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PHENOMENOLOGIZING COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE?

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*We should phenomenologize cognitive neuroscience
rather than naturalizing phenomenology[1].*

**1.
The Winter
School "The
Phenomenological
Mind"**

It is our pleasure to introduce the first issue of *Phenomenology and Mind – The online Journal of the Center in Phenomenology and Sciences of the Person.* This first issue is devoted to the proceedings of the Winter School *The Phenomenological Mind* (January 26-28, 2010) organized by the Research Center in Phenomenology and Sciences of the Person at the Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele and by the Phenomenology Lab (www.phenomenoloylab.eu) with the collaboration of the Università degli Studi di Milano.

As everybody knows, *The Phenomenological Mind* is also the title of the book by Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (Routledge, London 2008; Italian translation by Patrizia Pedrini, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2009). The Winter School *The Phenomenological Mind* aimed to discuss the main topics of *The phenomenological Mind*: first of all the phenomenological perspective on Mind, Cognitive and Neurosciences, including the relation between phenomenology and analytic philosophy, and secondly, some crucial themes like Action and Agency, Social Cognition and Consciousness, Pathology of the self perception.

We would like to thank the Scientific Board which reviewed the submitted papers: Clotilde Calabi (Università degli Studi di Milano), Roberto Mordacci (Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele), Massimo Reichlin (Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele), Elisabetta Sacchi (Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele), Roberta Sala (Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele), Corrado Sinigaglia (Università degli Studi di Milano).

We would like to thank also the invited speakers and invited contributors who have sent their papers for the publication in the present issue: Vittorio Gallese, Shaun Gallagher, Lynne Baker, Elisabetta Sacchi.

**2.
The structure
of the volume**

The issue collects nineteen papers about three topics:

(i) Phenomenology, neuroscience and analytic philosophy;
(ii) Action and Agency;
(iii) Social Cognition and Consciousness.

The first section of the volume collects the invited speakers' papers (Vittorio Gallese and Shaun Gallagher) and further invited contributions (Lynne Baker and Elisabetta Sacchi) as well as two papers by the editors of the volume (Roberta De Monticelli and Francesca De Vecchi). The focus of this session is the relation among phenomenology, neuroscience and analytic philosophy.

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[1] Gallese (2006, p. 294).

The main topics the section deals with are: neurophenomenology; first-person vs. third-person perspective; embodied simulation; social cognition, collective intentionality and social ontology; phenomenal modes of presentation.

The second section of the volume gathers the selected papers investigating the topic "Action and Agency" together (Luca Casartelli, Donald O'Conaill, Beril Sözmen Idemen, Philip Tonner, Lodovica Maria Zanet, Silvano Zipoli Caiani). The papers of this section deal with such questions as: what is an action? What is the sense of agency for our actions? Which is the relation between agency and awareness? These questions are crucial to phenomenology, according to which actions, practical concerns and practical reason drive our everyday life much more than theoretical wondering and thinking.

The third section of the volume collects the selected papers concerning the topic "Social Cognition and Consciousness" (Anna Bortolan, Emanuele Caminada, Marco Fenici, Gloria Galloni, Marco Tedeschini, Nicola Zippel, Beatrice Kobow). In philosophical, cognitive and neuroscientific debate "social cognition" and "consciousness" are said in many meanings. Starting both from phenomenological, neurobiological and cognitive data, the contributions of this section argue out several crucial aspects of "consciousness" – affective, cognitive and linguistic – and "social cognition" – empathic feeling, higher order persons, intersubjective intentionality.

3.
Phenomenology and cognitive neurosciences

We would like now to focus on the *Leit Motiv* of the first issue of *Phenomenology and Mind* which also characterises, even if in different ways, the contributions of Vittorio Gallese, Lynne Baker and Shaun Gallagher.

"We should phenomenologize cognitive neuroscience rather than naturalizing phenomenology"[2]. Let us adopt this often quoted statement as a maxim for what proved to be a hard endeavour: editing this first issue of *Phenomenology and Mind*, the online journal of the Research Center for Phenomenology and Sciences of the Person. Let us choose it as something more substantial and at the same time less solemn than a maxim or a motto: a word of moral support, so to speak, coming from a researcher and a scientist among the very few who are presently well known all over the world – and particularly well known to philosophers. Its author, as many remember, is Vittorio Gallese, whom we thank again both for having been among the protagonists of 2010 Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele Winter School "The Phenomenological Mind", and for enduring urgings and postponements, in order that his text could be ready for publication in this issue. Two other main contributions will be specially, even though too cursorily, addressed in this short presentation. This choice has been done to make a virtue of necessity, in a way: that is, to express our

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[2] Gallese (2006, p. 294).

special thanks to their authors, who, for different reasons, were not present at the Winter School but accepted to send their papers for our journal, in spite of its virtuality. Sending a paper to a journal which is virtual, not just in the sense of being essentially an online journal, but in the more embarrassing sense of not being born yet – this is an act of true generosity, for which we would like to express deep appreciation.

But there is a deeper, more theoretic reason to confine the more explicit part of this introduction within the triangle of three main contributions – namely Lynne Baker's and Shaun Gallagher's, beside the already quoted one by Vittorio Gallese. This, we hope, will be made clearer by the remainder of this introduction, which is so partial for a third and last reason too: that the very research project animating our Center and its ventures, as well as – we hope – this journal, is outlined in De Monticelli's own contribution to this issue, along with a piece of history of European and Italian phenomenology – that piece which our Center more directly stems from, and hopes to carry on.

Vittorio Gallese gives two good reasons supporting the attempt of phenomenologizing neuroscience. Since we all agree on one of them – namely that a dialogue and an attempt to translate the different notions employed by both disciplines, neuroscience and phenomenology, is just necessary – let us focus on the other one:

Why should we try to phenomenologize Neuroscience? Because if one of the aims of Cognitive Neuroscience is to shed light on the human condition, we certainly cannot but start from how the world is constituted within our own phenomenal appreciation [3].

We cannot but start from the phenomenal world, or the life-world, in the strict sense of the world which is each time given within the horizon of any given subject of consciousness or experience, namely any person. This is formally the horizon of a first person perspective – more specifically the noematic or objective pole of it, its noetic or subjective pole being the origin of such a perspective. Now, the concept of first person perspective is the subject of both Baker's and Gallagher's papers. What we found striking is the measure in which the results of Baker's and of Gallagher's independent analyses converge. As if getting closer to truth did diminish the distance between Pragmatic Realism and Experimental Phenomenology – as this convergence was not looked for, nor was it to foresee, in advance.

In order to argue for this convergence thesis, we shall start from a Husserlian text, a not so quoted one, which we find particularly inspiring as it links consciousness and normativity – a concept which both Baker and Gallagher use

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[3] Gallese (2011).

(the former quite explicitly, the latter at least implicitly) to refute reduction of (phenomenal) consciousness to sheer subjectivity.

Normativity is an essential feature of intentionality, though a very neglected one both in continental and analytic philosophy of mind: yet it pervades the whole extent of our mental life. This is a deep insight phenomenology offers, suggesting that we should look at personhood as the condition of what we may call "the normative animal". A description of what we mean by "normative animal" can be found in this remarkable passage by Edmund Husserl:

Animals live by sheer instinct, humans are also subject to norms. All kinds of conscious states are crossed by and interwoven with a normative consciousness of right and wrong (appropriate, inappropriate, handsome, ugly, suited, unsuited and so on), which motivates corresponding competent actions, with effects on reality and social reality, on the basis of knowledge and evaluation [4].

Consciousness and normativity are essentially bound in our life. For, according to this description, we do not first perceive, feel or act and only later learn to perceive, feel or act adequately; we are subject to normativity from the very beginning. We experience the world in such a way as to be at least able to learn from our errors, to correct them. We are bound to be reasonable from the very outset of our life. How is *that* possible? Husserl's answer to this question sheds light on many peculiarities which distinguish our very early dispositions to social cognition from those of other primates, as described in the pioneering work of Michael Tomasello[5], quoted by Baker and surely known to Gallagher[6]. We shall not go into details here, but one more quotation might be useful: it will help us to recall that central achievement of Husserl's which is his *unified theory of reason* (theoretic, axiological, practical), as the realm of acts subject to normativity, or the distinction right/wrong. Here is a passage nicely summarizing that achievement:

Let me notice for the sake of clarity that the word "reason" is not understood here as meaning a human psychological disposition, but as a general term for the essentially closed class of acts and corresponding objects, that fall under the ideas of right and wrong,

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[4] *Das Tier lebt unter bloßen Instinkten, der Mensch auch unter Normen. Durch alle Arten von Bewußtseinsakten geht ein damit verflochtenes normatives Bewußtsein von richtig und unrichtig (schicklich, unschicklich, schön, häßlich, zweckmäßig, unzweckmäßig usw.) und motiviert ein entsprechendes erkennendes, wertendes, dinglich und gesellschaftlich wirkendes Handeln.* Husserl, *Fünf Aufsätze über Erneuerung. Formale Typen der Kultur in der Menschheitsentwicklung*, in Husserl (1922-1937, p. 59).

[5] Tomasello (1999), *The cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; (2008) *Origins of Human Communication,* MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; (2009) *Why we cooperate*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[6] Tomasello (1999) belongs to the References of Gallagher-Zahavi (2008).

respectively of true and false, being there or not being there etc. As many basic kinds of acts subject to these ideas can be distinguished, so many kinds of reason there are [7].

Going back to our main invited contributions: both Baker and Gallagher focus on first person perspective, respectively as a mode of (self)consciousness essentially characterizing persons as such, and as a mode of (self)consciousness irreducible to third person perspective, or "neutral", "objective" reports of a subject sayings and behaviours. Both authors, we said, make explicitly or implicitly use of a concept of normativity to prove their theses. Let's see. Baker's argument rejects a Cartesian foundation of first person perspective. Descartes was right about the importance of the first person perspective point of view. He was wrong in claiming that such a perspective required a separate, substantial mind or self as its subject, being both independent of other selves and opposed to the material world, understood as, in its turn, mind-independent. A phenomenologist can but agree with both sides of the thesis: disembodied solitary selves are impossible, and the ordinary world – the world of encounters, or the life-world – is not mind independent. Now what is extremely interesting is Baker's argument for the "social" part of the first thesis, needed as a premise to support the second as well. A (robust) first person perspective, which, Baker argues, is already enjoyed by a very young child able to claim ownership of "her" toys, could not possibly be there in case the child were the only inhabitant of earth, since the ability to refer to oneself as oneself, "from inside" so to speak, requires an ability in discriminating objects (toys and fragile vases, "mine" and "not mine") which cannot be acquired without a public language. The reason is that a public language is – in a wittgensteinian mood – the source of normativity. The child "has to stand to be corrected" in order to acquire the empirical concepts of, say, "toy" and "vase". For, if whatever seems right to her is right, "that only means that here we cannot talk about 'right'". But to stand to be corrected is to have social and linguistic relations. So, Descartes solipsism is "a fantasy". That means, the very oblivion of a precondition of his thinking: he can think himself as disembodied, but if this thought were true, he could not have articulated it.
While agreeing with Baker on her main lines of argument, a phenomenologist would resist a wittgensteinian tendency to see language as the only origin of

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[7] "Der Deutlichkeit halber bemerke ich, dass das Wort Vernunft hier nicht im Sinne eines menschlichen Seelenvermögens, sondern einen Titel für die wesensmässig geschlossene Klasse von Akten und ihre zugehörigen Aktkorrelaten befasst, die unter Ideen der Rechtmässigkeit und Unrechtmässigkeit, korrelativ der Wahrheit und Falschheit, des Bestehens und Nichtbestehens usw. stehen. Soviel Grundarten von Akten wir scheiden können, für welche dies gilt, soviel Grundarten der Vernunft" (Husserl, 1908-1914, p. 68).

normativity. That is the reason why comparison with Gallagher's thesis is so interesting. Gallagher's question comes back to what we presented as Gallese's "phenomenolologizing" suggestion: we cannot but start from how the world is constituted within our own phenomenal appreciation. Are we sure we cannot but do that? The issue saw Ernst Schrödinger and Rudolf Carnap on opposite sides during the 1930s. Schrödinger was sure that we cannot do otherwise, the first-person framework being more basic that the third-person one. For science "is always accomplished by scientists who occupy, by necessity, their own first-person perspective". Science, bound to leave first-person perspective aside and to act as if there were a point of view from nowhere, or as if there were only a third-person perspective, depends on a "fundamental axiom" – namely, that the world is basically given from first-person perspectives – which cannot be scientifically known – for is not empirically testable, nor it is simply a matter of convention. So, science depends entirely from a truth not accessible to it! Carnap opposed this thesis along behaviouristic lines (we can infer that other people have minds on the basis of their exterior behaviour). In a way, this reproduces exactly a debate between a phenomenologist (was Schrödinger aware of Husserl's argument against some dogmas of empiricism in *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft?* (1911) or *Ideas I* (1913), Section I, Chapter II) – and an eliminativist metaphysician of the present time, for example Daniel Dennett. Where does normativity come in? In a discussion Gallagher introduces about some brain imaging experiments designed to study brain areas activated when subjects enjoy their own first-person perspectives on some actions they are requested to engage in, or observe others engaging in such actions, or just imagine to engage in such actions. To make a long story short, the experimental design is criticised for neglecting to test another situation, namely that in which we imagine ourselves *in the place of others.*

Why is focusing this form of social cognition so enlightening? Because it identifies a form of social cognition-interaction which is also an origin of pre-linguistic normativity, or of proto-normativity, so to speak.

While Gallagher's argument, that we leave to the reader for a pleasant discovery, has no need of scholarly references, it is interesting to notice that ability to transpose one's own egocentric coordinates in other's own (as when we give street directions in terms of our interlocutor's right and left hand, for example), being the very condition of an objective space constitution, is first made possible by a "motor" activity of actually changing one's present point of view, or just imaging that change: an example *par excellence* of an action-embedded, world-driven, pre-linguistic normativity. We often get this transposition wrong – we learn how to do it at about the same age we learn to use first person language. But it seems a more fundamental kind of socially learned normativity. For without it, we could not regard ourselves as objects –

along with the other things and persons – in a common objective space. And it is most striking that Dennett remark about phenomenology, bound to remain a fantasy is turned against him by Gallagher, in the same strict sense in which a Cartesian solipsism is a "fantasy" according to Baker: as oblivion of a necessary condition for something to be conceivable. A science without scientists rooted in the lived space and following the very norms to reach to objective space would simply be impossible.

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