

The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science

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The Phenomenological Mind is part of a recent initiative to show that phenomenology contributes something important to cognitive science. (For other examples, see the References section.) Phenomenology, of course, has been a part of cognitive science for a long time. It implicitly informs the works of Andy Clark (e.g., 1997) and John Haugeland (e.g., 1998), and Hubert Dreyfus explicitly uses it (e.g., 1992). But where the former use phenomenology in the background as broad context and Dreyfus uses it primarily (though not exclusively) as a critique of conventional artificial intelligence, Gallagher and Zahavi indicate a positive and constructive place for it. They do not recommend that we simply accept pronouncements of thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and apply them to questions of cognition, but that we use revised forms of phenomenology to illuminate dimensions of cognitive experience that are missing in current research.

After an introductory chapter that places phenomenology in the context of other approaches, the book lays out the traditional tenets of the phenomenological method and some potential surprises, namely, attempts to “naturalize” phenomenology, a few attempts to formalize it, and the emergence of “neurophenomenology.” Each of these is a surprise because Husserl was a critic of naturalism, seeing transcendental phenomenology as an alternative to the empirical study of consciousness. He was also skeptical about the possibilities of mathematizing it. Gallagher and Zahavi acknowledge these points, but since they are not repeating history or undertaking exegesis, adherence to canonical phenomenology is not required.

“Naturalizing” phenomenology means recognizing that “the phenomena it studies are part of nature and are therefore also open to empirical investigation” (p. 32) and that scientific investigation and phenomenology should mutually inform each other. They are corroborative, rather than competitive, though how this is best understood remains “contentious” (p. 30). “Formalizing” phenomenology is a matter of codifying “the formal structure of experience” (p. 30) in order to translate “data from phenomenological and naturalistic realms into a common language” (p. 32). The benefits of doing so are clear upon reflection, though the book does not offer detail. If we can find a way to code descriptions of experience in a language recognizable to science, we might go a long way toward finding scientific explanations for it—at least this seems to be the hope. Along similar lines, “neurophenomenology” attempts to fit careful descriptions of first person experience within neuroscience and the theoretical parameters of dynamic systems theory. In the brand of neurophenomenology espoused by Lutz et. al. (2002), for example, subjects are taught to employ the epoché (defined momentarily), focused description and intersubjective corroboration to provide data that can correlate with patterns of neural activity.

One other development is mentioned in this overview: something Gallagher calls “front-loading phenomenology,” an approach that, like neurophenomenology, asks

neuroscience “to determine what neurological processes generate . . . first-order phenomenal experiences” (p. 39). It is “front-loading” because, unlike neurophenomenology, here phenomenological description is allowed to influence the design of scientific experiments to help neuroscience determine more precisely what phenomena it should explain. For example, Chaminade and Decety (2002) develop an experiment based on the phenomenological distinction between our senses of agency and ownership to test whether our sense of agency comes from motor control or from the intentional component of our engagements. In so doing, they counter earlier experiments in which motor control is not successfully isolated as a variable and that, therefore, spuriously suggest that agency is tied to motor control (pp. 162-163).

This initial discussion of method passes quickly and suffices to illustrate important work in these areas. But, objections are not addressed and details are left without comment. Since this is an introductory text, perhaps this is appropriate. The book then continues with individual chapters dedicated to consciousness, time, perception, intentionality, embodiment, agency, other minds and self-identity, addressing each from a phenomenological perspective distinctly different from other mainstream approaches. These differences are perhaps most readily apparent in the book’s treatment of intentionality and the problem of other minds. In the analytic tradition, for instance, intentionality is approached in three different ways: 1) from a “language-philosophical approach” (p. 110) that examines the logical properties of psychological claims, 2) from an approach that tries to explain how intentionality might arise from non-intentional mechanisms, and 3) from an approach that sees intentionality as tied to first-person perspective. For phenomenologists, intentionality is closest to the third of these, though it is employed broadly here to describe consciousness more generally and to clarify the relationship between mind and world, rather than the relationship between mind and the mechanical brain, the precise focus of the second usage just mentioned. Regarding the problem of other minds the book steers away from both prongs of the Theory Theory vs. Simulation Theory debate to approach the problem on the basis of the embodied, and hence, visible, actions of others, the interactivity that this supports, and the narrative competence (primarily story-telling) that we achieve by interacting with others.

Though the book is thorough in its coverage, the thoughtful reader may nonetheless entertain doubts about the role of phenomenology in empirical cognitive science, due in part to the cursory presentation on method and in part to the fact that as the book continues with its various areas of application, it is not often clear how, whether or to what extent the methods outlined earlier are put to use. Certainly, clarified phenomenological descriptions are needed in cognitive science. With or without them, we appeal to experience to design experiments, interpret data, and so on. Uncritically accepting interpretations of experience without analysis can infect research with naiveté and a spurious appeal to “common sense.” But how precisely are we to find these critically clarified descriptions, and what might bestow validity on the methods that are supposed to arrive at them? Can anything resembling the scientific method be attached to our first-person descriptions, or are they always mired in uncritical theoretical supposition? (If this sounds like nitpicking, the reader may need reminding that considerations like these helped to drive phenomenology from Husserl into Heideggerian hermeneutics and then into deconstruction and postmodern philosophy.)

Consider, for example, the epoché, Husserl's principal strategy for rendering "pure" consciousness accessible to us" (1931, p. 103) that was recommended for use in neurophenomenology above. This strategy invites us to explore experience while setting aside any speculation concerning the extra-mental existence of a world outside the subject. The upshot of this maneuver is that it forces me to consider myself and my experience no longer as part of the natural world (p. 25) and methodologically constrains my pure descriptions of experience so that naturalistic hypotheses about existing objects do not taint them. It reduces experience to pure sense. Contemporary cognitive scientists will be wary of this kind of maneuver on the grounds that it may beg the question in favor of certain brands of representationalism (a mistake that this reviewer may have made in 2002). Indeed, the gesture seems to preclude many recent (and cogent!) challenges to the sense-think-act cycle of older explanatory strategies (see, e.g., Clark, 1997). Of course, Gallagher and Zahavi do not recommend the epoché across the board. My example here is only meant to point out methodological problems in describing experience more broadly.

Even granting that the question of method is settled, we may still have cause for concern. As was often the case with the classical phenomenologists, this book follows Husserl and slips uncritically from pure description to theory construction, often acting as if phenomenology can make the same kind of empirical claims that science makes. Two examples will have to suffice. Consider first Gallagher and Zahavi's discussion in chapter 4 of the idea that experience is not temporally punctate, but rather has "protentional" and "retentional" aspects extending, respectively, forward and backward in time. This notion is not grounded experimentally, but instead on the basis of necessary logical conditions:

A perception cannot merely be a perception of what is now; rather, any perception of the present slice of an object includes a retention of the just-past slice and a protention of what is about to occur.... Perceptual presence is *therefore* not punctual; it is a field in which now, not-now, and not-yet-now are given in a horizontal gestalt. *This is what is required* if perception of an enduring object is to be possible. (p. 78, italics added)

Retentions and protentions may not be necessary, it seems to me, if one does not initially assume such a logical (and Eliatic) conception of time initially. Elsewhere, when addressing perception, the authors write:

The meaning of the presented profile [of an object] is dependent upon its relation to the absent profiles ..., and *no perceptual awareness of the object would be possible* if our awareness were restricted to the intuitively given. In other words: in order for a perception to be a perception-of-an-object, it *must be* permeated by a horizontal intentionality... (p. 97, italics added)

Both examples start with an assumption about experience and then reason according to necessary conditions to what else must be the case. Indeed, the book frequently and frustratingly moves tacitly from description to explanation according to rationalistic inference rather than empirical experiment.

The departure from method to areas of application in this text leaves the reader asking several pressing questions: Is phenomenology a matter of applying methods to reach a clarified description of experience to help science better understand what it seeks to explain, or is it (or should it be) engaged in positive theory construction itself? If so, how is this maneuver to be justified? And do phenomenologists really think that they can supplement empirical science with *a priori* and "rationalistic" inferences? The earlier

discussion on method suggests that phenomenology is a matter of description only, but the chapters on application often suggest otherwise. In the end, we are still left asking about how we might best understand phenomenology's potential contribution to cognitive science.

There are two sets of questions that a reviewer can address when looking at an introductory text like *The Phenomenological Mind*: (a) whether or not the authors fairly and comprehensively present the subject matter; and (b) considerations of the subject matter itself. In the case of this book, the first set of questions is easy. The authors do an excellent job representing the state of the art. Most of the issues in current phenomenology that are pertinent to cognitive science and "analytic" philosophy of mind are presented. The book is clearly written and readable by intelligent upper-division undergraduates, though also informative to graduate students and professional philosophers looking for a review of recent phenomenological research. Taking the subject matter of the book to task, rather than its presentation, however, could well require a book of its own. I have suggested a few potential problems above. They are not, of course, an indictment of the book, since its aim was to introduce phenomenological philosophy of mind, not to justify it at every turn. Instead, these considerations suggest that there remains quite a bit of foundational work for phenomenology to do. This work is best undertaken in dynamic interchange with empirical cognitive science, as this book suggests. Granting that phenomenology cannot tell the whole story (with apologies to Husserl, etc.), it is worth pointing out that it is still "the early years" for phenomenology applied in this way, and Gallagher and Zahavi have served us well in presenting this compendium of current research.

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