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PHENOMENOLOGY TODAY: A GOOD TRAVEL MATE FOR ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY?

abstract

On the basis of a short summary of phenomenological aims and methods, this essay describes the present state of relationships between phenomenology and analytic philosophy, pointing out the progress done in the last years on the way of their rapprochement, after a long time of reciprocal scorn and misunderstandings. In the way of a presentation of the Phenomenology Lab and Center's present and future research program, it recalls some relevant chapters of past and present phenomenological research in Europe, and quite particularly in Italy. After discussing some aspects of contemporary debates in phenomenology and philosophy of mind, it attempts at establishing a convergent line of argument toward the assessment of an anti-reductive ontology of concreteness, or the life world.

keywords

Epistemic trust, scepticism, phenomena, anti-reductive ontology, fundierung

The principle of epistemic trust

Phenomenology has been here for a century, and yet not so many philosophers, among both traditional supporters and opponents, do really understand its novelty. Too many scholars, also, have usurped its beautiful name, without sharing its spirit, without applying or developing the methods for philosophical *research* on vital topics in our contemporary world, for which it had been devised.

What is, in fact, the spirit of phenomenology? I wish to propose a sort of key-principle which is just meant to point to that spirit, or rather to remind us of a style of thinking, which might be clarified through some more definite methodological principles¹. In this introduction I do not want to get into methodological details, though: for the sake of this general presentation, I shall first try to evoke that style of thinking by a formula which I shall term the *Principle of Epistemic Trust*:

(ET) *Nothing appears in vain* (without a foundation in reality) – of course the reverse is not true: there is much more to discover in reality than what appears (otherwise no *research* would be needed, and we would be omniscient).

The first thing I want to convey by this formula is that phenomenology has been so widely misunderstood, because we have not yet – not in the least – understood the whole depth of Plato’s summons: *sozein ta fainomena*, to “save” phenomena. That is, things which are seen, things which appear.

Phenomenology so characterized seems to radically escape what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed the “culture of suspicion”. Under such a phrase I understand the mental attitude quite opposed to epistemic trust: a complete lack of confidence in the world of phenomena, that is in the ordinary world of our daily experience.

Now, quite independently of Ricoeur’s references (“The masters of suspicion”), this lack of confidence in the truthfulness of experience itself seems to characterize a new and radical form of scepticism. Our age is, as I believe, an age of scepticism: but of a quite peculiar kind. It is a form of life and consciousness, a mentality much more than a sophisticated theory. It is a paradoxical form of life, in which our ordinary experience – sensory, emotional, “cognitive” and “moral” – seems such that we can avoid taking it seriously.

¹ Conni, De Monticelli (2008).

1. Scepticism and phenomenology

Over the last century, philosophy of culture as well as philosophy of nature have proposed many reasons to doubt that things are as they appear. A majority of continental philosophers of the twentieth century on the one side, and the mainstream naturalism striving toward an image of the world compatible with contemporary science on the other, suggest that our experience (and our moral experience quite particularly) is a pervasive, systematic illusion. They could be right. Why has this happened? The story would be too long to tell: we shall limit ourselves to pointing to the two mentioned contemporary forms of scepticism concerning visible things – or the visible and sensible life-world – which we may term Post-modern Relativism and Reductive Materialism.

The first one has been the dominant philosophy of culture, whereas the second one has been the dominant natural philosophy of mind and nature. Both represent a form of scepticism relative to the immediately given things of our life-world, including ourselves, human persons, and *our* world: the life-world, as a phenomenologist would have it, or the world of encounters, according to a nice expression proposed by Lynne Baker.

According to Post-modernism no real epistemic credit can be given to immediate cognition or consciousness – no form of intuition, acquaintance, perception, feeling is a mode of veridical experience, the world being as it were wrapped up in language, culture, interpretations.

But according to Reductive Materialism, phenomena are epi-phenomena, just shadows or dreams caused by a completely different reality. Take for example Dennett's *Consciousness explained*, which has a nice chapter, "The phenomenological garden"²: we do not find a description of a real scene like the one surrounding the reader, or of a fictional one, similar enough to a human life-world environment of the XXth century on earth, but just a list of qualia, or sense data, in three classes:

1. "Experiences" of the outer world, such as views, sounds, smells, sensations of slippery or rough, of warm and cold, and of our body's position;
2. "Experiences" of the inner world, such as imaged views and sounds, memories, ideas and insights;
3. "Experiences" of emotions and feelings.

All that is purely "subjective", that is belonging to what contemporary philosophers of mind call phenomenal consciousness.

Actually, questioning the reliability of sensory and sensible experience has been a main trend in the history of modern philosophy, starting indeed from Descartes

² Dennett (1993).

doubt, going on with Galileo and Locke's expulsion of secondary qualities from the furniture of the real world, and so on. Yet the "age of suspicion" which induced modern science to doubt the world of everyday experience was at its beginnings in Descartes' days. Nowadays we can perfectly conceive of a world such as that of *Matrix*, where no experienced object is really as it appears: steaks are nothing but tasty *qualia* and people themselves are nothing but the characters of a (shared) dream, while their true life is lived somewhere else... In fact, the "phenomenological garden" of Dennett or the world of *Matrix* are just sets of beautifully arranged *qualia*, which would support the universal negation of our Principle of Epistemic Trust:

(N) All appears in vain

(N) supports a version of (epi)phenomenalism. And phenomenalism is surely no phenomenology, but the very opposite way of thinking: a radical form of scepticism about phenomena.

Take any issue in contemporary philosophy of mind: the "hard problem" of consciousness, that is the nature of any form of direct cognition, such as perception, emotion, empathy, self-perception; or the nature of the self and personal identity; or – most important for meta-ethics and legal philosophy, the issue of free will. All of them can be reduced to the general problem of epistemic trust, that is, of reliability of ordinary experience.

What is the status of epistemic trust? It would be sad if the principle just were meant as a dogma. But, as we said, it is at most a heuristic principle, or the expression of a style of philosophical research, engaging a philosopher, above all, to a most faithful conceptualization and precise description of any phenomenological feature appearing to be relevant to the very nature of the concerned thing. It is the outset of a (non-sceptical) thought practice, more than a statement looking for an argument.

On the other hand, no argument seems to be conclusive against this scepticism about appearances. What is needed is a deep change in our customary way of thinking. A change not only relative to modern philosophy, but to ancient philosophy as well (there is no interesting way back to the past). Phenomenology is this kind of "revolution". The Principle of Epistemic Trust is about the relations between appearance and reality. Now, we are inclined to think that the true reality of a thing resides more in the hidden than in the apparent part of the thing. That the thing actually is what is its hidden part. A stone, for example, is ultimately its physical structure, the particles out of which it is composed and the forces which keep them together. But even if you are no materialist concerning human persons, even if you think that the real substance of a human

person is her soul, you are inclined to think of this substance as a hidden reality. In any case the true reality of a thing is thought of by opposition to its appearance. Ordinary language suggests this almost inevitably. Moreover, we are inclined to conceive of this relationship in terms of causation: reality “causes” or “determines” appearance, the latter is a “resultant” of the former, the surface is a product of the underlying reality.

In short, what is founding is ontologically more important than what is founded; the “basis” or the “inside” is more real than what “emerges” at the surface. A kind of atavistic mental grammar tacitly induces us into thinking that the entity and identity of a thing reside more in its hidden “basis” than in its “emerging” properties: water is really in its molecules rather than in its liquidity and transparency, a person’s reality in her biological basis than in her personal flourishing, and so on...

This atavistic grammar is what we call ontology: reductive materialism and dualism are but different versions of it, sharing the above mentioned foundational principle. But in fact, what we customarily mean by ontology is *just an* ontology, and one which is to be deeply revised. This deep revision is phenomenology.

Phenomenology completely redefines the relations between appearance and reality. “Phenomenon” is no longer a synonym of “sheer appearance”, nor of course of “subjective distortion”. The word refers to what we shall call *the emerging structure* of a thing.

This emerging structure bears the essential properties of the thing itself and hence manifests its specific identity. It tells us what type of thing the thing is. There is no possible world where a sound – a full fledged sound as the ones we can hear – would not have some pitch, some timber or tone-colour, some duration – or else it would be no *sound*. So, the typical identity of a thing – of a state of affairs, of a relation, of an event – is given, so to speak, by its “surface”. This surface – the “phenomenon” can be conceived as the very manifestation of the ontological significance (and richness) of the thing itself.

This way of thinking seems to be inspiring most of the papers published in this issue, deep down into their specific subjects – whether the authors refer or not to the phenomenological tradition – so that my general hints can be verified on each of the concerned topics, across such different concrete approaches as Vittorio Gallese’s embodied simulation theory, Shaun Gallagher’s anti-reductive thesis on first person perspective, Lynne Baker’s constitution theory of persons, Elisabetta Sacchi’s phenomenological account of aspectuality and Francesca De Vecchi’s analysis of three essentially different phenomena of shared intentionality – not to mention many relevant contributions by younger researchers.

The fruitful results of this anti-sceptical approach are among the reasons why phenomenology is experiencing a new life, the life of a philosophical method

devised to address those classical topics in philosophy of mind and the sciences of the person, that recent progress in the cognitive neurosciences have made even sharper and more urgent. A method, though, devised to address them with analytical rigour and disciplined experience, in a close cooperation with experimental research, as it was the case during the first decades of its life. *The phenomenological Mind*, a book from which we borrowed the title and the general subject of the first one of the international meetings to be promoted by our Research Center, does express and thoroughly exemplify this new attitude. It powerfully contributes to making phenomenology respectable again among philosophers who don't share in the least that ignorant contempt for science, logics and conceptual analysis, which has been so disastrous for the intellectual reputation of too many alleged heirs of the phenomenological tradition. It gives us a common language, without forcing us to give up our methods of experience's description and essential discovery. It makes phenomenology a good travel mate for analytic philosophers – or, this is the future we try to make possible. This is why we are grateful to Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, for being there, respectively, as a keynote speaker at our 2010 [Winter School](#) and as a central contributor to the first issue of *Phenomenology and Mind*.

2.
A new international research community?

Edmund Husserl used to dream of a philosophical community as universal as the scientific ones of the modern world, and yet as personally absorbing, as intellectually, morally, even existentially motivating as a Platonic symposium. Perhaps any true phenomenological philosopher since has tried to found such a community – and we are trying too, once again. I am persuaded that time is much more favourable to such an endeavour now, than it has ever been after World War Two. I shall try to explain why. On my way of doing so, I first wish to present the young and dynamic research community which happened to find in the Research Center in Phenomenology and the Sciences of Person, based at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, and in the associated [Phenomenology Lab](#), a first place of virtual encounter and a means of communication. This had a first opportunity of actual encounter and common work during the 2010 [Winter School](#), where most papers now published on this journal were first presented and discussed. The whole enterprise was brought about in a spirit of freedom and self-organization, created so to speak spontaneously by its very participants. That [Winter School](#) worked as a real place for *symplosofein*, and seemed to have inherited a spark at least of the enthusiasm which used to animate the first phenomenological circles. What I say must not be understood in a nostalgic mood: I do believe that we are living a new beginning. To see why, we must widen the horizon from our small community to the whole phenomenological renewed movement which is reviving all debates about consciousness, mind, embodied mind, action and agency, feeling and willing,

social cognition, self and person, values, norms, social ontology – all over the world. We shall widen the horizon gradually, by larger and larger circles so to speak, pretty much in the spirit of Husserl's famous piecemeal description of wider and wider skylines of the surrounding life-world – perceptual, geographical, historical, social – in *Ideas I*³.

So let me start from a first wider circle, encompassing our present community as its historical and geographical context of birth – the Italian phenomenological tradition, rooted in this city, and quite particularly in the Alma Mater of some of us, the Università degli Studi di Milano. This not only has been represented at our [Winter School](#) by the phenomenological- experimental work of Corrado Sinigaglia, but actually was, through him and his research group, among the organizers and sponsors of the School.

It is no redundancy, in the present international context, to recall the fact that the Università degli Studi di Milano has been the most important center for the study and the spread of phenomenology (mainly Husserlian one) in this country, since Antonio Banfi (before the Second World War) and Enzo Paci (from the Fifties onward). I myself was but a schoolgirl when I first heard a lecture held by Paci: therefore I am old enough to have met Paci's more brilliant pupils, and to have learned a lot from them. Paci's students developed different interests from the same phenomenological stump: among them two of my masters had already shown the ways to approach analytic philosophy from a phenomenological background, and this line of continuity with what we are trying to do here makes it a duty and a pleasure for me to mention them: Andrea Bonomi, who became a philosopher of language and logics, and Giovanni Piana who practiced a sort of experimental phenomenology on several modalities of perception and related objects (especially sounds and musical objects), imagination and experience generally. Both were well acquainted with Frege, Wittgenstein, the Gestalt Psychologists and their Italian heirs such as Gaetano Kanizsa and Paolo Bozzi, who introduced James Gibson to Italian students. But I also wish to mention at least Dino Formaggio, the father of Italian Phenomenological Aesthetics, which promoted research both in general and in special philosophy of art, partly in collaboration with Mikel Dufrenne, without neglecting aesthetics as phenomenology of each specific sensory modality, in Dufrenne's spirit, and the Italian school of phenomenological psychiatry, with Lorenzo Calvi, Bruno Callieri, Arnaldo Ballerini and their pupils⁴.

Mentioning this tradition, well represented in the scientific board of our

³ Husserl (1913, 1928), *Ideas I*, §§ 27-29.

⁴ Cfr. at least the issues 1988-2010 of the journal founded by Lorenzo Calvi, "Comprendre – Archive International pour l'Anthropologie et la Psychopathologie Phénoménologiques", Padua.

Research Center by these masters' successors (Elio Franzini, Paolo Spinicci, Vincenzo Costa, Carlo Serra) is more than a due act of gratitude. It is the premise of an engagement, that our Lab feels also due, to support any attempt to the effect of making the best works of those masters easily available again, and above all of making them known and accessible to the international phenomenological community. Much is waiting to be rediscovered and shared in the light of our research's present developments – not only in this purely philosophical tradition, but in some of its applied expansions as well: phenomenological psychology, phenomenological psychiatry, phenomenology of education⁵.

The next horizon to be considered is much wider. Let me introduce it by considering the span between two poles that were for a long time considered as opposed to each other: phenomenology and analytic philosophy.

We hope to be the founders of a community of analytically minded phenomenologists. I understand the expression “analytically minded” in a broad sense, which is best clarified by a statement made by the Munich phenomenologist Moritz Geiger (a pupil of Alexander Pfander): “Phenomenology is a passion for differences”.

But I also mean the expression in a stricter sense, more or less in the spirit of Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher's book. Its authors seem to be succeeding in an enterprise in which many others failed across the years, namely, to make phenomenology again intellectually respectable in the opinion of the scientific minded philosophers. No longer a muddled set of question-begging generalities, or – even worse – a post-Derridean conversational art, frivolously spurning logic and sometimes ethics, but a technique to provide valuable insights in the study of most widely debated topics in contemporary philosophy.

This was a big achievement, for most analytical philosophers of my generation would have agreed with Thomas Metzinger when he proclaimed phenomenology to be “a discredited research program... intellectually bankrupt for at least 50 years”⁶. (One relevant exception was Michael Dummett in Oxford: he was well acquainted with Lotze and other predecessors of Frege, but did not ignore, as most of his colleagues, Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. His encouragement on occasion of the preface he wrote to the printed Italian version of my thesis⁷ was decisive in persuading me that a phenomenologist could be a good research partner for an analytical philosopher. I never had doubted the other way round, of course).

Many important things happened since. Among them Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) point out three developments in cognitive science, which brought about

⁵ One should mention at least the work by Piero Bartolini: cfr. Tarozzi (Ed.), (2006), and the remarkable work by his pupil M. Tarozzi, editor of “Encyclopaedia - Rivista di fenomenologia, Pedagogia, Formazione”, Clueb, Bologna.

⁶ Gallagher, Zahavi (2008), 2.

⁷ Dummett (1982), XI-XXX.

a possible rehabilitation of phenomenology: 1. A revived interest in phenomenal consciousness; 2. The advent of embodied approaches to cognition; 3. The amazing progress in neuroscience and – I would add – the increasing need for accurate description of life-world phenomena whose neurobiological correlates one wants to investigate.

About 150 years have gone by since Husserl's birth: but, as Gallagher and Zahavi point out, no divide comparable to the one who took place later on occurred during the first decades of last century. Franz Brentano, Gottlob Frege, Edmund Husserl, William James, Bertrand Russell – to quote only some major figures – were all directly or indirectly aware of each other's works.

We should also recall many predecessors of Zahavi and Gallagher in the above mentioned rapprochement between philosophy and sciences of the mind – and of the embodied mind, or person. Among them are many former members of the Munich and Goettingen early phenomenological circles (from Herbert Spiegelberg to Dietrich von Hildebrand, from Roman Ingarden to Alfred Schutz – and many others). Having survived Nazi persecution through emigration, they spread our way of thinking and methods of research all over the world. To this direct inheritance belongs the uninterrupted tradition of phenomenology and experimental phenomenology within psychology and psychiatry, represented by the Dutch School, Erwin Straus, Ludwig Binswanger, Eugène Minkowski, Georges Lantéri-Laura, Wolfgang Blankenburg, Kimura Bin, and their followers down to the experimentally and philosophically impeccable present researches of Amedeo Giorgi, Matthew Ratcliffe's and Giovanni Stanghellini⁸.

We should not forget, of course, the relevant developments in formal and material ontology rooted in Husserl's III *Logical Investigation* (on Parts and Wholes), quite particularly Peter Simons' mereology and Barry Smith's biomedical ontology; as, more generally, Kevin Mulligan's pioneering works about the so called *Austrian-analytic philosophy*⁹. Nor should we ignore all the scholars and researchers who contributed to a better understanding of our classics in the phenomenological Archives of Europe, Löwen, Freiburg, Munich, Cologne and Paris (among them three members of our scientific board, Verena Mayer, Dieter Lohmar and Jocelyn Benoist).

Last but perhaps not least, the rich variety of Italian phenomenological schools which our website, [Phenomenology Lab](#), was born to give voice to. Some hints to the former phenomenological school of Milan were given above. Among the other Italian traditions in this field, it seems worthy of notice that our most important philosopher of law and politics (Norberto Bobbio, 1909-2004) wrote his first important book on social and legal philosophy within the

⁸ Giorgi (Ed.), (1985); Ratcliffe (2008); Stanghellini (2004).

⁹ Simons (1987); Mulligan, Smith (1982). See also <http://ontology.buffalo.edu>.

phenomenological movement¹⁰; his pages on Husserl, and those on Scheler, Reinach and Kaufmann still retain their unequalled lucidity. Social ontology, on the other hand, which was first – and far before John Searle – outlined as an independent material ontology by Adolf Reinach, as well as by the polish philosopher Czesław Znamierowski (introduced in Italy by two members of our Center, Wojciech Żelaniec and Giuseppe Lorini) has found in Pavia and Milan a flourishing prosecution within the school of Amedeo G. Conte (Gianpaolo Azzoni, Paolo Di Lucia, Lorenzo Passerini Glazel, Stefano Colloca). The so-called “realist” phenomenology has been explored through essays and translations at the University of Bologna, where the legacy of Ezio Melandri is still alive (Stefano Besoli and others)¹¹. Some women phenomenologists – from Edith Stein to Edwige Conrad Martius and Gertha Walter have been a privileged object of study within the school of Angela Ales Bello at the Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis in Rome, where Ales Bello founded the Centro Italiano di Ricerche Fenomenologiche in 1974.

Finally, I shall hint at those research fields which seem – up to now – to be the best covered by our Research Center. Persons and social objects make up the two main regional ontologies on which our work has focused. Two out of the three traditionally described spheres of consciousness – or rather personal life (cognitive, emotional and conative acts) – have been privileged and are being studied, both in their fundamental structures and relative to recent neuroscientific findings. The nature of decisions and of freedom of action and/or will, neurophenomenology, empathy and structures of the emotional sensibility are current subjects of research and discussion, as well as social cognition, social acts, ontology of institutions and artefacts, theories of values and norms, foundations of practical rationality and personal responsibility, foundations of ethics¹².

After the [Winter School](#) 2010 we have been working at the organization of a Spring School (June 7-9, 2011) centered on Social Ontology and John Searle’s last book – *Making the social world*. Here are our present contributions to what we hope is going to renew the spirit of early phenomenology – on a planetary level.

- 3. A new beginning?** Let me conclude on the possible upshot of all that. Europe, from Cracow to Oxford, passing through Copenhagen and Paris does share a common philosophical language again. Or at least it could. We do master one again. We have gone through the very beginning of a major philosophical turn in this century: the outset of a gradual reciprocal understanding between modern cognitive (neuro)science and phenomenology. We are learning to conceive

¹⁰Bobbio (1934).

¹¹Besoli, Guidetti (Eds), (2000).

¹²De Monticelli (2003, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2009).

of them as two complementary efforts aiming at – respectively – the study of the necessary neurological basis of a personal life, and their embeddings in *the relevant whole* of a living (human) person, which is the last subject of all our scientific inquiry. Phenomenology has shown the importance of replacing vague everyday talk about such pseudo-entities as “representations”, “sense data”, “qualia” or even about unanalyzed, complex phenomena such as the mind, the soul, the body and the natural, artificial and social objects of the life world, with rigorous, true to life, “*phänomengerecht*” descriptions of those things as experienced, and of the experience we make of them. For experience and the experienced world are the very background of our scientific enquiry, as well as the concrete embeddings of all normativity: logical, axiological, practical. They are the very foundations of our “normal” reason – theoretical or practical. While many of the best analyses on phenomenology are methodological essays presenting a possibly fruitful new approach to the cognitive sciences and the philosophy of mind, many of the best analyses *in* phenomenology are, so to speak, essays in the ontology of concreteness – of life and of the experienced world. Epistemic trust has proved itself a fruitful attitude via the rich variety of material ontologies which have been addressed since Husserl and Scheler’s times. Whenever single types of “things themselves” – ideal or mathematical objects, special art domains, kinds of social objects, artefacts or institutions, material and formal axiology and so on – have been investigated, most sterile scholarly disputations on the kind of *Weltanschauung* compatible with phenomenology have tended to die down. Meanwhile, a shared theoretical and methodological principle seems to have imposed itself within and beyond the phenomenological circles: being founded on something does not mean being reducible to it. Along with rigour in descriptions, the major contribution of phenomenology to philosophical knowledge seems to be the concept of ontological dependence or *Fundierung*, developed on a formal level by several researchers on the basis of Husserl’s pioneering logical investigation on parts and wholes¹³. This most useful tool of “antireductive metaphysics”, constituting a relevant contribution to analytic ontology, enables us to escape both dead ends of the alternative between dualisms and reductionisms of all sorts. It also proves precious in making sense both of our increasing knowledge of nature in ourselves and of the increasing demands of practical reason (justice) in our personal and social world.

To sum up, I really hope that some at least among the contributions to this issue will work as basic bricks of a building which we have dreamt of for a very long time: a common house for phenomenologists from all countries, maybe brought up in different traditions, maybe trained in different philosophical or

¹³ Meirav (2003); De Monticelli (submitted).

scientific disciplines, but all sharing that deep wish for clarity and evidence and that incessant quest for rigor in arguing and “Sachlichkeit” of issues, which are constitutive of phenomenology as a method of philosophical research, along with the caring attention to the richness and irreducible subtlety of the apparent world, and the engagement to “save the phenomena”, which distinguish phenomenology as a philosophical attitude. Here are some of the reasons we have to believe that we are facing a new beginning in philosophy. Thank you for helping us to realize this hope.

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VIDEO ON-LINE

[Winter School Milano R. De Monticelli part I](#)

[Winter School Milano R. De Monticelli part II](#)