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PHENOMENOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM

abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare Phenomenological Empiricism with two different kinds of Empiricism: Classical Empiricism (represented by Hume) and Logical Empiricism (represented by Schlick). Phenomenological Empiricism is at the same time a radical and sophisticated theory of experience, in which intentionality, ideation, material a priori, a complex notion of data and of intuition play a crucial role.

keywords

phenomenology, empiricism, intentionality, ideation

1. Radical Empiricism

The aim of this paper is to show how Phenomenology is a radical and at the same time complex (anti-reductionist) Empiricism. To this end, I will underline similarities and differences between Phenomenological Empiricism and other forms of Empiricism. I will consider in particular two important kinds of empiricism: Classical Empiricism and Logical Empiricism. A third and very important type of empiricism is the so-called Neutral Empiricism (that of James, Mach and also, I believe, Bergson). This paper will be limited in scope to the examination of the first two kinds of empiricism.¹

First of all, two preliminary questions. What do we mean by the expression “radical empiricism”? And in what ways can Phenomenology be considered a radical (even if sophisticated) kind of empiricism?

In a radical empiricism it all begins and ends in the field of Experience. Husserl says:

It must always be borne in mind here that *whatever physical things are* – the only physical things about which we can make statements, the only ones about the being or non-being, the being-thus or being-otherwise of which we can disagree and make rational decisions – *they are as experienceable physical things*. It is experience alone that prescribes their sense; and, since we are speaking of physical things in fact, it is actual experience alone which does so in its definitely ordered experiential concatenations.²

In a radical empiricism, being misled or deceiving oneself also falls within the range of phenomena.

As Husserl says:

I may be deceived as to the existence of the object of perception, but not as to the fact that I do perceived it as determined in this or that way, that my percept’s target is not some totally different object, a pine-tree, e.g., instead of a cockchafer. The self-evidence in characterizing description (or in identification and distinction of intentional objects) has, no doubt, its understandable limits, but it is true and genuine self-evidence.³

1 For the relationships between phenomenology and neutral pragmatism see Lanfredini (2017).

2 See Husserl, 1983, p. 86.

3 Husserl, 2001, p. 297.

Husserl's position, however, should not be confused with the Cartesian *videre videor*. According to Descartes, I could be deceived about what I see, but not about the fact that I am seeing it now. More radically, according to the so called static version of phenomenological empiricism, it is inappropriate to talk about deception not only from a noetic point of view (seeing something) but also from a noematic point of view (what I see).

I think that, against the so-called West Coast Interpretation⁴ (and in favour of Gurwitsch⁵), Husserl never proposed a realistic design of intentionality in a metaphysical sense. The principle by which objects that are not intended are not given is a principle of phenomenology with no exceptions. In a descriptive context this refers us back to the impossibility of making an object-based analysis without connecting it with some form of experience. In other words, in the phenomenological object there is always contained (from an ontological point of view) the reference to a state of consciousness: the red I detect necessarily leads back to a determined sensation of redness; the chair I see necessarily leads back to a determined perception of that chair; the thought property necessarily leads back to a determined modality of thought, and so on.

Any phenomenon, in order to be such (that is, to become manifest) necessarily leads back to an intentional *Erlebnis*. The necessity, contained in the structure of the phenomenon, of the reference to a state of consciousness allows the limit of Phenomenological Ontology to be defined.

This is one of the main differences with respect to Hume's empiricism. The phenomenological notion of data includes directness but not simplicity, even in fundamental elements such as sensations. The phenomenological notion of data goes beyond the amorphous and undiversified notion of *idea* to embrace a bi-polar concept of experience composed by a noetic pole and a noematic pole. According to Hume, and also Berkeley and Locke, a distinction between feeling and felt property, hyletic data and objectual data does not exist. According to Husserl, on the contrary, this distinction is absolutely fundamental.

The fact that for Husserl (*contra* Hume) the intended object may not effectively be contained within the state of consciousness (the singer's song, says Husserl, is distinct from the act of singing), while still being essentially bound to it (there can be no song whose singer can dispense with the act of singing), entails a distinction between two ontological dimensions: the dimension relating to subjective or noetic object (states of consciousness) and the dimension relating to real, objectual, or intended object.

These environments delimit two distinct but not separated regions: the first region, the noetic, which consists of adequate, non-perspectival objects (those given in a complete manner and "without residues", so to speak - eg. seeing a red spot, hearing the sound of violin, imaginings the god Jupiter); the second region, the noematic, which consists of objects that are inadequate, incomplete, essential perspectival and unilateral (eg. the red spot that is seen, the sound of the violin, the imagined god Jupiter). This distinction isolates domains of objects which, although ontologically distinct, are nevertheless connected by an essential and necessary relationship of unilateral foundation⁶. In this sense, phenomenological analysis (at least from a static point of view) is technically correlative.

In Husserl's opinion, Hume had passed right through phenomenology with his eyes closed. The first blindness consists in its denial of transcendence. Phenomenological transcendence is not

2. Hume's blindness

4 See Føllesdal, 1969, 1982; Dreyfus, 1979, McCulloch, 2003.

5 See Gurwitsch, 1967.

6 See Husserl, 2001, §16.

an absolute but a relative one: that is, relative to the state of consciousness that constitutes it. The expression “phenomenological transcendence” consists of two essential conditions: first, the intended object is not effectively contained within the act which intends it; and second, the intended object refers in an essential manner to an act that intends it.

The first condition confirms the *reality* of the object, the second denies its absolute, or metaphysical, reality. So, existence is not a property of the object in itself, but a property of the act that intends the object: when we say that an object exists we are in reality asserting that the object is understood *as existing*; that is, we are using a specific modality, a *thetic* or positioning character. In perception, as in memory, unlike in fantasy or in imagination, the object appears *as existing*. Conceived in this way, “authentic” perception, so to speak, is no different from hallucination, as far as content or description are concerned. Indeed, hallucinatory perception benefits from a positioning character just as much as other perceptions do, and as a consequence the hallucinated object appears to us *in flesh and blood* just like any other perceived object (contrary, for example, to what is maintained in Searle).⁷ The “reality” of the authentic object of perception lies in a sort of operative and contextual attitude. So, the materiality of things depends upon the circumstances and the context in which they are placed. If we consider a thing by itself, distinguishing between something and its phantom – i.e. its pale, empty, and ghostly counterpart – becomes virtually impossible. The ghost of a certain thing has all the essential features that render that thing exactly what it is and nothing else: essential features that are dispersed throughout an extension. In this sense, we would see rainbows and blue skies but we could not define them as material things. On the other hand, if we consider the thing within a given context, the thing and the ghost of that thing cannot be regarded as the same element. Things exist, are real, substantial, and causal (these terms are all synonyms) when they behave in a certain way. In this sense, real (or material) properties are, *ipso facto*, functional links: for example, causal links. In order to get to know the reality of a given thing, we must be able to predict its behavior under a certain force, pressure, when it is smashed up, cooled down, heated up and so on. In the multiplicity of its dependence relations the real thing will retain its own identity.

3. A world outside our world

The possibility of the thing in itself turns out, in conclusion, to be decisively denied by Husserl exactly as by Hume. An object that cannot be intended in principle is in fact an effective absurdity. But Husserl’s criticism is more sophisticated than Hume’s. Husserl admits that a thing in itself is not a matter of non-sense, hence of a contradiction. Asserting the existence of a thing in itself does not in fact mean violating any formal law (such as seems to happen in cases of syntactical nonsense such as “the tree is and” or semantic nonsense such as “round square”).

The hypothetical assumption of something real outside this world is, of course, logically possible; obviously it involves no formal contradiction. (...) When that is taken into account the formal-logical possibility of realities outside the world, the *one* spatiotemporal world, which is *fixed* by our *actual* experience, materially proves to be a countersense.⁸

On the other hand, the absurdity of the thing in itself cannot be ascribed to material countersense (that violation which we encounter in examples such as “color without extension”).

⁷ See Searle, 2012.

⁸ Husserl, 1983, pp.108-9.

The absurdity of the thing in itself seems to reside in a third order of reasons, which we could call motivational, according to which, in order for an object to be given, it must exhibit a rootedness in an actual experience. And this is the case for the thing in itself, which turns out to be impossible not because formally nonsensical, nor because it is materially counter-sense, but because it does not have in principle a bond of motivational synthesis with an actual experience. In the absence of such a chain of connections in experience, the object vanishes. A world outside our world is a concrete absurdity. There are two obligations which the notion of world must satisfy so as not to fall into concrete absurdity. The first is that any given phenomenon must effectively contain within it the reference to an experience. The second, which constitutes the foundation of so-called genetic phenomenology, is that any phenomenology, in order to be configured as such, must exhibit an original nexus (however remote) with an actual experience, with the acknowledgement of an object in flesh and blood. The thing in itself violates both these conditions (the first formal, the second material): on the one hand it is a thing which in principle severs the intentional nexus (which any object must satisfy in order to be declared as such); on the other it negates that rootedness in a concrete experience.

In conclusion: making reference to a world *outside* our world, hence to the thing in itself, does not entail either the violation of the purely material ontological law according to which two types which are founded one on the other are in fact separate (as in the case of color and extension), nor the violation of the purely formal ontological law by which two disconnected species cannot live within the same singularity (as in the case of the square and the round). In the thing in itself, we are in fact witnessing the violation of a further, still more fundamental law, the law by which the notion of thing necessarily contains the reference to lived experience. If we conceive the two objects of object and experience as unconnected categories linked by a relationship of unilateral foundation, the expression “thing in itself” expresses a counter-sense that is both formal and material. We can talk about constitutive and concrete absurdity. The thing in itself is a constitutive (formal) absurdity because it makes reference to something that contains the reference to a constitutive function and at the same time removes itself from it. Therefore it is not possible, for constitutive-formal reasons, to refer coherently to a thing in itself, simply because the thing in itself is not something, or, which is the same, it is a non-thing. Although not senseless, the thing in itself is impossible since it violates the formal law by which the notion of thing, containing *in itself* the reference to a corresponding intention, cannot at the same time free itself from such a reference. For this reason it turns out, though certainly in a different acceptation from syntactical and semantic senselessness, to be unthinkable and not merely imperceptible and unimaginable, as happens in purely formal and purely material counter-sense.

The thing in itself is at the same time a concrete (material) absurdity because it is not rooted in any original and lived experience. Therefore, it is not possible, for material reasons, to refer consistently to a thing in itself, because it is not available.

Hume's second blindness rests in his negation of the essential, eidetic dimension of experience. As is well known, Husserl's theory supports an ideative notion of data, against the empiricist theory of abstraction (see in particular the attention theory (Mill), the representational theory (Locke, Berkeley) and the theory of *distinctio rationis* (Hume)). At the same time Husserl claims a material and not formal conception of data (*contra* Cassirer). I think that the ideative notion of data not only is not in contradiction with phenomenological empiricism, but completely corroborates it. The event, being invariant, requires ideation; for example, invariant to variations of lighting conditions, changes in positions, and so on. Data, being invariant, are not without structure. Phenomenological ideation has the following characteristics. First, it is not

4. Form and content of the experience

an abstraction: it does not function by means of exclusion or negation of some characteristics for the benefit of another and it is not founded on any recording of similarities (*contra* Hume and Classical Empiricism). Second, it is not a concept: it does not function by means of categorization. There is no need of a good theory of concept constitution for a good theory of data (*contra* Kant). Third, it is not formal: it is not a functional but a material process: that is, a process founded on specific features of experience (*contra* Cassirer).

That last statement introduces the second point that I intend to address: the relationships between Phenomenological Empiricism and Logical Empiricism, respectively an empiricism with and without intuition.⁹

A crucial question for Schlick, as well as for Logical empiricism in general, is the total insignificance of the concept of content (in particular, intuitive content) for both a theory and a practice of knowledge. Besides, it is this thesis (related to a notable distinction between *Kennen* and *Erkennen*) which marks – on Schlick’s explicit admission – his radical divergence from Husserl.

According to Schlick the content is inexpressible and indescribable: that is, linguistically untouchable: “the difference between structure and material, between form and content is, roughly speaking, the difference between that which can be expressed and that which cannot be expressed”.¹⁰

Let’s consider the famous example, in Schlick, of a person who is born blind. This example is perfectly analogous to Husserl’s example (contained in *The Idea of Phenomenology*¹¹) of the deaf man. Let’s consider the perception of green and look at the ineffable quality of green which makes the essence of the content. This quality is accessible only to beings endowed with eyesight and power of color perception; it couldn’t possibly be conveyed to a person born blind. Shall we conclude, Schlick asks, that such a person could not understand any of our statements about color, that they must be quite meaningless to him because he can never possess the green content? Schlick’s answer to this question is no. We can communicate to the person born blind, as we can to a person who can see, the meaning of “green”. Nevertheless what we communicate is not the content – the *greenness*: “since content is incommunicable by language, it cannot be conveyed to a seeing man any more or any better than to a blind one”.¹² What can be communicated (or, which is for Schlick the same, expressed) is the fact that something exists – which we call green – and that it is something possessing a certain structure or belonging to a certain system of internal relationships.

I can give a particular description of this green leaf lying on my desk by placing the color in a certain order. I assert, for instance, that is a bright green, or a rich green, or a bluish green, trying to describe the green by compare it to other colors. Evidently it belongs to the intrinsic nature of our green that it occupies a definite position in a range of colors and in a scale of brightness, and this position is determined by relations of similarity and dissimilarity to the other elements, in this case shades, of the whole system. In this sense, quality, every quality, has a certain definite logical structure: “in this way every quality (for instance, the qualities of sensation: sound, smell, heat, etc., as well as color) is interconnected with all others by internal relations which determine its place in the system of qualities”.¹³

In such a perspective the difference between a color-blind person and a normal one is existentially relevant but philosophically limited. Both *are knowing* the same thing. And both

9 I have addressed this issue in more details in Lanfredini, 2003.

10 Schlick, 1938, p. 291.

11 Husserl, 1966.

12 Husserl, 1966, p. 295.

13 Husserl, 1966, p. 294.

are not knowing the same thing. Both know the structure in which the green is placed and its position in the color spectrum. But, according to Schlick, both do not know the content of the green. The only difference between the two consists in their ability to enjoy (or not enjoy) the green color. This is absolutely important as far as actual life is concerned, but just as absolutely irrelevant for the knowledge of color.

Schlick says:

I can perceive a green leaf; I say that I perceived it if (among other things) the content “green” is there, but it would be nonsense to say that I perceive this content.¹⁴

The content, in the sense of intuitive content, is simply there. The verb used by Schlick in this regard is “enjoying”, the nearest equivalent to the German “*Erleben*”.

Schlick says again:

Here we uncover the great error committed by the philosophy of intuition: the confusion of acquaintance (*Kennen*) with knowledge (*Erkennen*).¹⁵

So, Schlick claims a sort of epistemological (although not-ontological) eliminativism, very similar to that held by Churchland, according to which the qualitative element is irreducibly outside of an adequate theory of knowledge. When I look at the blue sky and lose myself entirely in the contemplation of it without thinking, then I am enjoying the blue, I am in a state of pure intuition. The blue fills my consciousness completely. But that does not mean knowing what blue really is. The Meaning of the word “blue” is entirely included in the structure of the intuitive content.

In *The idea of Phenomenology* Husserl’s example is perfectly analogous to Schlick’s, with respect to a person born deaf. A person born deaf knows that sounds exist, and sounds make harmonies. But he cannot understand how sounds do this, how symphonies are possible. He cannot represent a thing of that kind, he cannot perceive it; and perceiving it he can’t understand *the how*. No kind of physical or psychological theory about color can add anything to this “pure vision” which, according to Husserl, establishes the sense of color.

This thesis presents, from a phenomenological point of view, at least two problems. First, the necessity of an intuitive content for the determination of the empirical knowledge. Second, the necessity of an intuitive content for the configuration of the same structure.

Without intuition it is not possible to intend determined objects. According to Husserl, determination comes with the fulfillment of an empty intention. Without an intuitive act, by which I mean, a fulfilled act, it is not appropriate to speak about knowledge. So, if confronted with a brilliant green leaf, a sighted person and a blind person share the same thing, an empty intention aiming at a “pure something”.

But in no case can a blind person believe himself to know either the leaf or its particular green. Knowing something means necessarily to have a fulfilled act, that is an act equipped with an intuitive content. Without a full, intuitive content every determined knowledge is impossible. And without a full, intuitive content the structure of green (and the structure of colors in general) is inscrutable. According to the phenomenological point of view, intuition is a necessary condition for knowing something because it is a necessary condition to have

5. Content and determination

¹⁴ Schlick, 1974, p. 319.

¹⁵ Schlick, 1974, p. 83.

a determined intention of something. Knowing the structure of something requires a prior experience, and not vice-versa.

In fact, the rigorous separation between Schlick and Husserl can be analyzed further. The problem, I think, is to establish what we mean by intuitive content, a concept that has a more complex structure than Schlick has supposed. But as we have seen, the concept of living does not exhaust the notion of intuition. The distinction between *experiencing* (*erleben*) the content and *apprehending* (*auffassen*) or perceiving a property or an object makes Schlick's treatment more complex. We experience (or enjoy, as Schlick says) acoustic sensations, but we hearing (we perceive) the singer's song. So, contrary to what Schlick says ("when I gaze at a red surface, the red is part of the content of my consciousness"¹⁶), red is not a part of the content of my consciousness. Affirming that content is simply there and simply present means advocating a simplistic and undifferentiated vision of the concept of intuition. We experience content, but we mean objects that go beyond these contents in the strict sense.

Another clarification: for Schlick, content (in the sense of intuitive content) has nothing to do with knowledge. There is still more: "the most fundamental mistake of philosophy of all times"¹⁷ is to identify knowledge with immediate awareness or with intuition. But Husserl has never identified knowledge and intuition, even if he considers intuition as necessary condition for knowledge. When I hear a sound or see a color, it is not with these acts of hearing and seeing that I come to understand what a sound or a color is. Knowing and having acquaintance with are not at all synonymous even for Husserl. According to Schlick, knowledge is a result of an act of comparing, recognizing, naming. According to Husserl, knowledge means to recognize, to identify the intended object, too. Nevertheless, this does not mean, as Schlick suggests, to differentiate two types of knowledge: one conceptual and one intuitive. On the contrary, knowledge is the result of an integration between two components. This is exactly the reasoning which makes it possible to in phenomenological terms to distinguish between *discrimination* of something (the result of a simple act of perception) and *identification* of something as such and such (the result of the conjunction of a meaning act and a perceptive act). This important distinction does not seem present in Schlick's perspective.

6. Phenomenal Intentionality

Husserl's analysis is more subtle in comparison with that of Schlick. In fact, he distinguishes sensation from perception on the one hand, and perception from conceptual elaboration on the other. Perception, for Husserl, is not a judgment; it is not knowing something. The distinction marks the important difference between an epistemic conception and a non-epistemic conception of perception. Husserl accepts the second one; in this sense he corrects Kant's famous principle according to which "intuition without conception is blind, and conception without intuition is empty". While the second part of the affirmation is without doubt true, the first needs a correction: it is not the concept that allows intuition to see; perception has already, in itself, an organization, a structure which does not have any reference to conceptualization.

Then, according to Husserl, it is not necessary that our consciousness experience acquires propositional contents. In particular, conscious experiences can represent something in a certain way regardless of inferential or propositional content: that is, regardless of beliefs and concepts. Conscious experiences are intrinsically related to a qualitative format (*qualia*). Qualitative states are independent of their descriptive value, so that we can have a conscious experience without having a description of something.

¹⁶ Schlick, 1938, p. 102.

¹⁷ Schlick, 1938, p. 318.

There is in fact an important distinction between perceptual discrimination (non-propositional) and perceptual identification (propositional).

Against the so called *tracking theories* (TT)¹⁸ whose main endeavor is to naturalize the content of qualitative states by reducing it to tracking relations holding between the phenomenality of consciousness and physical properties of environment, Husserl would endorse the so called *phenomenal intentionality research program* (PIT)¹⁹. According to PIT, intentionality is basically a matter of phenomenal consciousness: any qualitative state has a phenomenal property which expresses a specific and determined qualitative state. Furthermore, it is precisely by virtue of this richness of phenomenal properties that it is impossible to think about different experiences with different propositional content. The propositional content depends on phenomenal properties, and not vice versa. If the qualitative spectrum of our experiences were not characterized by a plurality of phenomenal properties, it could not be available to a propositional format.

Accordingly, the experience's propositional content depends in a strong sense on having a plurality of phenomenal properties that characterize the experience in itself.²⁰

In conclusion, the famous distinction between *Kennen* and *Erkennen* is not at all denied by Husserl. Certainly for Husserl, as for Schlick, *Kennen* is not knowledge in a proper sense. But knowledge needs the *Kennen* in order to acquire determined knowledge. So, there is a crucial difference between the two perspectives. Schlick declares explicitly that "intuition and conceptual knowledge do not both strive for the same goal; they move in opposite directions"²¹. According to Husserl, in contrast, intuition is an integrating part of the genuine process of knowledge. Authentic knowledge cannot function without a qualitative factor. To determine and consequently to identify a red object, we must have an experience of "what it is like" (using Nagel's expression) to see something red. We have knowledge when we have an acknowledgment. But acknowledgment necessarily implies an act of intuition.

So, I think that the main element of the deep disagreement between Husserl's empiricism and Schlick's empiricism resides in a different philosophical conception of the notion of intuition (and, thus, in the notion of experience). Schlick speaks about intuition as "an exceptionally close relation between subject and object", something mystical and completely inexpressible (the borderline case of this is the relation between consciousness and God). But this is a mere caricature of the concept of intuition. Intuition has an internal structure.

The second difference between Schlick and Husserl resides in the different value that the two attribute to the concept of intuition. For Schlick, intuition is radically outside the dimension of knowledge; according to Husserl, in contrast, intuition is an integral part of knowledge. Without it, no determined knowledge is possible. In this sense, I think that the content empiricism advocated by Husserl is more radical than the formal empiricism advocated by Schlick.

In conclusion, phenomenology is a kind of radical empiricism. But it is not a reductionist form of empiricism. Husserl's position has not assimilated to classical Empiricism for these reasons. First, the phenomenological notion of data includes directness and immediacy but not simplicity. In Classical Empiricism, consciousness is a place, and the objects are immanent data: that is, sensations, ideas, perceptions, and so on. For Husserl, consciousness

7. Conclusions

18 Dretske, 1981, 1988, 1996, 2003; Millikan, 2009; Papineau, 1987.

19 Kriegel, 2008, 2013.

20 See Zipoli Caiani, 2019.

21 Schlick, 1938, p. 82.

is, on the contrary, not a closed place, and the object is not inside consciousness, as in a sack. Second, the phenomenological notion of data includes reality, even if *relative*, or, if you will, empirical. The phenomenological notion of reality is functional, relational, operative and not substantial in any sense of the word. Third, the phenomenological notion of absolute reality is an absurdity (as in Hume), but the argument in Husserl is much more sophisticated and more fully articulated. Husserl distinguishes different forms of absurdity: nonsense, counter-sense and constitutive-motivational (or concrete) absurdity. A *reality in itself* reflects the last kind of absurdity. Finally, the phenomenological notion of data requires an ideative process that fixes an invariant to the variations of different conditions. Husserl's position is profoundly different from Logical empiricism for these reasons: a) the phenomenological notion of intuition is more elaborated and sophisticated by comparison with that of Schlick. For example, in Husserl an important difference exists between discrimination of something and identification of something. Both imply intuition, but in a different sense; b) the phenomenological notion of intuition is absolutely essential for knowing something. Without intuitive, qualitative content, the empirical knowledge is lacking in determination. Moreover, without intuitive, qualitative content we cannot set a structure of something; for instance the structure of color, the structure of sound, the structure of physical things, and so on.

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