

Reflections on the role of phenomenology as an instrument of critique

Sven SELLMER*

ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to show that the phenomenological method is a crucial methodological element of all research that is based on the interpretation of utterances or texts based on experiences, such as religious studies. Following the neophenomenological school, the notion of “phenomenon” is understood in a radically relative way: “A phenomenon for a person at a given point of time is a state of affairs for which this person cannot — in spite of trying to vary the presuppositions she makes as much as possible — withdraw the belief that it is a fact” (Schmitz, 2003: 1). Starting from this notion, phenomenology may fruitfully criticise two common strategies: reduction and construction. The first one tries to reduce experiences to allegedly more fundamental processes like electrical impulses in neural nets. Here the phenomenologist must object that in doing so without preceding phenomenological analysis the reductionist will lose large parts of potentially important information. As for the second strategy, constructions — in the sense of presuppositions, ready-made concepts, *etc.* — are present in all texts that are meant to express an experience. In order to describe the underlying experience more adequately, phenomenological researchers have to remove as many constructions as possible. In this way they not only produce a description that is “closer” to the experience (though they can never hope to fully grasp it), but they also pave the way for comparison and dialogue across religions and cultures.

KEYWORDS

methodology; reductionism; deconstruction; experience; phenomenological method; Hermann Schmitz

* Assistant Professor at the Oriental Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. E-mail: sven@amu.edu.pl.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper¹ has a quite modest aim: It does not attempt to assign any new role to phenomenology, but rather to clarify its relation to popular methods in science and philosophy. The arguments used are for the most part not new, but in a time where scientific research is more and more based on big data analysis as opposed to small-scale studies it may be appropriate to emphasise that phenomenology still has a specific and crucial role to play.

As the very notion of “phenomenology” may give rise to certain misunderstandings let me try to clarify one or two points at the very beginning. First of all, it should be noted that what is at stake here is not phenomenology as such, but its role in the methodological “ecosystem”, especially its critical function. Secondly, and most importantly, I would like to underscore that I use the term “phenomenology” as designation of an open philosophical approach or general method to be described in more detail later. In other words, I do not regard phenomenology as a fixed and closed doctrine or system; in particular, I do not use the term as a quasi-synonym for Husserlian philosophy. To be sure, Husserl was one of the pioneers of a phenomenological method and used in an admirable way. Nevertheless, his way of doing things is by no means the only one, so it should not be equated with phenomenology in general.²

After these introductory and cautionary remarks it is time to sketch how I use the term “phenomenological method” on these pages. I do not claim that all colleagues seeing themselves as phenomenologists will agree with all parts of the following sketch, but at least I will try to stick to Husserl’s famous motto: “Zu den Sachen selbst!”. These words imply that in the general philosophical discourse we are not talking about “the real things”, which, therefore, should necessarily be identified in the first place. This program may look like a truism, because every science should define the “things” it deals with, but phenomenology has special requirements towards its objects: they should be real, fundamental and solid, or at least more real, fundamental and solid than the objects of non-phenomenological philosophers. Different phenomenological schools define the notion of phenomenon in different ways. The definition I will use in this paper is the one by Hermann Schmitz,³ the founder of the so-called ne-

¹ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their very valuable and perceptive critical comments.

² A critical assessment of both Husserl and Heidegger from a radical phenomenological standpoint can be found in Schmitz, 1999.

³ Schmitz (born 1928) is a very prolific philosopher; a bibliography of his writings, including references to some English and Polish translations, can be found under: gnp-online.de/Bibliographie.18.0.html. He is perhaps best known for his emphasis on the fundamental importance of the felt body (*Leib*), though it would be wrong to reduce him to this aspect of his philosophy. His theories of subjectivity, manifoldness, and time — to name but a few central topics — are, in my estimation, of at least the same philosophical interest.

phenomenological school, because (in my opinion) it is particularly powerful as an instrument of critique:

A p h e n o m e n o n for a person at a given point of time is a state of affairs for which this person cannot — in spite of trying to vary the presuppositions she makes as much as possible — withdraw the belief that it is a fact (Schmitz, 2003: 1).⁴

It must be underscored at the outset that this notion is relative in a double sense: in respect to the person perceiving the phenomenon and in respect to time. In other words, what is a phenomenon for person *S* at time t_1 must not be a phenomenon for person *T* at the same moment, or for the same person *S* at another point of time t_2 . It follows from this definition that the position of the first person is in a certain sense privileged, but this fact does in no way imply that phenomenology should be restricted to introspection. Rather, the phenomenologist should take into account as many sources and perspectives as possible, because in this way she increases her potential for the variation of presuppositions. It is a second important implication of this double-relative notion of phenomenon that all results achieved by this method must necessarily be preliminary and should be subjected to constant investigation. So there is no hope for a final truth here, and aspirations for a Husserlian *Wesensschau* and the like are out of the question. As far as the kinds of possible phenomena are concerned, the definition is completely general and makes no distinction between a simple affection of the felt body, like a short feeling of pain, and a rich emotional situation that is characterised not only by a certain state of the felt body, but also by a complex interplay of, say, desires, fears, the physical presence of a second person etc. On this very fundamental methodological level there is no fundamental difference between different types of phenomena, though appropriate methods of analysis must of course be adapted to each single case and can vary widely.

PHENOMENOLOGY WITH A CRITICAL AIM

From a methodological point of view, phenomenology is most directly opposed to two intellectual strategies that shall be labelled reduction and construction. I will take them up in turn in order to show the specific ways in which the phenomenological method runs counter to their approach.

⁴ Translation by S.S.; in German: “Ein Phänomen für jemand zu einer Zeit ist ein Sachverhalt, dem der Betreffende dann trotz tunlichster Variation seiner Annahmen nicht im Ernst den Glauben entziehen kann, dass es sich um eine Tatsache handelt.”

Phenomenology and reduction

Passing by all the finer points, reductionist approaches may be quite neatly circumscribed as such that tend to use formulations like “A is nothing but B”, or “A is ultimately B”. Reductionists can come from very different quarters, as the following examples show:

- (1) “The feeling of a divine presence is nothing but a particular activity of the frontal lobe”.
- (2) “Ultimately, religion is merely a traditional instrument to reduce complexity”.

It should be quite evident in which respect the reductionist approach is, so to speak, counterphenomenological. While the phenomenologist — once he has identified a phenomenon, *e.g.*, an experience of divine presence — is interested in its content, the reductionist tries to eliminate the phenomenon together with its context by connecting it with some other, “more fundamental”, fact.

In order to understand the mutual relationship of these approaches and to assess their respective value, it is useful to distinguish between ontological and practical reductionism. The former aims at undermining the ontological status of, say, an experience of divine presence to a mere epiphenomenon, illusion or the like; the latter does not make ontological claims, but uses the reductionist approach to achieve a practical aim. As it would lead too far to try to raise questions of fundamental ontology here, and also because from a methodological point of view ontological reductionism seems less relevant, I will restrict myself to discussing the practical variation, but the critique adduced in the following also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the ontological branch.

To illustrate practical reductionism let us consider a fictitious example: A scholar studies the religion of an ethnic group solely in a statistical way — *i.e.*, basing his research on simple questionnaires, without talking to the believers — because he wants to make predictions about its future in the context of a potential religious war. Research of this kind is certainly legitimate, and no direct problem with phenomenology arises. Nevertheless, in real-world circumstances with limited research funds, colleagues with a practical agenda sometimes discard phenomenological and other non-goal-oriented approaches as a futile waste of money and resources. Only by reducing complex subjective phenomena to less complex and objectively describable factors, it is argued, one may gain practically significant results. How can a phenomenologist answer to such an allegation? I see two ways, but neither of them is completely satisfactory.

Firstly, it is easy to show that even the most radical reductionist needs something to reduce. Even if the reduction is done in a very primitive way, *e.g.* when the belief of person is reduced to the answer “YES” in a questionnaire asking “Do you believe in God?”, the statistician must presuppose a not yet reduced phenomenon of belief. Perhaps here one might argue that such phenomena form

part of everyday knowledge and experience, hence do not require any sophisticated analysis and can be reduced right away. In many other cases, however, it is rather obvious that a detailed phenomenological analysis is indispensable to provide much valuable material for reductionist researchers. For instance, a neurophysiologist will only be able to look fruitfully for correlations between experiences and neuronal patterns if his “roadmap” is a good phenomenological description of those experiences. So the phenomenologist may prove to be useful, even necessary, but it is the usefulness of a subordinate figure.

The second strategy of self-defence would avoid this outcome: It emphasizes the intrinsic value of a phenomenological analysis and the impoverished picture of the world that emerges from reductionist approaches. One might also say that for a reductionist it may be possible to explain certain aspects of a phenomenon, let’s say a religious experience — *e.g.*, under which circumstances it arises, which neuronal patterns appear along with it, etc. — but in such way it will be impossible to understand this experience from inside, as it were.⁵ This argument may be convincing for sympathetic persons, but a radical reductionist who takes religion to be nothing but mumbo-jumbo might argue that for him it is enough to find the brain areas responsible for religious experiences, he does not need to know exactly how it is like to be a religious person.⁶

To sum up: phenomenology will not be able to demonstrate its intrinsic value to a practically minded person, but it may:

- (1) firstly, show its indispensability for reductionist approaches — though this only gives it the humble position of a deliverer of useful material;
- (2) secondly, remind us constantly of the fact that the world is much richer than reductionist analyses tend to make us think.

So it seems, after all, as if the phenomenological and the reductionist approach may quite happily, and even fruitfully, coexist, as long as both sides show the required respect and understanding. With the other counterpart, construction, it is a different story.

Phenomenology and construction

One may safely say that the analysis and description of human experiences is one of the main tasks of phenomenology. This means that, if the phenomenological researcher does not confine herself to introspection, she inevitably has to deal

⁵ Such arguments go back to Dilthey’s distinction between *erklären* and *verstehen*.

⁶ This formulation alludes to Thomas Nagel’s well-known paper *What is it like to be a bat?*, which however has a slightly different topic. Generally speaking, one can say that Nagel belongs to the analytically oriented philosophers with the greatest openness for a phenomenological perspective.

with oral, written, or other kinds of texts of other persons. And it should be quite clear that no text can be accepted right away as a phenomenologically adequate description of the underlying experience (to use a somehow simplifying formulation, on which see the remarks below). Rather, even a seemingly simple utterance like:

I can feel the presence of God right now.

contains a great many implicit presuppositions, theories, structures etc. that I refer to with the general term “constructions” here. We therefore have to question and analyse as many of these constructing elements as possible — beginning with such loaded and difficult concepts as “presence” and “God” — and remove those that are not in accord with the structure of the experience the text is meant to describe.⁷ In this sense, phenomenology is a kind of deconstruction.

Such a removing of superstructures can prove extremely fruitful, one important result being that it makes possible intercultural comparisons and inter-religious dialogue by pointing to common experiences, rather than dwelling on linguistic and doctrinal differences. At the same time, it is a massive and difficult task that is fraught with all kinds of practical and methodological problems, which cannot be tackled in the frame of this modest piece. In any case, in accordance with the notion of phenomenon I presented at the beginning of this paper, there should be no hope to ever reach something like an “ultimate” or “pure” experience. An experience, conceived as the basis of a complex phenomenon, remains a kind of “regulative idea”⁸ that has the power to guide our research, but can never be fully captured by any kind of description or analysis.⁹

So it may seem that the relationship between phenomenology and construction is an antagonistic one; but perhaps it would be better to call it dialectical. If we understand phenomenology as a continuous work of deconstruction, it is obvious that it needs constructions to thrive upon, so to speak. On the other hand, in order not to be completely empty, theoretical constructions need some sort of experiential basis. To be sure, the experience itself is not provided by phenomenology, but a person with a knowledge of good phenomenological descriptions concerning his field of experience may very well develop a higher sensitivity for certain aspects, or may even discover certain things for the first time, just as a good analysis of a piece of music allows us to discern features we did not notice before though we have listened to the piece a hundred times. In this sense it can

⁷ Many examples of this approach can be found in Schmitz, 1977.

⁸ I am using Kant’s term that he introduced in the Appendix to the *Transcendental dialectic* in a slightly free way here (cf. Kant, 1983: B 670–697 / A 642–669).

⁹ The whole complex of problems connected with the fact that a description uses language whereas an experience is proto-linguistic can only be mentioned here.

be said that phenomenological research paves the way for a richer experience and, consequently, for more interesting and richer constructions.

Moreover, it should be noted that phenomenological research not only fights for strengthening the link between our experiences and our talking about these experiences, but keeps alive the knowledge about the fundamental role of our experience in respect to all kinds of theories and constructions.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope it has become plausible that the critical potential of the phenomenological approach gives it a crucial role in the methodological ecosystem. The following schema is meant to illustrate the above argumentation, and the explanatory remarks accompanying it may, at the same time, serve as a kind of summary.

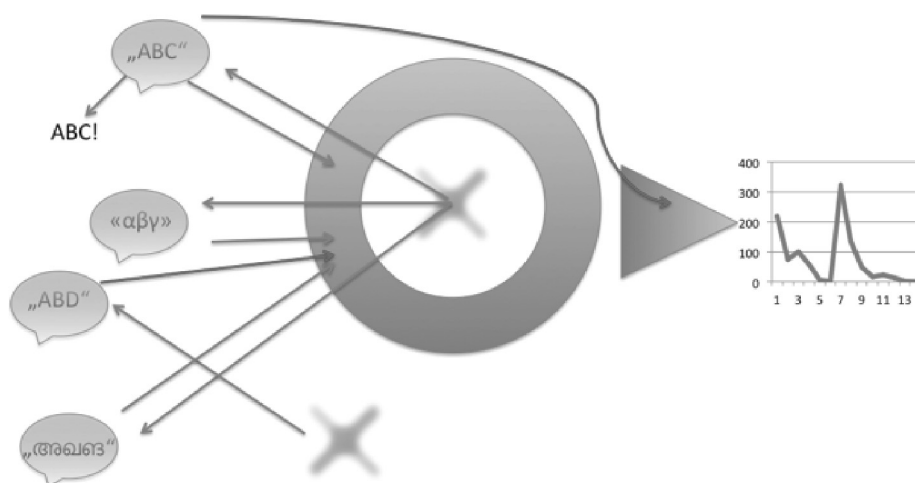


Fig. 1: Experience between, phenomenological analysis, reduction and construction.

Explanation: The two Xs symbolise two different experiences, their fuzzy shapes indicating the chaotic indistinctness characteristic of an experience in its initial stage. The arrows leading from an X to one of the “bubbles” stand for the process of articulation that results in an utterance, which may be made in any language (here symbolised by different alphabets) the experiencer happens to know well enough. As researchers dealing with, *e.g.*, religious phenomena, we frequently have to start with utterances: oral and written texts of believers etc., and as phenomenologists we try to remove as many elements of constructions from these texts, in order to approach the phenomenon behind a given utterance as closely as possible — this movement is expressed by the arrows pointing towards the central X. They all end in a circle that symbolises the result of the

phenomenological analysis; the distance between circle and X indicates that there always remains a fundamental difference between any phenomenological description and the phenomenon it is meant to describe. Please also note the small arrow pointing from “ABC” to ABC! that is meant to indicate a very common, but unphenomenological usage of religious utterances, namely their transformation into a dogma. The arrow that points from “ABD” to the circle shows a possible error by which a researcher connects an utterance to the wrong kind of experience. Lastly it must be explained how reduction is included in our schema. Here, we see a bending arrow leading from the utterance “ABC” to a triangle that symbolises the process of reduction leading to a result represented by a graph. Please note that the arrow bypasses the circle, i.e. the reductionist typically applies her method directly to a more or less intuitive understanding of the utterances it uses as raw material and does not care about phenomenological analyses — though this can and should be done, as was argued above.

Summing up, phenomenology (in the restricted sense explained above) should be regarded as a crucial part of the methodological toolkit because it is indispensable to achieve the following tasks:

- (1) preparing material for reductionist research;
- (2) “earthing” constructions by removing superstructures,
- (3) thus also enabling comparison and dialogue.

In this paper the positive achievements of phenomenology have deliberately been left out of the picture in order to focus on its methodological function. Thus it will be in order to add as a final note that, in my opinion, the most genuine function of phenomenology consists in showing the richness of real-life experiences and making them accessible for discussion and reflection by teaching how to talk about them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Kant, I. (1983). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Nagel, Th. (1974). What is it like to be a bat?. *Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435–450.
- Schmitz, H. (1977). *Das Göttliche und der Raum (= System der Philosophie, III 4)*. Bonn: Bouvier.
- Schmitz, H. (1999). *Husserl und Heidegger*. Bonn: Bouvier.
- Schmitz, H. (2003). *Was ist Neue Phänomenologie?*. Rostock: Ingo Koch.