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Forum on

The Phenomenological Mind. An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science, by Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, London-New York, Routledge, 2008.

La mente fenomenologica, trad. it. di P. Pedrini, Milano, Cortina, 2009.

Discussants

Michele Averchi - Vincenzo Costa - Steven Crowell

Roberta Lanfredini - Luigi Perissinotto

ABSTRACT. – *The Phenomenological Mind. An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, written by Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, is a precious occasion to discuss some fundamental philosophical topics, starting from the question about the fruitful relationship, and the mutual enlightenment, between phenomenology and cognitive sciences. So, both the authors and their commentators discuss the important notions of mind and body, consciousness and experience, added to those of imagination, memory, intentionality, self-experience, intersubjectivity, and empathy through a vivid debate that touches essential, and challenging, subjects of our days.

Luigi Perissinotto (Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia)

The Phenomenological Mind is an extremely interesting book full of important considerations and valuable analysis. In this brief intervention I will outline some general comments related to its overall approach.

1. Gallagher and Zahavi's goal is explicitly formulated: their book is a *philosophical* book on the mind but capable of systematically confronting itself with the sciences that are concerned with the mind. That is why the authors, as they immediately put forth, «will frequently appeal to the details of scientific evidence from studies in cognitive neuroscience and

brain imagining, developmental and cognitive psychology, and psychopathology» [p. 1]. The approach adopted is not meant to be «a *pure* philosophical approach – that is, [...] a philosophical approach that would ignore the other sciences» [p. 1], but still wants to remain a *philosophical* approach that does not surrender to the current prevailing naturalism that assigns exclusively to the neurosciences the study of the mind moving from the premise that «all human activity is dictated by the organization and laws of the brain» [p. 12, no. 1; this is a quote from an essay by Semir Zeki in which it is described what Gallagher and Zahavi in a polemic spirit call «neurologism»].

Clearly, one might ask whether this «*pure* philosophical approach» which our authors renounce remains, if not desirable, at least possible. What will be given up by those who would adopt it? What was lost by all those philosophers (including many phenomenologists), who have endorsed it so far? Actually, a different question seems to drive Gallagher and Zahavi's volume: what do sciences risk losing if they yield to any philosophical approach to the mind either out of lack of knowledge or because of pride fuelled by the very same naturalism-oriented philosophers? The question is not vague or allusive at all because here we refer not to an indistinct philosophical approach, but to a specific perspective, namely the European-originated phenomenological method that «includes the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and other more recent thinkers» [p. 1]. Thus, the assumption underlying the book is that neurosciences (and along with them the analytic philosophy of mind that has mainly accompanied their development) need phenomenology – primarily, though not exclusively [see p. 10] – as a method or set of methods. Still unresolved is whether and, if so, how phenomenology needs neurosciences.

Certainly, one might argue that the need for phenomenology emerged within the neurosciences themselves sets the phenomenological tradition free from the widespread suspect of anti-scientific attitude, a suspect fed by phenomenology's tendency toward a «non or even anti-naturalistic approach» [p. 4]. If Gallagher and Zahavi are right, science can not only live with but even thrive with phenomenological non-naturalistic and typical «first-person approach» [p. 7]. As an example, within neurosciences «the generation of images of neural processing using non-

invasive technology has made possible a variety of experiments that depend on reports about the experience of the experimental subjects. Both in order to design the experiments properly and in order to interpret their results, experimenters often want to know what the subject's experience is like» [p. 5]. But if this cohabitation can suit neurosciences, what can phenomenology learn from the «third-person approach» typical of those sciences? In the *Introduction* one reads that «phenomenology and science may be aiming for different kinds of accounts, but it seems clear that phenomenology can be relevant and useful for scientific work» [p. 10]. But is this appreciation also true the other way? May scientific work be relevant and useful for phenomenology?

2. Why and how phenomenology might be relevant and useful for scientific work is clearly explained in short by our authors in the *Introduction*, and more at length throughout the book. In short, the main idea is as follows: phenomenology describes and attempts to fully understand the experience that «the psychologists and neuroscientists are trying to explain when they appeal to neural, information processing, or dynamic models» [p. 9]. This is why phenomenological analysis can be a good (and maybe necessary) starting point for science: thanks to it «we know what we have to explain, and we may have good clues about how to design experiments» [p. 10]. In this sense, phenomenology «provides a more adequate model [for example] of perception for the scientist to work with than if the scientist simply starts with a commonsense approach» or «with a pre-established theory of perception» [p. 9]. The belief that drives those considerations is that whoever starts with a theory (i.e., according to the highly significant paraphrase by the authors, whoever let oneself be guided by one's own «theoretical prejudices» or by one's own «theoretical preconceptions») by that theory will get dogmatically entrapped. In contrast to this dogmatic attitude, phenomenology, which always seeks to remain critical, «asks us not to let preconceived theories form our experience, but to let our experience inform and guide our theories» [p. 10]. Now, in a sense, there is nothing dogmatic or accidental to begin with a theory (a scientific one). As the authors themselves recognize at last, it is so that «science often makes progress» [p. 10]. Who starts with a (scientific) theory does not (or does not necessarily) do so against or in opposition to the experience (or to the ex-

periments or to experimentation in general). It is not against theory so conceived that phenomenology engages in controversy, but rather against the idea that we should commit to some general and comprehensive theory (either to dualism or materialism or identity theory or functionalism or eliminativism, and further on) «[b]efore we even know for sure what we are talking about» [p. 6]. In this sense, the explicit reference is to the Husserlian tradition, for which one should not begin with theory, but with experience [see p. 6.]. It remains to be asked whether experience remains only at the beginning of phenomenology and not at its end. To put it differently: should the phenomenologist, at the end of his pathway, resume and attempt to respond to that kind of theoretical questions [i.e., see p. 6: «Does the brain cause consciousness?»] that had been suspended exactly because the starting point was experience? The attitude by the authors of *The Phenomenological Mind* is not entirely explicit. It is certainly true that they do not deny the theoretical claims and intentions of phenomenology: «It would be an oversimplification if we considered phenomenology as simply a set of methods for the pure description of experience. Using such methods, however, phenomenologists are led to insights about experience, and they are also interested in developing these insights into theories of perception, intentionality, phenomenality, etc». [p. 10]; but these are theories, so to speak, *internal* to the phenomenological horizon, and not theories in the same sense the so called Cartesian materialism is a theory on the relationship between mind, brain and body. Once again it is not entirely clear what kind of attitude the phenomenologist should assume against that kind of theories to which belong the aforementioned materialism or dualism. Should the phenomenologist as such: 1. keep a suspension attitude? 2. assess which of these theories best matches the phenomenological descriptions of experience? 3. move from phenomenology to metaphysics?

3. With reference to the foregoing considerations I would further note two points that seem particularly crucial in the phenomenological framework set out by Gallagher and Zahavi.

a. As highlighted above, in tune with Husserl our two authors argue that phenomenologists as such neither deny nor state, for example, that the brain causes consciousness. «They suspend these kinds of questions and all judgments about them. They start with experience» [p. 6]. In so doing,

they still do attribute, at least implicitly, *sense* to the questions that they suspend. However, one would immediately ask, are those questions really meaningful? What does to «cause» mean for those who ask themselves whether the brain causes consciousness? And what consequences would those persons draw or would delude themselves to draw from the response, whether positive or negative? Is there any sense of «causing» (a methodologically legitimate sense) that would allow one to resist the reduction of consciousness to the brain or, as many would like today, to foster it? Is not the very same idea of reduction in need of a conceptual clarification? It must be pointed out that all these questions cannot be resolved, as our authors recognize it after all [see p. 9], not even by the most detailed phenomenological description of consciousness. Is a phenomenological response to reductionism possible? Should there be one at all? Could we be satisfied with observing that adopting «a reductionist strategy» [p. 9] is not mandatory?

b. At the onset I wondered if early phenomenology has something to learn from the neurosciences. On this particular point the authors, certainly more concerned with recognising the contribution made by phenomenology to the neurosciences, are elusive. Of course, the problem does not only concern the specific relationship of phenomenology with the neurosciences, but more generally involves the question of the relationship (a relationship of contiguity, overlapping, difference in principle, strangeness, competition, and further on) between philosophy and science. There is a place in the book where the problem is explicitly formulated, although it does not find an equally explicit answer. In the chapter 8 on *Action and Agency* [pp. 154-170] the authors note that «[p]henomenologically (experientially) [...] intentions in almost all cases come already fully clothed in agency. [...] I don't experience actions without agents; I experience 'X's action' where X is either you or me». The same does not seem to apply to the brain which «in fact [...] can process information about intentions without assigning agency to the intentions» [p. 168]. Now, Gallagher and Zahavi believe that the difference that does or does not hold good «between the phenomenological level and the neuronal level» is a problem only for those arguing that the two levels should be isomorphic. But our authors remark that «there is no isomorphism necessary between the phenomenological level and the

neuronal level. If the neuronal processes can be defined as involving a step-wise process, this does not mean that a step-wise process needs to show up in phenomenology» [pp. 168-169]. Perhaps Gallagher and Zahavi are right on this particular aspect. But, then, I wonder whether the project underlying the whole book remains unchanged if the authors are right on this point. To put it differently: can it ever be that the neuronal level belies the phenomenological one?

Shaun Gallagher (University of Central Florida) and Dan Zahavi (University of Copenhagen)

We first want to express our thanks to the commentators for their close and critical readings of *The Phenomenological Mind*. We would like to treat their comments and challenging questions as a productive opportunity to clarify our views and to make our positions more precise.

In his comments, *Luigi Perissinotto* raises a question of paramount importance. Phenomenologists might heartily embrace the view that phenomenology can be of value to cognitive science, neuroscience, and biology and, more generally, to any empirical investigation of the mind, but to what extent does phenomenology need neuroscience? To what extent is scientific work more generally speaking relevant to and useful for phenomenology? In short, is it really correct to speak of mutual enlightenment – to pick this slogan – or is the truth of the matter, that the influence is more unidirectional?

As we tried to make clear in the book, phenomenology is not only engaged in fundamental transcendental philosophical clarifications, it also studies concrete phenomena that are open to empirical investigation, and insofar as phenomenology concerns itself with such phenomena our claim would be that it should be informed by the best available scientific knowledge.

To be more specific, the phenomenological credo ‘to the things themselves’ calls for us to let our experience guide our theories. We should pay attention to the way in which we experience reality. Empirical scientists might not pay much attention to the formal structure of phenomenality, but as empirical researchers they do in fact pay quite a lot of

attention to concrete phenomena, and might consequently be less apt to underestimate the richness, complexity and variety of phenomena than the average philosopher. To put it differently, even if the ultimate aim of phenomenology is to provide a transcendental philosophical clarification, there is more to phenomenology than this ultimate goal. Phenomenology also offers detailed analyses of various aspects of consciousness, including perception, imagination, embodiment, memory, self-experience, temporality, etc. In offering such analyses, phenomenology addresses issues that are crucial for an understanding of the true complexity of consciousness and might even offer a conceptual framework for understanding the mind that is of considerably more value than some of the models currently in vogue in cognitive science. But for the very same reason, it should also be clear that phenomenology deals with topics that it shares with other disciplines, and it would be wrong to insist that it should simply ignore empirical findings pertaining to these very topics. Does this entail that a phenomenological account of perception or action should necessarily be informed and constrained by, say, investigations of the neuronal mechanisms and processes involved in action and perception? In some cases, discoveries of the latter kind could motivate us to take another look at the phenomenology, in order to ascertain whether we got it right the first time, but generally speaking a phenomenological account of perception and action is an attempt to do justice to the first-person perspective, it seeks to understand the experience in terms of the meaning it has for the subject, and doesn't address the subpersonal mechanisms that might enable us to experience the way we do. However, we shouldn't overlook the fact that disciplines such as psychopathology, neuropathology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, anthropology etc. can provide *person-level descriptions* that might be of phenomenological relevance. The examples are legion, but if one were to mention a few, one could single out 1) neuropsychological descriptions of various disorders of body-awareness, 2) psychopathological descriptions of schizophrenic disturbances of self-experience and intentionality, 3) developmental descriptions of social interactions in early childhood.

To be more precise consider Jonathan Cole's careful analysis of Ian Waterman, who at the age of nineteen, due to illness, lost all sense of touch and proprioception from the neck down; compare Cole's analysis

of how dramatic and disabling this impairment was, with the classical phenomenological investigation of the lived body. Consider next the work by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists like Blankenburg, Parnas and Sass, who provide careful analyses of the disturbed self- and world-experience we find in schizophrenic patients; compare this to the phenomenological discussion of natural evidence and non-objectifying pre-reflective self-acquaintance. Consider, finally, the work by developmental psychologists like Trevarthen, Stern, Rochat, Reddy and Hobson, let us compare their careful analyses of primitive but fundamental forms of social understanding found in infants and young children to the work on empathy, pairing and intercorporeity we find in Scheler, Stein, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

So what we are proposing is in fact not merely that phenomenological analyses and distinctions might be useful for cognitive science. The point isn't merely that phenomenology might prove indispensable if we wish to obtain a precise description of the explanandum – a *sine qua non* for any successful attempt to identify and localize the relevant neurobiological correlate. It isn't merely a question of employing phenomenological insights in the empirical investigation of the mind. Rather, the idea is that the influence goes both ways, i.e., it would also be a question of letting phenomenology profit from – and be challenged by – empirical findings. This is why it is entirely appropriate to speak of *mutual enlightenment* [Gallagher 1997].

But it is one thing to talk about person-level descriptions, what about the insights from neurobiology and dynamical systems theory regarding various sub-personal mechanisms. Can they really help us to improve and refine the classical phenomenological analyses, as it has occasionally been suggested [Varela 1997 and Thompson 2007, p. 340]? Here is a proposal. Let us assume that our initial phenomenological description presents us with what appears to be a simple and unified phenomenon. When studying the neural correlates of this phenomenon, we discover that two quite distinct mechanisms are involved; mechanisms that are normally correlated with distinctive experiential phenomena, say, perception and memory. This discovery might motivate us to return to our initial phenomenological description in order to see whether the phenomenon in question is indeed as simple as we thought. Perhaps a

more careful analysis will reveal that it harbors a concealed complexity (obviously, one might also consider the reverse case, where the phenomenological analysis presents us with what appears to be two distinct phenomena and where subsequent neuroscientific findings suggest a striking overlap, unity, or even identity). However, it is very important to emphasize that the discovery of a significant complexity on the sub-personal level – to stick to this simple example – cannot by itself force us to refine or revise our phenomenological description. It can only serve as motivation for further inquiry. There is no straightforward isomorphism between the sub-personal and personal level, and ultimately the only way to justify a claim concerning a complexity on the phenomenological level is by cashing it out in experiential terms.

Vincenzo Costa (*Università degli Studi del Molise*)

The Phenomenological Mind is a very interesting book. All the most important issues of the philosophy of mind have been investigated with a very close phenomenological attention. I will focus on a single chapter of the book: the chapter 9, *How we Know Others*, and just try to raise some questions.

First of all I agree with the authors of the book when they refuse a theory of simulation as a theory that could explain how we understand other people. I think that such a theory must involve the idea that to understand other persons means to feel what they are feeling, i.e. that we have the same mental states as the others. Husserl criticised the idea that empathy means to have the same mental states of the other, «for when I feel empathy with your anger, I am myself not angry, not at all. Just as I am not angry when I imagine anger or merely recall it» [Hua XIII,188].

Yet, I think we have to make clear how we can understand what happens in the other minds. If I understand correctly your position, you have argued that «in seeing the action and expressive movements of other persons, one already sees their meaning» [p. 185]. But I did not understand *how this is possible*. As a matter of fact the problem is just to make clear why we experience a mere facial or bodily movement as an expression. This is my first question.