

## **A Defense of Pure Phenomenology**

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**Abstract** The question whether phenomenology, as the philosophical study of experience, can still have any contemporary scientific relevance is often associated with the demand that it relinquishes its hostile attitude toward naturalism, which was a fundamental feature bequeathed by important founding figures such as Husserl and Heidegger. In this paper I make a distinction between phenomenological philosophy and cognitive phenomenology in order to argue that whereas the former defends the autonomous character of philosophical reflection, the latter understands itself in continuity with the cognitive scientific agenda, thus rendering itself nonphenomenological in the process. I defend the autonomy of phenomenology (and thus of philosophy itself) with the purpose of making plain that there is a vast dimension of experience which not only cannot be dispensed with, eliminated or reduced to natural science, but whose proper investigation is the subject matter of philosophy alone.

**Key words** phenomenology · cognitive phenomenology · epistemological autonomy · phenomenological method · critique of naturalism

### **Mother and Offspring**

The question regarding the autonomous character of philosophy has come to the fore ever since the sciences took hold of themes and problems that once exclusively belonged to the playground of philosophers. For reasons that have to do with the parent-offspring relationship between philosophy and the sciences, some clarification remains to be provided on what the current parlance of an intersection or a combined effort means, for there lays the promise of cooperative work and an amicable coexistence between the mother and the sciences that spun out of her cocoon. However, doubt has also been cast on the belief in two registers coexisting cheek-by-jowl in mutual cooperation. In some cases it would be more accurate to talk of a clash, inviting thus further considerations precisely because defining something in opposition to something else is still being anaclitic on that thing. So the need to face the difficulties associated with such clash, instead of just somewhat timidly tiptoeing around it, are here still more recalcitrant than ever.

The situation is more severe if one considers the advent of today's perhaps most promising venture, cognitive science, which attempts precisely to achieve the articulation of empirically plausible answers concerning mind and consciousness. As Gardner (1985) has put it, the cognitive agenda itself is the one set by the two and a half millennia old tradition of Western philosophy. And although the rise of cognitive science has not rendered philosophy redundant, there is no doubt the tendency to make the facile suggestion that philosophy should postpone its own problems, its "eternal questions" (Bostrom 2014, 256), and thus delegate its tasks to cognitive research. This situation can be couched in terms of a cognitivization process affecting philosophy and the sciences as well. Descombes discloses this cognitivization as follows:

If the sciences called ‘cognitive’ were simply those whose objects are intellectual ones like language or culture, then the word ‘cognition’ would be understood in the ordinary, precognitivist way, an understanding to which notions like the treatment of information and artificial intelligence are utterly alien. Yet when the cognitive theorists include already-existing disciplines among the cognitive sciences, they do so in order to propose that these disciplines redefine themselves in the light of a new conception of mind. Thus construed, cognitivism is the program that seeks to change the sciences of the mind into cognitive sciences. For example, if linguistics counts among the cognitive sciences, it is not because it studies languages, which are intellectual systems. Rather, linguistics counts as a cognitive science because it could, we are told, be redefined or reconstructed as psycholinguistics, the study of the linguistic capabilities of a mental system endowed with the ‘organs’ necessary for the understanding and production of sentences. (2001, 66-67)

Under these conditions, the relationship between philosophy and cognitive science can become paradoxical and sometimes an air of conflict surrounds their peaceful coexistence. If it is true that cognitive science “saw itself as a ‘new philosophy’ and indeed as an anti-philosophy that aimed at recovering the goals and scope of the millennia-old attempts toward an exhaustive account of man and his place in the cosmos, while replacing armchair speculations with a radically new kind of empirical approach” (Franchi 2006, 27), everything is set for mayhem, especially if philosophy daringly adopts a noncommittal attitude toward such purported ‘new philosophy’.

In a book defiantly entitled *The Computer Revolution in Philosophy*, Sloman argues that “within a few years, if there remain any philosophers who are not familiar with some of the main developments in artificial intelligence, it will be fair to accuse them of professional incompetence” (1978, 5). Agreeing with this view, Floridi claims that there is in fact some sort of ‘scholasticism’ raised anew out of sheer desperation on behalf of professional philosophers trying to find shelter against their field’s purported lack of contemporary relevance. In this vein, scholastic philosophers

are like wretched workers digging an almost exhausted but not yet abandoned mine. They belong to a late generation, technically trained to work only in the narrow field in which they happen to find themselves. They work to gain little, and the more they invest in their meagre explorations, the more they stubbornly bury themselves in their own mine, refusing to leave their place to explore new sites. Tragically, only time will tell whether the mine is truly exhausted. Scholasticism is a censure that can be applied only post-mortem. (Floridi 2012, 10)

Such characterization has been pinned on endeavors aiming at boosting the importance and independence of philosophical thinking, as though philosophers concerned with their own field’s problems had negligibly fell into some kind of “nostalgic metaphysization” (Floridi 2012, 22). So a critique of ‘pure phenomenology’, like the one advanced by Noë (2007), is a notion that is

brought to bear on the very question regarding the mother-offspring relationship between philosophy and the sciences.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I shall conversely offer a defense of the autonomous character of philosophy. In order to carry out such philosophical vindication, I will make a distinction between *phenomenological philosophy* and *cognitive phenomenology* with the purpose of taking stock of the debate whether philosophy is to be given an autonomous standing in intellectual life. By phenomenological philosophy I shall understand *Phänomenologie*, that is, the philosophical movement founded by Husserl in Germany whose problems were taken up by thinkers such as Heidegger, Levinas, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Gurwitsch, and Marion, among many others. All phenomenological philosophers, although they do not constitute a unified school of thought in itself, do share a series of assumptions bequeathed to them by Husserl. The critique of psychologism and naturalism is perhaps the most recognizable feature, as is the defiant idea that philosophy is indeed autonomous. What is more, according to the classical epigones, the scope of philosophy, its task and themes, is not to be conflated with the scope pertaining to the sciences. On this view, philosophy and the sciences do not just have a different perspective on the same topics, but different topics altogether (Lembeck 2010, 176). The distinction is fundamental because cognitive phenomenology (sometimes simply referred to as ‘phenomenology’, which only adds to the confusion) investigates the what-is-likeness character of experience and the qualitative side of consciousness from the first-person point of view, and this in line with Nagel’s famous essay which defended the irreducibility of consciousness to the objective point of view (Nagel 1974). On this view, the defining feature of phenomenology “is a matter of how things seem to us” (Noë 2007, 231), and apparently nothing more than such investigation of subjective life. Phenomenology then would thrive to understand the subjective side of knowledge that has been overshadowed by the glaring successes of the empirical sciences.

I submit that making this distinction between phenomenological philosophy and cognitive phenomenology is crucial for understanding two different theoretical ventures having a radically different agenda: one which postulates the existence of an autonomous dimension of research for philosophy (and that claims to have discovered this dimension) and another which understands itself in continuity with cognitive research and, for that matter, with natural science. The former is classical phenomenology and understands itself as an independent endeavor, whereas the latter is the cognitive reinterpretation of phenomenological research and insists on its right to justify the subjective side of cognition. Despite the fundamental importance of such radical difference, the misleading conflation of these approaches is rather ubiquitous. A case in point is the article ‘Phenomenology’ penned by D. W. Smith for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. There the distinction is made between a movement in the history of philosophy (the philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, *et al.*) and a disciplinary field defined as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons that will become clear in due course, I am not convinced of the adequacy of this characterization of phenomenology as ‘pure’. Actually, phenomenology deals with the impurest dimension: factic pre-theoretical life experience. But I adopt the epithet only because this paper is conceived as a response to Noë’s (2007) critique of pure phenomenology.

view” (Smith 2013). Much is said indeed about the disciplinary field and its contributions to the philosophy of mind and consciousness, whereas little (or almost nothing) allows one to get a grip on the fundamental fact that the research underpinning the historical movement cannot be simply considered as hopping on the cognitive bandwagon. In point of fact, the disciplinary field tends to be oblivious, if not overtly dismissive, to the careful and systematic attempt to neutralize our dogmatic attitude towards reality called for by the phenomenological reduction. As Zahavi has rightly put it, “to effectuate the reduction is to liberate the world from a hidden abstraction, and to reveal it in its concretion as a constituted network of meaning” (2017, 59-60). Indeed, without the reduction, which is not a facile change of focus towards subjectivity, one has not yet entered the phenomenological field.

By making the latter fundamental distinction I attempt to provide a defense of ‘pure phenomenology’, or preferably, of phenomenological philosophy as such. However, it must be borne in mind that ‘phenomenology’ is an ambiguous concept. Basically, Husserl and Heidegger would not have recognized their own phenomenological practice in such investigation of how things seem to us from the first-person point of view. On Noë’s view, pure phenomenology is based on the supposition that “phenomenology is free standing in the sense that phenomenological facts are logically and conceptually independent of empirical or metaphysical facts” (2007, 231). However much phenomenologists would like to defend the autonomous character of their research field, it is its isolation “more than anything else, that threatens to undermine its claim to be a serious kind of intellectual pursuit. At best, it seems, it is the fantasy of such a pursuit” (Noë 2007, 232). According to this line of criticism, it is necessary to give up the misbegotten conception of pure phenomenology and undertake the task of articulating an alternative conception of phenomenology as concerned with nature (Noë 2007, 234). Such undertaking, of course, is not one that phenomenological philosophy would pursue but it is no doubt part and parcel of the intellectual venture assisting the project of a cognitive phenomenology. Therefore, the so-called articulation of a naturalized phenomenology is not phenomenological at all, for such project relinquishes everything that made phenomenology a daring defense of the autonomous character of philosophical reflection. In spite of this, I will offer arguments against the conflation of phenomenological philosophy and cognitive phenomenology; a confusion which actually undergirds the claims inveighing against the existence of a fruitful and fundamental autonomous philosophical reflection. The difficulties associated with a defense of phenomenology so conceived must be ironed out by a clarification of what phenomenology is not (first-person point of view research alone), thus making plain a vast dimension of experience which not only cannot be dispensed with or eliminated but whose proper investigation can only be carried out by philosophy itself.

## **Methodological Hardships**

The question whether phenomenological philosophy is still relevant for intellectual life depends on the concept of phenomenology that one entertains. To be sure, none of the important classic phenomenological thinkers deferred to the cognitive orientation underlying the defining idea of phenomenology as the study of consciousness from the first-person point of view. This talk of

subjective experience research is nowadays ubiquitous and misleading, for it is wont to reduce phenomenology to a sort of introspective endeavor aiming at the vindication of a subjective level of experience to which the natural sciences have been manifestly oblivious. The point would be to do justice to the subjective side of experience and thus ameliorate the most nefarious consequences stemming from the objectification of human life.

However much fundamental it would seem to rescue experience from the belittlement of its first-person embedding, the expression ‘phenomenology’ primarily refers to a methodological conception. On Heidegger’s view, “this expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the *how* of that research” (SZ, 27). The formulation of the methodological maxim which characterizes this *how*, ‘to the things themselves’ (*zu den Sachen selbst*), should indicate both where our gaze is to be directed and, most importantly, the subject matter of phenomenological research. Given that, as Heidegger has it, phenomenological research does not characterize the *sachhaltige Was der Gegenstände*, one should be certain that this definition does no chime with the conception of phenomenology as a matter of how things seem to us, precisely because such definition gleefully assumes a *sachhaltige Was der Gegenstände*: subjective experience. Needless to say, Husserl is in thorough agreement with Heidegger’s conception of phenomenology as stated in his postulation of a *Prinzip aller Prinzipien* of phenomenological research, whereupon an “originary giving Intuition” (*originär gebende Anschauung*) is to be taken as the “legitimizing source of knowledge” (Hua III, 43). That is, what is at stake here is *how* something is offered to us in its self-presentation. Of course, some clarification remains to be provided on what this precisely means, given that both passages referred to above are usually misunderstood, albeit they are crucial for a proper cognizance of the phenomenological method.

I submit that it is remiss of cognitive enthusiasts to pin on phenomenology a research domain which is utterly foreign to its original nature. So rather than glibly defining the *what* of phenomenology as the “structures of conscious experience as experienced from the first-person point of view, along with relevant conditions of experience” (Smith 2013), one should address the very idea according to which phenomenology, as method, does not concern itself with objects, but rather with ‘the things themselves’, that is, with phenomena. One is therefore driven to the conclusion that a fundamental distinction has been introduced between the objects of scientific research and the phenomena pertaining to phenomenology alone. If this distinction is radical, then no idyll can survive between such method of phenomenological leanings and the one which surreptitiously conflates phenomenology with the psychological research—however important it may be—focused on subjective experience and perception. In addition, the suggestion of a radical ontological difference between domains establishes as well a differentiation with regard to the attitude that is to be adopted toward the concepts bequeathed to us by the philosophical and scientific tradition. Given that our concepts are rooted in a ‘hardened tradition’ (*verhärtete Tradition*) against which phenomenological reflection must do its work, our conceptual tradition “must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved” (Heidegger SZ, 22). Of course, this cannot be achieved by sheer happenstance, so it must be the result of a meticulous confrontation with the very conceptual tradition doing the concealment. Heidegger refers to this fundamental confrontation as

*Destruktion*, which now is tasked with becoming the linchpin of conceptual oversight and an integral element of phenomenological method (SZ, § 6).

Unfortunately, many examples steering the focus of phenomenological research towards subjective what-it-is-likeness burgeon rather mightily, and this in dereliction of their duty of adopting a destructive attitude towards the history of ontology. This has had pernicious consequences for the proper cognizance of phenomenology, which has been misrepresented as some sort of phenomenalism. Dennett has famously dismissed phenomenology on these grounds proclaiming its conceptual inefficiency. According to Dennett, phenomenology

grew up early in the twentieth century around the work of Edmund Husserl. Its aim was to find a new foundation for all philosophy (indeed, for all knowledge) based on a special technique of introspection, in which the outer world and all its implications and presuppositions were supposed to be ‘bracketed’ in a particular act of mind known as the *epoché*. The net result was an investigative state of mind in which the Phenomenologist was supposed to become acquainted with the pure objects of conscious experience, called *noemata*, untainted by the usual distortions and amendments of theory and practice. Like other attempts to strip away interpretation and reveal the basic facts of consciousness to rigorous observation, such as the Impressionist movement in the arts and the Introspectionist psychologies of Wundt, Titchener, and others, Phenomenology has failed to find a single, settled method that everyone could agree upon. (1991, 44)

It is widely accepted that introspection proved to be unreliable as source of scientific data. One simply needs reminding that Titchener and his disciples at Cornell University believed they had demonstrated that nonsensory conscious thought was impossible, whereas Külpe and the Würzburg School had precisely demonstrated the contrary to be the case (Lycan 1986, 21). In proclaiming the premature death of phenomenology, Dennett needs only to establish the link between phenomenology and introspectionist psychology. Phenomenology so construed, can be said to have been born already dead.

Apropos, Dennett is not alone in proclaiming phenomenology’s conceptual inefficiency. In *Being No One* (2003), Thomas Metzinger characterizes phenomenology as an impossible theoretical endeavor. According to Metzinger, “first-person access to the phenomenal content of one’s own mental states does not fulfill the defining criteria for the concept of ‘data’. My politically incorrect conclusion therefore is that first-person data do not exist” (*idem*). So there really is no such thing as a true phenomenological philosophy and this is why Metzinger has gone so far as to affirm the bankruptcy of phenomenology due to its lack of scientific relevance. As such unscientific endeavor, phenomenology is “a discredited research program... intellectually bankrupt for at least 50 years” (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, 2).

Dennett takes then a further step and puts this autophenomenological introspection with its purported authoritative incorrigibility at the same level of phenomenological philosophy by ascribing to phenomenology a methodological search for inner life and private musings:

Perhaps when people first encounter the different schools of thought on phenomenology, they join the school that sounds right to them, and each school of phenomenological

description is basically right about its own members' sorts of inner life, and then just innocently overgeneralizes, making unsupported claims about how it is with everyone (1991, 67).

Again, Metzinger agrees almost *verbatim* with Dennett in ridiculing phenomenology for the absurd pretension of generating data by mere invoking first-person judgements. Phenomenology, argues Metzinger, could lead perhaps to arcane disputes when arriving at conflicting statements such as the following:

“This is the purest blue anyone can perceive!” versus “No, it *isn't*, it has a faint but perceptible trace of green in it!” or, “This conscious experience of jealousy shows me how much I love my husband!” versus “No, this emotional state is not love *at all*, it is a neurotic, bourgeois fear of loss!” (2003, 591)

If phenomenology does concern itself with introspectionistic reports of the aforementioned kind, it is then easy to cast doubt on how disputes concerning the way things seem to be on the first-person level can be adjudicated. On Noë's view, such disputes float “free of questions about the natural world. Phenomenology, conceived this way, makes no meaningful epistemic commitments” (2007, 232). But, unlike Dennett and Metzinger, Noë is part of a group of philosophers seeking a dialogue between phenomenology and the empirical sciences in such a way that phenomenology could constructively contribute to the cognitive agenda. The discussion can then be framed along two mutually excluding propositions: either (i) there is phenomenology (in the sense of first-person data) or (ii) there isn't. The defenders of the first proposition simply need to show that the availability of first-person data is only possible from the first-person perspective, and that the very investigation of such dimension is the business of phenomenology alone. According to this appraisal of the first-person perspective, the spell of the ‘phenomenological garden’ (which Dennett thinks to have broken) is richly real and fundamentally important. But here is the rub: if phenomenology is to have any relevance for the scientific study of mind and consciousness it must not stand aloof from the natural facts provided by the sciences. What is more, “it is important to remain vigilant against the assumptions of autonomous phenomenology, to prevent them from tacitly shaping our forays into phenomenology” (Noë 2007, 233).

At this juncture it is important to note that there is no call to drive a wedge between phenomenology and cognitive research or to claim that a fruitful collaboration is undesirable. It might well be true that “the use of phenomenology in the empirical cognitive sciences reinforces the importance of first-person experience and thereby undermines the reductionist tendencies that one often finds in scientific theory” (Gallagher 2010, 32). However, I object to this integrative approach that it effectuates a translation of phenomenological concepts like ‘Dasein’ into more cognitive constructs like ‘agency,’ whereby ‘being-in-the-world’ is turned into ‘practical activity.’ The autonomous character of phenomenological philosophy is in this case dismissed as a relic, and the deepest opprobrium is piled on its critique of naturalism and psychologism for stymieing scientific progress outright. In point of fact, phenomenology must be constrained in such a way that “if philosophy and natural science clash (in the sense that

philosophy demands the presence of some entity, state, or process that is judged to be inconsistent with natural science), then it is philosophy and not science that must give up” (Wheeler 2005, 5).

As it turns out, I also would be baffled if I found out that phenomenologists are smuggling occult entities competing with science. However, the critical question must be asked: Is this really what philosophy is about? It would be interesting to note—and I say this with outright irony—which entities and natural processes have been introduced by phenomenologists that are inconsistent with empirical science! We can be sure at least of this: Husserl did not offer a neuroscientific theory of phenomenality and Heidegger’s cognitive psychology is nowhere to be found. So it is rather striking that someone would suggest that one should beware of the theoretical objects being postulated by phenomenology when certainly neither Husserl nor Heidegger were in the business of populating their ‘theories’ with objects challenging those processes investigated by empirical science. Neither Husserl nor Heidegger were concerned with scientific investigations. If we are not aware of Heidegger’s theory about the neural correlates of consciousness or Husserl’s ideas on how to design a quantum computer, the reason for this is because they do not present us with any kind of theory regarding scientific phenomena. Phenomenology does not postulate entities whatsoever, neither natural nor even cultural, and it certainly does not concern itself with the law-like causality governing natural processes. Given that, as Heidegger claims, phenomenology does not characterize the *sachhaltige Was der Gegenstände*, what should be the reason for this rather awkward concern about the inappropriate meddling of philosophy in matters about which it has no competence whatsoever?

My contention is that the sole claim against the conception of phenomenology as an autonomous discipline is not only concerned with remarking the cognitive relevance of phenomenological research by stripping it of its most radical tendencies, but that this operation ends up obfuscating the very dimension uncovered by phenomenology (a dimension which has been strictly differentiated from that of the empirical sciences by phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger). The phenomenological method itself prevents one from confusing the scope of philosophy with that of the sciences. I submit that the project advocating the naturalization of phenomenology cannot simply be “a question of letting phenomenology engage in a fruitful exchange and collaboration with empirical science” (Zahavi 2010, 8), because this very exchange—if it is premised on divesting phenomenology of its core features—cannot be achieved without at the same time embracing the dismantling of philosophical reflection as a whole.

### **The Autonomous Dimension**

Noë raises the question: “Does anyone actually believe in pure phenomenology? Maybe not” (2007, 232). I find myself somewhat vexed by the fact that it seems so hard to recognize that phenomenologists of high stature such as Husserl and Heidegger did believe their philosophical practice to be autonomous. However, if one plays devil’s advocate, Noë’s scathing critique of pure phenomenology might seem reasonable, because the abandonment of the factual, objective sphere provided by the sciences invites the obvious retorts that phenomenology



succumbs to irrationalism. As a matter of fact, the phenomenological maxim ‘Zurück zu den Sachen selbst’ does not offer us better guarantees than the ones provided by objective knowledge and therefore any theoretical endeavor promising to reach some mythic intuitive origin threatens to turn philosophy into some obscure poetic theory, or worse, a theological one. If phenomenology refrains from adopting an empirically-minded conception of its practice, it might end up turning into a menace for rationality altogether.

The situation is further aggravated if we take into consideration that there is not a fixed and established phenomenological method universally shared by all phenomenology practitioners (Vetter 2004). The most famous example of this methodological insecurity is reflected in the well-publicized *Auseinandersetzung* between Husserl and Heidegger. As is widely known, Heidegger committed parricide at the behest of his hermeneutic transformation of phenomenology over against Husserl’s idealistic approach. Isn’t it then the case that phenomenology reinvents the wheel at every turn? Are we to face a brand new method every time a phenomenological work is released? If even phenomenologists cannot agree on methodological grounds, why should we take in earnest their claims that phenomenology gives us access to the ‘things themselves’?

The first troubling feature that comes to the fore is the problem of access. If phenomenology claims that by means of its method we can gain access to a pre-theoretical dimension glossed over altogether by the sciences, isn’t this again the introspectionist strategy already obliterated by Dennett and Metzinger? Moreover, isn’t this already a mythic dimension about which nothing can be said? At least from a Husserlian standpoint, the line of criticism as to the problematic character of phenomenological reflection is self-refuting. The point is, of course, not to take reflection as alien to lived experience (*Erlebnis*), because it is itself part of the stream of experience and it should be apprehended as “consciousness’s own method leading to the knowledge of consciousness in general” (Hua III, 147). It is always possible to cast a glance into intuitive perception and lived experience (Hua III, 104), to dip into it by means of what Husserl calls a *reflektive Blickwendung* (Hua III, 84). Lived experience as such is not devoid of its own understanding and ways of expression. Both Heidegger and Husserl would be in agreement that facticity or meaningful coping in the *Lebenswelt* is not, however vague, bereft of a pre-hermeneutic understanding.

The context of this Husserlian defense of reflection is the criticism that phenomenology is not feasible altogether and cannot have access to the dimension it claims to have gained. In § 79 of *Ideen I*, Husserl discusses the objections against phenomenology advanced by the experimental psychologist H. J. Watt (a disciple of Külpe and member of the Würzburg School). Husserl quotes Watt at length:

It is scarcely possible even to form opinions concerning the way in which one comes to a knowledge of immediate experience. For it is neither knowledge nor the object of knowledge, but something different. One cannot see how a record concerning the experience of experience, even if it has been taken, could be put on paper... But this is always the final question of the fundamental problem of self-observation... It is now customary to refer to this absolute description as phenomenology. (Hua III, 152)

According to this line of criticism, phenomenology proceeds by acts of reflection and, by doing so, it is oblivious to the fact that the dimension which is reflected on, inasmuch as modified in reflection, cannot count neither as pure access to the things themselves nor as immediate experience.<sup>2</sup> What is here discussed is the question regarding the phenomenological access to lived experience, or to say it with Heidegger: “how experiencing as such is to be had” (GA 59, 92). How does one refer to intuitive experience without at the same time distorting it and modifying it by means of this very reflection superimposed on it from without? By describing it, doesn’t immediate experience ultimately appear as something different, as something which was not there in the first place, as something thus transformed by phenomenological description (however accurate)? Given that phenomenology is descriptive it must use language, and grasping in words is generalizing. This criticism, of course, is based on the idea that all language is objectifying in itself (Heidegger GA 56/57, 111). In addition, what we experience in immediate perception is somewhat private and as such ineffable. Again, what I see might turn out to be different from what everyone else sees. We might be stuck in an ominous cul-de-sac of shaky hunches and subjective impressions.

On Husserl’s account, however, it is absurd to affirm that lived experience is epistemologically guaranteed only in so far as the perceptions deriving thereof are immanently given to us, pure and untouched by reflection, or that we can only be sure of them in the actual flow of the present moment, as it would be nonsensical to doubt “whether in the end experiences which pass into the field of vision are not precisely for this reason transformed into something *toto caelo* different from what they were” (Hua III, 151). On the one hand, our immanent dealings in the *Lebenswelt* are not just irrational automatisms in need of conceptual ordering. No one needs conceptual clarity for coping with the world. On the other, it is self-refuting to doubt the significance of reflection for knowledge altogether, because “as he [Watt in this case] asserts his doubt, he reflects, and to set this assertion forth as valid presupposes that reflection *has* really and without a doubt... the very cognitive value upon which doubt has been cast, that it does *not* alter the objective relation, that the unreflective experience does *not* forfeit its essence through the transition into reflection” (Hua III, 155). In sum,

a *knowledge* of unreflective experiences including unreflective reflections is presupposed throughout, whilst at the same time the possibility of such knowledge is put into question. That happens in so far as doubt arises as to the possibility of making any statement whatsoever concerning the content of unreflective experience and the work of reflection upon it: how far does reflection alter the original experience, and does it not falsify it, so to speak, by converting it into something totally different from what it was? (Hua III, 155-156)

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<sup>2</sup> According to Husserl, “die phänomenologische Methode bewegt sich durchaus in Akten der Reflexion” (Hua III, 144). Moreover, “das Studium des Erlebnisstromes vollzieht sich seinerseits in mancherlei eigentümlich gebauten reflektiven Akten, die selbst wieder in den Erlebnisstrom gehören und in entsprechenden Reflexionen höherer Stufe zu Objekten von phänomenologischen Analysen gemacht werden können und auch gemacht werden müssen” (Hua III, 147).

The gap between no reflection at all and complete reflection is artificial, for immanent experience is not devoid of its own expression and understanding. Reflection and unreflective experience are not separated by an abysmal gap, precisely because unreflective experience is not unreflective at all, in the sense of being bereft of orientation and self-expression.

Crucially, a similar line of criticism against phenomenological philosophy was espoused by Natorp in his *Allgemeine Psychologie nach Kristischer Methode* (1912), according to which it is not possible to grasp the content of immediate experience (*unmittelbares Erlebnis*) as it is in itself, in its pure *Strom des Werdens* (2013, 102-103). When this is attempted, the result is always objectifying, just as the anatomist fixates, isolates, and strips his specimen of life when turning it into an object (Natorp 2013, 103). One terminates thus the life of the subjective [*man schlägt die Subjektivität tot*], while at the same time deceitfully pretending to pinpoint it (*idem*). And this because reflection implies a sort of de-living stance on *Erlebnis*. Reflection involving thus a theoretical attitude, that of looking where one does not normally do so (in the stream of becoming), turns out to be ineffective to grasp lived experience since it cannot be but objectifying. One surmises that in phenomenological reflection access is gained to the very immediate subjective experience, but what truly happens with reflection is that the access leads only to that which is reflected upon. So, *pace* the phenomenologists, we never reach immediate experience but only a theoretical glance at it. Natorp's position is so decisively theoretical that he even conceives of ordinary representations and prescientific knowledge as already objectifying, as the next passage of his *Allgemeine Psychologie* clearly shows: "Die gesamte auch nichtwissenschaftliche Vorstellung der Dinge ist in der Tat das Ergebnis einer oft schon weitgehenden Objektivierung" (2013, 196).

However, Heidegger is not convinced of the soundness of Natorp's critique. If immediate subjective experience is inaccessible, since the mere inspection of it distorts it, how does Natorp actually know that? If reflection distorts the *Erlebnisse*, doesn't this imply that there is actually a dimension of pre-giveness that is distorted precisely by means of theoretical reflection? Given that Natorp denies that this dimension can be known, his claim that reflection is distorting strikes one as rather odd, for in order to claim that something is distorted, one would necessarily have to know the structure of that which is thus transformed. Again, if reflection distorts this dimension, then there is something which is thus distorted. Natorp's argument seems to be muddled and confusing at the very least.

According to Heidegger, phenomenology is feasible as an "originary science of life" (GA 58, 233), which begins with the recognition that life is not an object, but neither a subject, for *Subjektivierung* is also a theoretical postulate that deforms life (GA 58, 145). So Heidegger's point of departure is not psychology but rather factic-life experience itself. Of course, theoretical reflection is not originary but only because there is a self-acquaintance that belongs to experiencing as such: "es gilt, diesen im Erfahren selbst liegenden *Charakter des Vertrautseins mit 'mir'* zu sehen" (GA 58, 157). On Heidegger's view, this is why, on the one hand, *es weltet* (GA 56/57, 73). On the other hand, "das Bedeutsame ist das primäre" (GA 56/57, 73). Our absorbed experiencing of pre-theoretical life is as such meaningful from the outset and not some chaotic *Erlebnis* of ineffable or mystical character.

So let us return at this point to the main reason motivating my defense of phenomenological philosophy over against the demands that it relinquish its autonomous claims.

Phenomenology is safeguarded precisely when it abandons the traditional distinctions that one encounters in the theoretical attitude. Indeed, according to Heidegger, “the irrational is an idle name that was invented in order to explain that with which one does not know what to do” (GA 56/57, 117). Dasein finds itself already in a world which is meaningful (GA 20, 352) and that explains why we always find ourselves affected by this or that mood and why we know what is going on in our daily lives. For phenomenology then the point is not to begin with a distorting reflection of the irrational but rather to articulate factic-life experience from the motivations that spring from life itself. On the contrary, the Natorpian conception of how we find ourselves is entirely theoretical, since our very I is supposedly a mere abstract reflective construct that stands detached from its objectified world-correlate.

What is crucial at this juncture is to grasp that facticity is no *factum brutum*, it is nothing mute, ungraspable or mystical. On Heidegger’s terms, “*facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something present-at-hand, but a characteristic of Dasein’s Being—one which has been taken up into existence, even if proximally it has been thrust aside.* The ‘that-it-is’ of facticity never becomes something that we can come across by beholding it” (SZ, 174). It is the opposition between subject and object (between the internal and the external, the first-person and the third-person) which is here at play when rendering the dimension uncovered by phenomenology unreachable. Precisely, Husserl associated such *Scheidung*, between inner and outer spheres, with a naïve commonsensical metaphysics left behind with the concept of intentionality (Hua XIX/2, 673). But factic life itself is primarily *bedeutsam* or meaningful, it has its own ‘vision’ (*Umsicht*) and its own forms of dealing (*Umgang*) with the environment-world (*Umwelt*). That said, the very difference between objective theory and subjective practice is thus annulled:

‘Practical’ behavior is not ‘atheoretical’ in the sense of ‘sightlessness’. The way it differs from theoretical behavior does not lie simply in the fact that in theoretical behavior one observes, while in practical behavior one *acts*, and that action must employ theoretical cognition if it is not to remain blind; for the fact that observation is a kind of concern is just as primordial as the fact that the action has *its own* kind of sight. (Heidegger SZ, 69)

At any rate, this “*acquisition of a new region of being never before delimited in its peculiarity*” (Husserl Hua III, 58) discovered by phenomenology is certainly not present-at-hand and therefore it is also not beholden to objective characterization. But only if we deferred to the *Primat des Theoretischen* (Heidegger GA 56/57, 87), as Natorp and all those claiming that phenomenology must relinquish its ‘purity’, will we be unable to grasp the fundamental discovery of phenomenology. If phenomenology concerns itself with a pre-theoretical dimension which is always presupposed in every propositional and theoretical stance, the critical enterprise of denying the right of phenomenological philosophy to exist appears as the consequence of a category mistake: an error “in which things of one kind are presented as if they belonged to another” (Blackburn 2016, 58). In this case, ‘things’ whose character is essentially nonobjective being presented as if they belonged to the objective realm of facts.

While the idea that the objective stance is the most fundamental retains its appeal, phenomenology has shown that nobody ever encountered an object, that is, no one in the history

of humanity came across a mere entity that merely is-there. Ontologically understood, all cognition is “a *founded* mode of Being-in-the-world” (Heidegger SZ, 71). So, in point of fact, no scientific cognition could have been gained without the factic structures underpinning our existence. In the same vein, scientific empirical theories cannot encapsulate the meaning of this being-in-the-world, because “the world we find ourselves in, which is made intelligible by our understanding of Being, is a world in which we encounter the present-at-hand. It is not itself encountered as present-at-hand. The sense of belonging to a world cannot be reduced to an encounter with some object” (Ratcliffe 2012, 144). Moreover, the very idea of ‘nature’ is beholden to its having been previously uncovered in its *Zuhandenheit* in Dasein’s factic existence. Therefore, the investigation of Dasein’s existential structures is a condition of possibility for the very understanding of the origin of objective knowledge. Our *Welterkennen* is never primarily some knowledge concerning the objective features of entities. On the contrary, this explicit knowledge stems from our pre-theoretical understanding already at work.

In conclusion, at least from the phenomenological point of view, there is a nonreducible and noncognitive core with which phenomenology concerns itself. The existence of a nonreductive core which is safeguarded by phenomenology does not only demonstrate that this dimension is irreducible to whatever natural processes but, more importantly, that philosophical questioning is nonisomorphic with the theoretical attitude of the natural sciences. Of course, phenomenology is concerned with how things seem to us, but only because things present themselves to us and are grasp *as* such things. And the way they are given to us is not only a matter of how we grasp them but more crucially of how the world is in itself, of how the world itself is given to us. A such, phenomenology remains a crucial investigation of reality and not only of private, ineffable, subjective appearances. Precisely because reality is more than the capability of objectifying it inasmuch as it is given to us as meaningful due to the access to it provided by our being-in-the-world, it is nothing but a category mistake to conflate this dimension with a set of objects of natural reality (originating, from example, in our brain). On Nöe’s view, the problem of phenomenological philosophy is not due to its reflective or introspective character, nor is its problem to focus on subjective experience: “the trouble, rather, is that pure phenomenology conceives of its subject matter as autonomous” (2007, 232). On this suggestion, however, the natural sphere is somewhat absolutized to the point where the question about its genesis in pre-theoretical experience is no longer posted. It is not even recognized as a true philosophical question which is precisely premised on our adoption of “an antinatural habitus of seeing [*Anschauungs-*] and thinking [*Denkrichtung*]” (Hua XIX/1, 14), which does not focus on objects but rather on the acts that underlie them. Of course, this is Husserl’s demand that we suspend naïve metaphysical opinions (*epoché*) as the first step to reach the entrance gate (*Eingangstor*) to the genuine dimension of philosophical reflection (Hua VI, 260).

Against the backdrop of the forgetfulness of this dimension, which amounts to the definitive disparagement of philosophy, phenomenology stands strong against the deleterious effects ensuing therefrom. Far from being a nostalgic metaphysical endeavor clinging desperately to old-fashioned methods and concepts to safeguard institutionalized philosophy, phenomenological philosophy epitomizes the unique character of philosophical thinking, which will live on as long as human beings are confronted with the challenge of their finitude and the abismal limits of their knowledge.

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