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**Transcendental phenomenology, intentionality and subjectivity**

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# Transcendental phenomenology, intentionality and subjectivity

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## The reign of phenomenology

- Phenomenology counts as one of the most influential philosophical movements in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy.
- But the question of how to define phenomenology remains contested even today, almost 120 years after the publication of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900-01)
- A central ambition in *Logical Investigations* was to explore the intentionality of consciousness
- Must phenomenology be appreciated as a continuation of Brentano's project of descriptive psychology?



## Plain phenomenology and introspectionism

- One is doing plain phenomenology, if (1) one makes and explains mental or psychological distinctions, (2) shows why those distinctions are theoretically important, (3) relies on a source of first-person warrant, and (4) does not assume that first-person warrant derives from some source of third-person warrant (Siewert 2007: 202).
- Dennett vs. Vermersch
  - Husserl is engaged in “introspectionist [...] mental gymnastics”
  - Husserl is “a great unrecognized psychologist”



## Phenomenology and mindfulness

- Should we appreciate Husserl's phenomenological work as a collection of fine-grained descriptions of experiences?
- Is the aim of the phenomenological method to "detect laterally occurrences that are not in the main focus of attention" (Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013: 179)?
- Is it about revealing the margins "of our experience that are overlooked as long as exclusive concern for objects prevails" (Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013: 179)?
- Will a technique that broadens our field of attention in such a way as to allow us to discover hitherto unreflected and unnoticed aspects and details of lived experience make us into better phenomenologists?



## Reinach: *Concerning Phenomenology*

- “This ‘Experiencing’ is just as remote and difficult to grasp in its qualitative structure or nature as it is certain for us in its existence. What the normal person beholds of it - in fact, what he even merely notices of it - is little enough. Joy and pain, love and hate, yearning, homesickness, etc., certainly present themselves to him. But in the last analysis these are only crudely cut sections out of an infinitely nuanced domain. Even the poorest conscious life is yet much too rich to be fully grasped by its bearer. Also here we can learn to look; also here it is art which teaches the normal person to comprehend for the first time what he had hitherto overlooked. This does not mean merely that, by means of art or technique, Experiences are evoked within us which we would not have otherwise had, but also that, out of the fullness of Experience, art allows us to view what was, indeed, there already, but without our being conscious of it” (Reinach 1914).



## Eidetic intuitions

- Reinach starts out by insisting that phenomenology rather than being a comprehensive system of philosophical propositions is a specific method of philosophizing, a particular philosophical attitude.
- The phenomenological return to “the things themselves” is a turning away from theories and constructions, in order to obtain a “pure and unobscured intuition of essences”.
- Its aim is to grasp the essence or what-ness of the object under investigation, whereas its singularity or actuality is of no concern.
- As quickly becomes clear, however, the psychical domain is for Reinach only one among many possible topics worthy of phenomenological investigation. He next mentions time, space, number, concepts, propositions etc.



## Transcendental phenomenology

- We are first-personally acquainted with our ongoing experiential life, and our ability to reflectively articulate first-person reports on this basis is epistemically significant.
- But this doesn't entail that phenomenology is or should primarily be engaged in an exploration of more and more subtle aspects of experience.
- Indeed, amassing experiential descriptions is a poor substitute for the systematic and argumentative work that is being done by phenomenological philosophers like Husserl.
- Even if a certain level of noetic description might be necessary, a too minute investigation will merely derail the philosophical investigation and make us lose our proper focus.
- It would not allow us to elucidate the relation between perceptual intentionality and scientific rationality, the link between evidence and truth, or engage with the spectre of global scepticism.
- It is no coincidence that Husserl dismissed a purely descriptive endeavor devoid of systematic ambitions as mere "picture-book phenomenology" (cf. Spiegelberg 1965: 170).



# The constitution of transcendence

- Why does Husserl's phenomenology merit the name transcendental?
- The concepts transcendence and transcendental are correlated. Phenomenology is transcendental because its aim is to clarify the constitution of transcendence.
- Rather than simply naively accepting the ready-made character of the objective world, we need to understand how the world for us comes to acquire its character of true, valid, and objective.
- Indeed, rather than taking the objective world as the point of departure, phenomenology precisely asks how something like objectivity is possible in the first place. How is objectivity constituted? How is it that the world can be manifested or revealed to us in the first place?
- To put it differently, by adopting the phenomenological attitude, we do not turn the gaze inwards in order to examine the happenings in a private interior sphere. Rather we look at how the world shows up for the subject and we investigate the conditions of possibility for this happening.
- For Husserl, the *transcendental* dimension of consciousness is something that realists and naturalists alike have failed to recognize. This is why phenomenology has to be appreciated as a form of transcendental philosophy and not as a kind of (Brentanian) descriptive psychology.



## Merleau-Ponty

- In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty would echo this characterization by declaring that phenomenology is distinguished in all its characteristics from introspective psychology and that the difference in question is a difference in principle.
- Whereas the introspective psychologist considers consciousness as a mere sector of being, and tries to investigate this sector in the same way the physicist tries to investigate his, the phenomenologist realizes that an investigation of consciousness cannot take place as long as the absolute existence of the world is left unquestioned.
- Consciousness cannot be analyzed properly without leading us beyond common-sense assumptions and towards a transcendental clarification of the constitution of the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 59-60).



## Buddhist phenomenology?

- In recent years, quite a number of people have stressed the existence of convergent ideas in western phenomenology and Buddhism.
- I am not denying that there might be some truth to this, but one should certainly also not overlook the presence of marked differences
- Many Buddhist metaphysicians (e.g., Siderits) endorse a thoroughgoing mereological reductionism, according to which no composite entity is ultimately real.
- Such a view differs markedly from the phenomenological attempt to rehabilitate our life-world.
- But what about experience?



## Against self-luminosity

- Garfield: *Engaging Buddhism* (2015)
- Criticizing self-luminosity views as well as minimalist accounts of self (targeting in particular my work – but only until 2009).
- How explicitly Buddhist is the criticism?
- The criticism rather seems to be motivated by an endorsement of some mixture of phenomenal externalism and Dennettian heterophenomenology
- The criticism is partially based on a significant misinterpretation of my view
- Preliminary response



## The two-object objection

- To claim that the experience is first-personally manifest is to claim that ordinary experience involves two objects: The external object and the experiencing of the external object, but that is one object too many.
- Surprising criticism since I have repeatedly criticized the two-object account of Brentano and Kriegel and emphasized that my awareness or acquaintance with my experience when living it through pre-reflectively is non-objectifying. It doesn't involve an additional secondary object.



## The two-object objection continued

- Nothing appears except the object
- The only thing that is manifest is the object and its properties
- “I conclude that one consequence of a Buddhist take on consciousness is that the phrase “what it is like” is simply empty, if it is meant to apply to anything other than the objects of experience, and does nothing to explicate consciousness. I can say what a blue sky is like: it is blue; what a red sunset is like: it is red. But to go further and to say that there is something more or different that it is like to see a blue sky or a red sunset is simply to obfuscate, and to posit an ineffable, mysterious nothing as a mediator of my awareness of the world.”
- Consciousness itself is experientially invisible. Its presence makes no experiential difference



## Return of what-it-is-like

- There is an obvious difference between an object and an experience of an object.
- There is nothing it is like to be a cup. There is something it is like to be an experience of a cup.
- Does a cup-experience only gives us more “cupness”, is it entirely objective, and in no way subject-revealing or self-involving?
- Not only is what it is like to perceive a blue square different from what it is like to perceive an orange triangle, but what it is like to perceive a blue square is also different from what it is like to remember or imagine a blue square.



## Experience and appearance

- I am not merely presented with a variety of objects and objectual properties, rather these objects and properties are also presented in different modes of givenness (as imagined, desired, anticipated, recollected etc.), and it makes a difference to the phenomenal character of, say, the taste of coffee, whether it is perceived, remembered, imagined or anticipated.
- To deny this, to cash out the notion of experience exclusively in terms of representational features is to pay lip-service to the notion of experience
- Missing the difference between conscious and nonconscious representations





## Auto- and hetero-manifestation

- Garfield: Consciousness is a hidden, rather than manifest phenomena, known only by inference.
- Am I inferring that I am in pain?
- First-person authority
- Garfield does recognize the possibility of introspection and reflection, but he doesn't engage critically with the transcendental argument that both require pre-reflective self-awareness
- Phenomenally conscious states are like something for the subject and this is what makes those very states capable of playing a justificatory role vis-à-vis any higher-order beliefs regarding their very existence
- Auto- and hetero-manifestation go hand in hand – and phenomenology has to attend to both



## Back to Husserl

- In *Crisis*, Husserl describes phenomenology as the final gestalt (*Endform*) of transcendental philosophy (Husserl 1954: 71).
- Transcendental philosophy is characterized by its criticism of objectivism and by its elucidation of subjectivity as the locus of all objective formations of sense and validity (1954: 102).
- Rather than merely amounting to a limited exploration of the psychological domain, for Husserl an in-depth investigation of intentionality paves the way for a proper understanding of reality and objectivity.
- This is why transcendental phenomenology should not be conceived merely as a theory about the structure of subjectivity, nor is it merely a theory about how we understand and perceive the world, rather its proper theme is the mind-world dyad.



