, page 44.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Keller, *Husserl and Heidegger on Human Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pages 39 et sq.

<sup>9</sup> E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. New York: Humanities Press, 1970, section 11.

to be examined, however, is whether the experience of an intentional object can be a shared experience or not, given that Husserl's account is eminently solipsistic. His methodological solipsism does, indeed, acknowledge the existence of an exterior world and of other minds, but requires that we suspend our belief in them, as this is a subsequent task for each and every mind adhering to the phenomenological *epoché*.

Even though Husserl admits to some sort of a "we-intentionality", i.e., the intentionality allowing us to consider groups of people as objects, he still submits that the latter is ultimately based upon the "I-intentionality" as the individual consciousness directed at an object. Be that as it may, is it feasible that the external, intersubjective world is accessible via the "I-intentionality"? How can intersubjectivity be encapsulated in a private sphere of consciousness? Husserl suggested regarding this encapsulation in analogy with encapsulating both a notion of the past and of the future in the present moment. However, accepting this idea would only bring forth and accentuate the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic intentional objects: are the past and the future the same thing as *our thoughts* on the past and the future in the present? It is only with Heidegger that this dichotomy would finally be undermined conceptually, by acknowledging that our present-at-hand thoughts and perceptions of the past, future, or any other object, would never exhaust the ready-to-hand nature of that object.

Another attempt to bridge the experiences of intentional objects between multiple "I"s rests in experiences "bearing their individuation in themselves"<sup>10</sup>. This is often an overlooked idea, and Husserl's statement might lead readers to presuppose some sort of realist essentialism conflicting the general solipsism of phenomenology. That is to say, an experience of an object bears its own essential characteristics, no matter of the person experiencing the object; consequently, objects may be experienced intersubjectively, in the sense that they do not rely upon the person experiencing them. But such a realism falls beyond Husserl's intent in *Ideas*. Rather, the "essential" individuation of experiences Husserl refers to forms a unique (non-repeatable) history due to the individual motivation with which the object to be experienced is approached. Therefore, the point Husserl is trying to make is that the experience of an intentional object is not derived from the latter's position in time and space, but from the I experiencing it.

An ever more difficult situation from Husserl's phenomenological standpoint is explaining the experience of other persons. This experience is not only physically mediated by properties pertaining to colour, weight, temperature etc., but also by bodily experience. I submit that, in Husserl, what we can experience of another

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<sup>10</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas* (2), page 300.

person *at most* is actually our own apperception of their representation of the world. Apperception here designates being conscious of one's awareness of the spatial properties of the experienced objects. So, all in all, apperception is still quite one-sided. Husserl does not yet manage to provide sufficient proof that the other from my apperception is nothing more than an apparent projection of the I.

### The Body

Is there a programmatic (and phenomenological) manner in which the intentional elucidation of the other and of the objective world can be achieved? Our starting point for answering this question is, again, the concept of experience. Experience in Husserl is quite embedded in the flesh. Even if an object or the other is not given to me in itself, it is still incarnated in my body. So what this would firstly mean is that the other is given to myself as I myself am given. Hence an essential problem of constitutive phenomenology: if we cannot constitute the other objectively, neither can we constitute objective world in general.

Husserl makes use of "appresentation" in an attempt to clarify this matter<sup>11</sup>. Appresentation stems from incarnate experience and, Husserl claims, is what makes it possible to differentiate between impressional presentations and "compresentations", i.e., between original and non-original perceptions. In short, another body given to me is being perceived by myself as a mere *face* and not at all in its full originality. Even though this would later represent the basis for Heidegger's difference between the availability of a thing and its "mere presence", it still does not completely solve the problem. For, what is to assure us that the experience of my own body is not a "mere face" as well? Is it truly possible that an object be given in its full originality? Our own flesh seems to be incompletely constituted in apprehending the world.

The important thing to notice here is that not being fully accessible to ourselves does not constitute a problem for appresentation, which holds that the other is never given to us in its full originality. The true "power" of appresentation rests in its temporal character, that is, in the idea that, alongside ourselves, we can co-constitute others *in the same time*. Appresentation co-presents, one would say. It is of no interest here that appresentation does not present objects in their originality or that it does not exhaustively represent them. What is at stake here is its temporal constitutive dimension. Let us provide our own view as to how the other is co-constituted in section 5 of the *Cartesian Meditations*.

First of all, the moment in which another steps into my field of perception coincides with admitting that the other could not or may have also not been there.

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<sup>11</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, section 50.

My experience, therefore, implies both the presence and the absence of the other. *A priori*, nothing can precede this state of my experiencing the other. Therefore, the moment the ego is constituted, so is the possibility of its experiencing the other, even if the other is not given immediately into the ego's field of perception. As a corollary, egological temporality cannot be reduced to the perception of the actual present. Egological temporality presupposes a "primordial sphere" which allows for modal explications of phenomena.

Secondly, the ego has a primordial sphere and in which the other is constituted as a transcendence in immanence. The other's transcendence in immanence appears as a body. A "weak" argument for this is very similar to the ontological argument in a sense: I have at least a mental idea of a spatial "there", which I oppose to a spatial "here". If I can grasp a transcendence in immanence as a "body over there", then it is necessary that my grasping occurs only *after* the body of that transcendence is given, and not before.

Finally, if we admit that "the body over there" acquires meaning from my ownness, this is because it resembles my body. What is the purpose of two bodies resembling each other, other than being two different instantiations of Descartes' *res extensa*? The constitution of the alter ego presupposes the ego; this issue seems insurmountable. But why should this bother us in any way, if the alter ego *is*, after all, constituted? One shouldn't lose sight of the fact that reconstruing phenomena beginning from a phenomenological reduction was actually the whole purpose behind using *epoche* as a conceptual tool by Husserl. As long as it leads us to a satisfactory concept of other phenomena than our own consciousness, it has played its part quite well.

### Closing Remarks

At the very least, this paper must have shed more light into the psychological component of Husserl's constitutive phenomenology. In short, there are two aspects we discussed, together with their afferent conclusions to be drawn: (1) intentional consciousness rests upon interpretative acts, even when it attempts to unveil pure phenomena, and (2) exiting solipsism when referring to "outside" phenomena is possible, although it was argued that Husserl never actually managed to surpass the issue. In arguing this point, we chose to refer to the body of the other and how it is constituted in consciousness. We hope to have shown that a corporeal substance, other than my own, has no point in being conceived if it had not existed before being given to my consciousness. The fact that an argument similar to the ontological one is used to prove this idea may provoke criticism, but, all in all, we believe we have brought enough to the table to maintain debates open as to the phenomenological constitution of the other.



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