

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). **The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations** was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

Essay 37

The Transcendental and the Naturalistic Approach to Experience

© Robert Pilat

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology

The Polish Academy of Science

rpilat@ifispan.waw.pl

The Polish Phenomenological Association

Abstract

I am arguing for combining phenomenological and naturalistic approaches in research into cognitive processes in human subjects. Taking as an example the problem of categorical character of immediate experience I try to show that an inquire into the role of concepts in experience involves several explanatory discontinuities. I am presenting three phenomenological and three naturalistic turns as phases of copying with the problem.

Introduction

In this essay I am discussing the possibility of co-operation between phenomenology and cognitive science in the search for comprehensive theory of human experience. There is no straightforward way to reconcile the two approaches. The task of phenomenology is to inquire into conditions that make our experience have the content it has. The task of cognitive science is to provide theories of cognitive operations involved in experience. The phenomenological approach is conceptual and transcendental and it presupposes the suspension of scientific commitment. In cognitive science it is rather the purely conceptual analysis that is suspended unless it can be made part of an empirical theory. However, there is obviously a common subject matter to both

The copyright on this text belongs to the author. The work is published here by permission of the author and can be cited as "*Essays in Celebration of the Founding of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations*. Ed. CHEUNG, Chan-Fai, Ivan Chvatik, Ion Copoeru, Lester Embree, Julia Iribarne, & Hans Rainer Sepp. Web-Published at www.o-p-o.net, 2003."

approaches—the human cognition and experience. In order to show the possibility of reconciliation of phenomenology and cognitive science I focus on one arbitrary chosen problem: the categorical character of perception.

I argue that in order to provide a full account of perceptual categorization we need to change our perspective several times from the phenomenological to the naturalistic (cognitivist) and back to the phenomenological. In turn we take the results achieved in each approach as a problem to solve in the other approach. I suggest that the strategy applies to many problems connected with the structure of human cognition. It implies that Husserl's hope for establishing the autonomous ground of human rationality by resorting to phenomenological analysis of experience alone can never be fulfilled; there will always be phenomenological results which will function as problems and not as solutions in the scientific framework. On the other hand, there will always be technical concepts and metaphors in cognitive science which will remain arbitrary and even meaningless if they are not linked to genuine human experience. This link can be established by phenomenological analysis. My conclusion is that in the domain of experience we have therefore to allow for explanatory discontinuities.

The Search for Rational Foundations of Knowledge

One of the most difficult philosophical problems we have inherited from the 20th century—one that will probably continue through the next decades—is the rationality of human knowledge and action. The practical efforts to make more and more life-domains rational coexists with the equally strong tendency to undermine and unmask the rationality. Philosophers have always been aware of the limitations of human rationality, but they have seen the limitations outside of reason: in unpredictability of desires, inconsistency of the will, and contingency of life. In 20th century the limitations were placed within the reason itself. It is the reason itself that is now blamed for smuggling the irrationality in.

Given the alleged contradiction within rationality it is still pertinent to remind and re-examine the 20th century attempts to put rational thinking and action on a firm ground. Such an attempt was famously made by Edmund Husserl in his *Crisis of European Sciences*. It is probably the most radical and in-depth rational project dramatically attempted in a time of multifaceted denial of reason. According to Husserl, rationality was strictly connected with the unity of knowledge and integrity of culture. Phenomenology was supposed to help to re-establish the unity by providing them with epistemological ground through

radical insight into the constitution of meaning. Despite the 100 years that has passed since the release of the *Logische Untersuchungen* and a great deal of justified criticism of the Husserlian project, there is still much life in it, something which is worth pursuing once the criticized foundationalism is abandoned.

What has been greatly appreciated recently is the possibility of fruitful combination of phenomenological and scientific approach to cognitive processes including direct experience. This possibility was explicitly denied by Husserl (as violating the phenomenological epochē), although the reasons he gave were not convincing even for the generation of his immediate followers like Aron Gurwitsch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Loosing Husserl's restriction has lead to a blossoming research field. In this paper I am arguing for indispensability of this naturalistic turn in phenomenology, but at the same time I am remaining skeptical about the naturalization of phenomenology. The reason for that is the analogous indispensability of a phenomenological turn in the cognitive science. Only the combination of these two turns can yield a new paradigm in studying human cognition and experience.

The Husserlian rational project for science and culture can be characterized by three postulates: (1) autonomy; (2) transcendental foundation; (3) eurocentrism. Leaving aside the third postulate as pertaining to different discussion, I shall argue against the first one and I shall defend the second.

Husserl's belief to the effect that there is autonomous ground for rationality has it's anthropological underpinning, which is a project of an integral view of human being. Such a view should not be vulnerable to changes in particular domains of scientific theory. Philosophy should use scientific beliefs as content providers but not as philosophical commitments. In other words, the scientific theories have neither explanatory power in relation to phenomenological statements, nor are they the logical premises of phenomenological statements. Such an isolationistic view is hard to accept. An alternative possibility will be shown in this essay. My point is that it is possible to establish a much closer theoretical link between phenomenology and science without losing the autonomy of both fields.

Husserl's transcendental postulate does much better than his autonomy postulate. It can be traced back to Kant, but the differences are crucial. Kant arrives at his transcendental judgments through a deduction that shows the logical relation linking certain set of concepts (categories) to a certain cognitive value, namely, the reliability of Newtonian physics. The scientific success of Newton serves as a philosophical premise. What Husserl wants is an insight into

the underlying conceptual structure of experience by analysis this very experience without any other premises. Now, my claim is that certain combination of these two transcendentalisms may still be justified as a sound philosophical project.

It is counterproductive and leading to unwanted misunderstanding to discuss my proposal in general terms. My claim is that we are going to shift several times from phenomenological to naturalistic approach while studying aspects of human cognition and experience. Each turn to the phenomenological perspective should result in deepening the perspective. "Deepening" means in this context a radicalization of the phenomenological reduction, which leads to revealing more and more general horizons of experience. The most general horizon ceases to be immediate and intuitive. It is grounded in the immediate content of experience by a chain of phenomenological operations. This is why the horizon is neither a theory nor an intuitive description-- it is a transcendental ground of immediate intuition (*Anschauung*).

I am listing five explanatory turns in the case I have chosen as an example. I do not claim, however, that the number or order is ubiquitous. In other cases we may employ less or more turns. The kind of analysis I am proposing always applies to particular problems. Because, as I think, each of the turns is motivated by the preceding one, there is no way of extracting the pure phenomenological method. Consequently, there will be no autonomous, purely philosophical (or philosophically accessible) ground for human rationality. A theory of rationality should make use of both approaches. It is crucial to know, however, where the turn (i.e., the explanatory discontinuity) comes.

The Conceptual Character of Perception

It is commonplace that concepts influence sensory perception. But what does this mean exactly? Most probably it has to do with the identity of perceived object. This thing can be perceived as this particular object only if it occupies a place in a conceptual network of the perceiver. The structure of this network is determined by large scale universals like categories, but even the most elementary nodes of the network are types and not individuals. How can an individual be placed at the appropriate node of the network? Actually—to make the picture even more complicated—it is the conceptual structure that makes it possible to speak of individuals at all. The notion of individuality can be comprehended only if there is some grasp of universals. The direct object of

perception is neither individual nor universal. It is one or many, clear or unclear, but it is not individual or universal. We may speak of it as perceived in certain generality, i.e., non-specificity. It is natural to suppose that there is some relationship between the non-specificity (generality) of experience and universality of concepts involved in experience. In other words, it is the generality of experience that is suspected places the perceptual content in the conceptual network. If so, how does it work?

According to Husserl it is intentionality that gives the sensory—or any—experience a general character. But how should we understand the generality of intention? We have to avoid circularity, so the account of general intention cannot resort to generality or universality of concepts. And this is where the first theoretical turn comes to play.

Phenomenological Turn I

Intention comes as coupled with fulfillment. Within the regime of phenomenological reduction we can study the pair, intention—fulfillment, as belonging to some separate and closed domain of transcendental consciousness. In this perspective the generality of experience should be thought of as a property of such pairs and not of the intention alone. Both sides of conscious experience, intention and fulfillment, constitute the generality. Whereas the generality of intention is relatively easy to understand as a possibility of multiple application of a psychic act, the generality of fulfillment strikes as mysterious. According to Patocka (1965), this generality is a product of an act of reflection. In reflection the pair, intention—fulfillment, is grasped as certain whole. It presents itself as a phenomenon and not as object or subjective psychical state. So if we want to know why our perception can be conceptually structured, we have to think of the properties of phenomena. These are to be revealed by phenomenological analysis, which is in fact a second-order reflection applied to the product of spontaneous reflection. The aim of this second-order reflection is to grasp the essential characteristic of phenomena and the rules governing them. Only this kind of analysis can show why generality leads to conceptuality.

The experience is shown here—from the point of view of some mental activity, which is a (methodologically modified) reflection—a domain of possible relations between intentions and fulfillments. They have the status of possibilities, because they may have many and very different spatio-temporal

instantiations. It follows that to understand the generality of experience we shift our attention from actual data to possible data framed as fulfillments.

How much can be said about the aforementioned necessary relationships? Is the domain ordered at all? Can the phenomenological analysis lead to discoveries in a sense of scientific discoveries or at least to *ceteris paribus* rules as we know them from psychology? Nothing of this kind. Phenomenology is ineffective in this sense. Well, there are some striking necessities in the domain of phenomena like the famous bond between color and shape (there is no shapeless colors and colorless shapes), but the list of such rules is far from impressive. Husserl suggests that these necessities are based on certain psychical bonds. What do the bonds consist in? We will not get much further by using phenomenological analysis alone. What we need is a turn:

Naturalistic Turn I

We need an approach that would enable us not only to show the variety of phenomena and relations among them, but also to learn something about them that we did not know before. The knowledge we seek should be expressed in a form of strict regularities and have some predictive power. First of all, however, the knowledge should be independent of the supporting evidence. Since this condition is not met by phenomenological analysis (we deliberately delimit the content of statements about things to the content of their self presentation), we have to suspend the phenomenological suspension. How can it be accomplished in practice?

The rich body of psychological and linguistic evidence about categorization is elucidated by several competing theories. In an instructive paper U. Neisser (1987) looks for a golden mean between two such theories. The first comes from J. J. Gibson. It has been called "ecological" because it assumes the priority of overall reaction of an organism to the states of environment. Conceptual contents do not function independently. On this theory all specific information about the states of the environment emerges from narrowing the overall relation. There is alternative theory by E. Rosch to the effect that our experience is naturally ordered by conceptual contents (categories) belonging to a certain basic level. Neisser suggests that the two theories are in fact two sides of the same coin. What underlies categorization on the basic level is in fact a principle of the whole. The natural categories fulfill the whole domain of

possible experience. This principle is superior to the properties of individual categories; they are to certain extent flexible.

The whole field of experience is interpreted at the cost of some blur at the categories' edges. Now, what does it mean exactly "to a certain extent"? Obviously there are limits to flexibility on the basic level. What are the limits based on? The most natural answer, suggested by both Rosch and Neisser, is similarity. Strictly speaking it is experienced similarity. "Experienced" in this context means that the similarity is not based on criteria that are themselves experienced. Our senses function not only as a source of information but also as a structuring faculty. What distinguishes the basic level of categorization from the others is exactly this overlapping. On the other levels the sources of information and categorizing criteria can be treated as separate.

Now what becomes a problem is similarity itself. How does the human subject accomplish it? The answer to this question is not to be found in psychological research. It is not, as it may seem, an empirical question. It refers to a certain whole which escapes the methods of cognitive psychology. The question may be rephrased in the following way: What traits of experience enable us to perceive similarity? Why do I talk about the traits of experience instead of talking about the properties of perceived objects? Because, the similarity as it is experienced holds between pieces of experience and not between objects. The similarity of objects is discovered in a certain flow of similar experiences, for instance a repeated gaze. In order to see what is really at stake in the similarity establishing experience, we need to change our theoretical perspective. It will not be an empirical research any longer, but rather a step back to phenomenological perspective.

Phenomenological Turn II

A good example of such turn is the theory of the field of consciousness by Aron Gurwitsch (1964). He defines the field of consciousness as field of the simultaneously given. The field shows as divided into three parts: (1) the theme; (2) the thematic field; and (3) the margin. The first notion denotes the given datum the conscious experience is directed to. The second notion refers to the contents that do not belong to the theme but can influence it as they are functionally or otherwise related to the theme. The third notion refers to an open domain of contents that do not modify the theme but build a context that places the experience in the world.

The field of consciousness is a dynamic structure. Each oncoming field is a modification of the previous field. The modification consists in alteration of the status of a given content in the field. For instance, what presented itself as a theme may in the following fields function as part of the margin.

Gurwitsch's theory makes it possible to further elaborate on the notion of similarity. By it every content appears in one of the three field modalities at a time; each content is capable of appearing in all three modes over time. While it is undergoing the changes its identity is preserved and correlates with the fundamental continuity of the field. The combination of field continuity and multi-modal appearance has a certain "analytic" effect—the object reveals its multiple aspects and presents itself in a mutable but identity preserving multiplicity. The object is in a sense related to itself.

This relation cannot be reduced to straightforward, ontological self-identity. The object refers to itself like one multitude to another, with all the imperfectness it implies. It is similar to itself rather than identical with itself. This is how experience works—ontological identity is not the question here. The lived similarity of an object to itself is—I suggest—a primordial form of similarity, preceding and underlying similarities among objects. On Gurwitsch's theory this primordial similarity has its roots in the architecture and dynamic of the field of consciousness.

Can the proposed analysis influence empirical research on categorization? Most probably it can not. What it shows is a certain horizon, which has to be taken into account if we want to see how and to what extent the regularities discovered in empirical cognitive science can explain experience. Gurwitsch's analysis takes up Husserl's project of transcendental phenomenology aimed at discovering necessary structures of possible experience. However, in his interpretation, the notion of possible experience is given more specific meaning. Also the theory gives a plausible account of the internal dynamic of consciousness. The modification of the field by transferring the theme into the background changes its status into relative possibility (what presents itself as the actual experience is the new theme). It also works the other way around—the background content, which is given in a form of relative possibility can be transformed into actuality of the theme or the thematic field. The field of consciousness has a perspective structure. To conclude, the generality of perception is grounded in similarity and similarity is grounded in the possibility of multiple positions for every content in the field of consciousness.

Earlier in this section I mentioned the continuity of the field as another condition of experienced identity of objects. I left the issue unexplained as I

focused on the modification of the field. In fact, I think that the phenomenon of field continuity cannot be accounted for in phenomenological terms. What we get from Gurwitsch's analysis is that certain invariables of the field are necessary for the constitution of similarity. But we are not going to discover the invariables in the phenomenological attitude. What we need is another theoretical turn:

Naturalistic Turn II

What I call turn here may be realized in a number of theories. In this section I present one of such realizations. In recently published book (2000) as well as in number of minor studies Peter Gärdenfors sets out what he called a theory of conceptual spaces. He gives a uniform interpretation of perceived properties of objects and concepts we have of those objects. Both can be thought of as being represented in a multidimensional abstract space. The dimensions of this space are set by measurable physical quantities, which are connected with perception or other function of cognitive apparatus (like pitch, extension of time, frequency of light wave, etc.). The regions of this space corresponding to properties and concepts have regular and characteristic topological features (like convexity, symmetries, directions, etc.) On Gärdenfors' theory it is exactly these features that determine the invariables governing the consecutive phases of experience (consecutive fields of consciousness in Gurwitsch's terms).

The model proposed by Gärdenfors is—contrary to Gurwitsch's one—an effective construction. It can be empirically tested both in weaker and stronger sense (it is consistent with empirical data and it allows for empirical predictions). In particular, the model yields a formal definition of similarity as a distance between two regions in a conceptual space (Gärdenfors 2000, pp. 109-111, 133). Gärdenfors shows that the rules of identifying similarities that are implied by his model are consistent with the rules we spontaneously apply and which have been empirically established by Aisbett and Gibbon. The rules are (among others): (1) look for parts that uniquely correspond to the parts in another object; (2) ignore the unfitting parts instead of trying to fit them in additional consideration; (3) fit the undifferentiated regions in one object to differentiated regions in another object and not the other way around.

Gärdenfors' theory interprets the continuity of the field as a set of its topological properties. Another route to the same end has been chosen by Christopher Peacocke (1987, pp. 61-67). According to him the conceptual representation is based on some form of self-presentation of objects in a certain

perceptual space, namely, the space which is consistent with the representation's being true. In other words, for every adequate (true) representation there is certain space-type characterized by such non-conceptual features like symmetry and the direction and pace of fulfillment with perceptual content. Peacocke calls such space-types space scenarios.

A question arises immediately: What ontological status have all the regions, directions, dimensions, symmetry axes, space metrics, etc? How can these features be placed within human experience? What do the postulated space and the dynamic of experience have in common? Both Gärdenfors and Peacocke make use of a number of theoretical concepts they should not be expected to explain—their job is to provide an empirically testable hypotheses. The empirical hypotheses are tested as certain wholes although not all their components have the same cognitive value or logical status. The hypotheses are tested by experience but this experience is constructed as becoming a part of experiment—it is not naturally placed within the whole structure of human experience. To be sure, it is not cognitive science's job to care about the placement. However, the philosophically satisfactory account for conceptual share in experience cannot rely on so many theoretical devices. What we need is the next theoretical turn:

Phenomenological Turn III

Research on the constitution of experience amounts to searching for such sequences of the pairs noesis and noema, that account for self-presentation of some type of objects. Constitutional analysis lead Husserl to the most radical of his methodological reductions—the reduction to pure passivity. The reduction proposed by Husserl (interestingly but unclearly described in a unpublished manuscript C6) is an attempt to grasp the nature of experienced temporal flow. The flow consists in moving what is given centrally in its retentional-protentional flow towards the margin (the similarity to my interpretation of Gurwitsch's field is striking); the content is being reduced to pure perception that is no longer the “perception of.” It is aimed at revealing the primary dynamics thanks to which any content can appear. This is the deepest immanence that is accessible to phenomenological analysis. The pure I appears here not as a problematic entanglement in the reflexive movement of experienced contents (like in the non-egological theory of consciousness endorsed by Gurwitsch), or as a pole of the acts of consciousness, but as one side of the immanent relation

between the one who experiences and the fact that he experiences. These “who” and “that” remain strictly interwoven. “I systematically reduce the concrete flowing present through an unbuilding (*Abbau*). I reduce to the primal impressional immanent present of things, to the 'foreign to me', namely the immanent hyle (sphere of marginalized experience)” (Husserl, Ms. C6, p. 3).

This *hylē* Husserl talks about is something constitutionally more primary than the impressional matter which occurs in the *Logische Untersuchungen*. This is, in fact, an *Urhylē*, a pre-matter: “Primal hyle in its temporization is the ego-foreign core, so to speak, in the concrete present. We would then have to say: in the flow of concrete primal presence, purely immanent time temporizes itself constantly as primal time, in which [primal] [non-] individual being exists; thereupon, we postulate as valid the pure flow of experience, the first 'transcendence' over and against the primal-impressional flowing present” (Husserl, Ms. C 6, p. 5). One more quotation may be pertinent in the present context: “In this 'unbuilding' we return to the primal-impressional present, which leaves valid exclusively the purely perceived and reserves in bracketed form that which is not purely perceived, withholding in this from pure perception 'perceiving' and all other consciousness, and that as non-purely perceived in any case, and as perhaps not perceived at all” (Husserl, Ms. C 6, p. 4). Husserl wants to understand our ability to be stimulated by the environment in a way that provides us not only with activation of our neurons but also by content, influencing the whole flow of experience.

From this radical phenomenological perspective nothing is *ad hoc* and nothing is extracted from the comprehensive structure of experience. There is common ground to all experienced content. This ground is not effective—it can be revealed only in radical reflection. But if such a transcendental structure accounts for anything there should be no arbitrariness in it too, which means that there must be some translation of these transcendental conditions onto a not trivial and not random set of theories about the functioning of our cognitive apparatus. I stress the notion of set, because there may be many empirical theories compatible with a transcendental (constitutional) description. The phenomenological analysis will not tell us how to choose the right set of theories. The naturalistic approach is again indispensable.

Naturalistic Turn III

The receiving, passive subject that stands in opposition to the impressional flow is not an abstract Cartesian subject. Husserl makes it clear that what he grasps in the transcendental attitude is the general structure of the functioning of the body. The gaze of reflection is directed towards the sense constitution but the kind of sense it discovers can only be attributed to the bodily subject. In other words, Husserl arrives at transcendental theory of bodily presence in the perceptual world.

It may be fruitful to think of the internal division within the experiencing subject—the division brought about by the functioning body—in naturalistic terms, namely, as certain property of human species such as the working of human brain. In the naturalistic approach the opposition between the "I" and "foreign to me" might be shown, for instance, as co-existent with tensions among the functional modules in the brain. Maybe more than a moderate postulate of co-existence can be achieved, but this cannot be yet decided because the turn I am taking now is still a matter of postulates rather than actual research project. The project should consist in a searching for an empirically demonstrable theory that would link the following structures: (1) the properties of the human body as an physical object moving in space; (2) the structure of sensory information as strictly connected with mechanisms of controlling the body motion; and (3) the neural mechanisms of time coding.

The prospects of setting out such an ambitious theory have been vague so far, but it would be well-advised not to make far-going predictions—pessimistic or optimistic alike—in this matter.

Conclusion

Phenomenology is ineffective in the sense of not providing the empirically testable theories or foundations of such theories. What is at stake in phenomenological analyses is not "Why" but rather "What" and "How." However, phenomenology formulates well motivated judgments about the possible objects and their presentations. "Well motivated" means a certain type of linking of possibilities to actual experience by means of a chain of reflective apprehensions. There is no way back though. The reflective chain cannot be tested experimentally, so the possible structures given in the transcendental mode cannot be tested either. Despite this, or maybe exactly because of this,

phenomenology reveals the conceptual horizon of science and may well serve the purpose of establishing the ground for the unity of human knowledge, exactly as it was envisioned by Husserl, but without epistemological foundationalism.

It is claimed sometimes by those who care about the dialog between phenomenology and cognitive science that phenomenology provides the cognitive science with pure descriptions that serve as *explananda* for scientific theories. My point in this essay has been that phenomenological and naturalistic turns motivate each other and follow each other. Although I limited myself to one problem, but even this has shown, I hope, that cognitive science provides *explananda* for phenomenology too.

References

- Gärdenfors, P., *Conceptual Spaces. The Geometry of Thought*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000.
- Gurwitsch, A., *The Theory of the Field of Consciousness*, Duquesne 1964.
- Gurwitsch, A., On Thematization, *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 4, 1974.
- Husserl, E. (Ms. C6), The manuscript: Zeitigung. Unpublished. E. Husserl's Archive in Louvain.
- Neisser, U., *From Direct Perception to Conceptual Structure*, w: U. Neisser (red.), *Concepts and Conceptual Development: Ecological and intellectual factors in the categorization*, New York., 1987, pp. 11-25.
- Patocka, J., La doctrine husserlienne de l'intuition eidétique et ses critiques récentes, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 71-72, 1965, pp. 17-33.
- Peacocke, Ch., *A Study of Concepts*, 1987, Cambridge, Mass.