

On the autonomy of phenomenology

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Abstract

In this paper, I make a consideration about the relationship between phenomenology and empirical sciences about conscious experience. Recently, it has been suggested by proponents of ‘naturalized phenomenology’ that phenomenology and cognitive sciences should exchange with each other. This proposal prompts us to abandon the ‘puristic’ conception of phenomenology, according to which phenomenology is independent from empirical sciences. I show that, though abandoning purism and exchanging with cognitive sciences is fruitful for phenomenology, proponents of naturalized phenomenology underemphasize an important feature of phenomenology — its *autonomy* of a certain kind.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I make a consideration about *the relationship between phenomenology and empirical sciences about consciousness*. (I use the term ‘phenomenology’ to mean ‘an attempt to describe the way the world appears in our conscious experience from the first-personal perspective.’ This definition might not correspond exactly to Husserl’s and other traditional phenomenologist’s conception(s) of phenomenology. On my conception, however, theorists belonging to the phenomenological tradition have tried to systematize ‘phenomenology’ in the above sense by developing theoretical and methodological frameworks.)

Recently, it has been suggested that phenomenology and cognitive sciences (including cognitive neuroscience) should exchange with each other. This suggestion has been enthusiastically put forth by proponents of ‘naturalized phenomenology’ (whom I call ‘naturalists’ henceforth). It is opposed to the ‘puristic’ conception of phenomenology, according to which phenomenology is independent from empirical sciences and metaphysics. I am not against this suggestion, but I am afraid that an important feature of phenomenology is underemphasized in it. So, in this paper, I try to call your attention to this feature of phenomenology — its *autonomy* of a certain kind.

2 The Problem of Phenomenological Disputes

Many theorists hold that science of consciousness needs phenomenology. For example, David Chalmers (1997) and Max Velmans (2007) claim that some sophisticated phenomenological method is required to provide the appropriate description of explananda for the scientific research on consciousness. However, there are theorists (e.g. Dennett 1991; Metzinger 2003) who are pessimistic about the fruitfulness of adopting phenomenology as a method for studying consciousness. As a reason for that, they mention ‘the problem of phenomenological disputes’: as Søren Overgaard and his co-author formulate it, ‘if someone denies that a phenomenological description is adequate, there is nothing the phenomenologist can do to convince him or her otherwise, except shouting and foot stomping’ (Overgaard, Gilbert & Burwood, 2013, p.82). I think that, although this problem does not force us to give up phenomenology altogether, it encourages us to reconsider how phenomenology and cognitive sciences should be related with each other.

Phenomenological disputes include the following examples:

Ex.1: Do tilted coins look round? Some phenomenologists hold that they do, whereas others hold that they look elliptical and we judge that they are round.

Ex.2: Do we perceive high-level properties (such as the property of *being a giant panda*)? Some hold that we see a panda *as a panda*, while others hold that we see it as *a slowly moving, black-and-white thing with a certain shape* and we judge that it is a panda.

Pessimists regard these controversies as impossible to settle, and they urge us to give up phenomenology altogether. For example, Daniel Dennett says, ‘It is just astonishing to see how often “academic” discussions of phenomenological controversies degenerate into desk-thumping cacophony, with everybody talking past everybody else’ (Dennett 1991, p.66). In a similar vein, Thomas Metzinger says, ‘*The epistemological problem regarding phenomenological, first-person approaches of “data generation” is that if inconsistencies in two individual “data sets” should appear, there is no way to settle the conflict*’ (Metzinger 2003, p.591, original emphasis).

However, I think it is too hasty to accept this conclusion, since several methods to settle such disputes are proposed. One of these methods is ‘the method of contrast’ (cf. Siegel 2006; Kriegel 2007): to contrast two experiences that are different in terms of the property in question. If their phenomenal characters are different, we get a *prima facie* reason to suppose that the property is manifest in our experience. Still, this supposition is overridden, if the difference can be explained in terms of certain other properties. For example, suppose that a person *A* is familiar with pandas and another person *B* is not. Is there any relevant difference between *A*’s visual experience of a panda and *B*’s one? If some difference is found, is it can be explained in terms of low-level properties (such as shape, colour, and so on)? Considering these questions leads us closer to the right answer. As Uriah Kriegel (2007) says, such a method cannot *demonstrate conclusively* that a phenomenological claim is true and the other is false, but it can *create a presumption* in favour of a certain phenomenological claim rather than the

other (ibid., p.124). Thus, such a method enables us to engage in intellectual discussions, rather than in ‘shouting and foot stomping.’

Nevertheless, there seem to be cases in which the method of contrast does not work. So, some authors such as Overgaard and his co-authors (Overgaard et al. 2013) propose that we appeal to scientific evidences to settle phenomenological disputes.¹ This proposal invites phenomenologists to abandon the *puristic* conception of phenomenology, and to accept the *naturalistic* one. I will introduce these conceptions in turn.

3 Purism Abandoned

The puristic conception, to borrow Alva Noë’s words, ‘conceives of its subject matter as autonomous’ (Noë 2007, p.232). It presupposes that phenomenology exclusively studies facts concerning *the way the world appears in our conscious experience*, and that these facts are independent from facts empirical sciences and metaphysics study, i.e. facts concerning *the way the world actually is*. Thus, purism regards phenomenological disputes as *epistemically insulated* from empirical sciences and metaphysics. So, contemporary phenomenologists must give up an opportunity to avoid the problem of phenomenological disputes, if they are committed to purism. However, in fact they are not.² I will explain the reasons.

Noë argues against purism for the very reason that it is fruitless. As he states, according to purism, ‘It’s hard to see how phenomenology could be anything more than earnest pleading as to the supposed revelations of one’s own inner searchings’, and it ‘threatens to undermine its [phenomenology’s] claim to be a serious kind of intellectual pursuit’ (Noë 2007, pp.232).

Noë is not exceptional in this regard. Some might be surprised to hear this. At first sight, adopting the ‘epoché’ as a main method of phenomenology seems to be tantamount to accepting purism, since the epoché is supposed to ‘bracket’ all scientific and metaphysical theories about how the world actually is, and to enable us to focus on how it appears to us. However, this is not necessarily the case, indeed. At least on one reading, the purpose of the epoché (and the subsequent procedure of ‘phenomenological reduction’) is not to focus *exclusively* on the appearance, but to reveal the reality in terms of how it appears. Thus, phenomenologists are ultimately concerned with how the world actually is, or so they say. For example, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi state:

¹ Overgaard and his co-authors state, ‘The only way phenomenologists can remove it [the phenomenological standoff] entirely is by appealing to other types of evidence. These may be scientific, or they may be other types of armchair evidence’ (Overgaard et al. 2013, p.83). Actually, for example, visual impairment cases such as ‘associative agnosia’ (see Bayne 2009) and visual effects such as ‘adaptational effects’ (see Fish 2013) are cited in philosophical literature addressing perceivability of higher-level property. In addition, neuroscientific findings may inform us about the issue: for example, if activation of some neurons that are known to be concerned with a higher-level property turns out to be involved in the neural mechanism subserving perceptual processes, we get a *pro tanto* reason to think that the property in question can be perceived.

² Husserl is sometimes accused of being committed to purism. For, according to his transcendentalism, phenomenology studies the region of pure consciousness, which is not a constituent of the natural world, but instead in which the natural world is ‘constituted’ (i.e. ‘conferred meanings’). Taking this into account, Zahavi (2004, 2013) claims that the transcendental character of Husserl’s phenomenology resists the naturalization. However, let me put aside this point, since the aim of this paper is not to provide a correct interpretation of Husserl’s phenomenology. What is more important for the present purpose is that even Zahavi never denies that there can be useful exchanges between phenomenology and empirical sciences.

‘... [T]he epoché does not involve an exclusive turn inward. On the contrary, it permits us to investigate the world we live in from a new reflective attitude, namely in its significance and manifestation for consciousness. Although this reflective investigation differs from a straightforward exploration of the world, it remains an investigation of reality; it is not an investigation of some otherworldly, mental realm’ (Gallagher & Zahavi 2003, p.23).

Notice that they reject not only purism, but also an ontological view underlying it, i.e., the view that the field phenomenology investigates, i.e., our conscious experience, constitutes an inner, private realm of appearance, which is ontologically distinct from the outer, public realm of reality. Citing Husserl’s comment, Gallagher and Zahavi accuse this view of ‘a metaphysical fallacy’ (ibid., p.21). Indeed, no contemporary phenomenologist is committed to such a view, as far as I know. Rather, most of them hold that facts concerning how the world appears in experience belong to, or at least are inextricably bound up with, facts concerning how the real world is.³

For the above reasons, contemporary phenomenologists deny the strong, ontologically-based kind of autonomy of phenomenology, or the thesis that the subject matter of phenomenology is autonomous. They hold that phenomenology and empirical sciences are not distinguished by their subject matters, but by their approaches: the former takes the first-person approach, while the latter take the third-person approach, for example.⁴ In agreement with these theorists, I will take it for granted henceforth that purism should be abandoned.

4 Naturalizing Phenomenology?

The denial of the autonomy of phenomenology is prominent in the recent tendency towards ‘naturalizing phenomenology’. There are several versions of naturalized phenomenology, such as ‘neurophenomenology’ (Varela 1997; Lutz & Thompson 2003) and ‘front-loaded phenomenology’ (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher & Brøsted Sørensen 2006). Each version is marked by its unique strategy for naturalization. The ‘neurophenomenological’ approach involves training subjects to employ phenomenological methods (say, epoché), and integrating phenomenological data and neuroscientific data using dynamical system models. In contrast, the approach of ‘front-loaded phenomenology’ involves incorporating phenomenological insights⁵ into experimental design and testing them through experimental results. Notwithstanding such a difference, the versions of naturalized phenomenology share a common feature. Gallagher and

³ Of course, explaining exactly how appearance and reality are related is a hard issue. Taylor Carman explicates their complex relationship as follows: ‘... [H]ow things seem is bound up in deep and complex ways with how they are. It is natural to suppose that any knowledge we have of how things are must be based on or mediated by how they seem. But this is not obvious. For seeming presupposes being, and in two ways. On the one hand, seeming is often, if not always, precisely, a seeming *to be*; to understand a seeming *as* a seeming is to understand it in relation to an actual or possible being. On the other hand, seemings *are* beings; whether they turn out to be objects or properties or events or relations, they are in any case *not nothing*’ (Carman 2007, p.99, original emphasis).

⁴ Although it is common to distinguish the approach of phenomenology and that of empirical sciences in terms of the first/third person, Noë opposes this way of distinction. See Noë (2007).

⁵ A highly influential example of phenomenological findings that are incorporated into experimental research in cognitive sciences is Gallagher’s analysis of the ‘minimal self’ into the ‘sense of ownership’ and the ‘sense of agency’. See Gallagher (2000).

Zahavi formulate this general feature as follows:

‘... [A] naturalized phenomenology ... should recognize that the phenomena it studies are part of nature and are therefore open to empirical investigation. Insofar as phenomenology concerns itself with such phenomena, it should be informed by the best available scientific knowledge, and vice versa, so that our best account of experience will involve some integration of phenomenology and science’ (Gallagher & Zahavi 2003, p.30).

It is important to note that phenomenological naturalism does not imply *scientism*, i.e. the thesis that natural science is the measure of all things and there is no unique method for philosophy. Rather, its proponents claim that phenomenology and cognitive science can get along with each other while each of them retains its uniqueness.

On the naturalistic conception of phenomenology, there should be ‘reciprocal constraints’ (Lutz et al. 2003, p.33) or ‘mutual enlightenment’ (Gallagher et al. 2006, p.131) between phenomenology and cognitive sciences. Naturalists do not only expect that phenomenology can provide the description of explananda for science of consciousness, but also that they can *refine* and *revise* each other. It should be noted here that, in emphasizing reciprocity or mutuality, naturalists permit the possibility that phenomenological claims can be *challenged* by empirical findings. They refer explicitly to this possibility. Anotoine Lutz and Evan Thompson says, ‘the (phenomenologically enriched) neuroscientific analyses provoke revisions and refinements of the phenomenological accounts’ (Lutz et al. 2003, p.33). Likewise, Gallagher claims that the experiments based on phenomenological method or insight ‘do not simply presuppose the phenomenological description. Rather, they test and verify that description’ (Gallagher 2003, p.10; see also Gallagher et al. 2006, p.131). These claims are vital to naturalized phenomenology, for, unless admitting this, it would be mysterious how ‘reciprocal constraints’ or ‘mutual enlightenment’ would be obtained, and their position would not be worthy of the label of ‘naturalist’. Indeed, this is an assumption they share with sceptics like Dennett: their difference lies in that sceptics deny, whereas naturalists admit, the reliability and the self-correctibility of phenomenology.

As I see it, the epistemic connection between phenomenology and cognitive sciences (especially, disciplines that are concerned with sub-personal level accounts such as cognitive neuroscience) is not so simple. The claim that certain empirical finding can settle phenomenological disputes presupposes that these finding can be evidences of the adequacy of phenomenological claims. Naturalists go further to admit that phenomenological descriptions can be overridden by empirical findings. Then, how about *undisputed* phenomenological claims? Let us think about the Müller-Lyer illusion. It is agreed (though there are some exceptions) that, when we see the Müller-Lyer figure, two lines of the same length looks to us as if they are different in length. Can even such a seemingly indisputable claim be challenged by empirical findings (such as neuroscientific one), too? In my view, the answer is ‘No’, and phenomenology has a kind of autonomy.

5 The Autonomy of Phenomenology Reconsidered

Now, I will show that phenomenology has a minimal, purely methodological kind of autonomy. Since phenomenology cannot avail itself of any privileged, infallible access to conscious experience, any phenomenological description of our experience can be overridden as the result of subsequent investigations. However, here is a qualification: any phenomenological description can be overridden *only when a certain alternative phenomenological description is given*. This feature of phenomenology in relation to empirical sciences is what I mean by the ‘minimal kind of autonomy’.

To confirm the methodological autonomy, imagine that a neuroscientific datum N , which conflicts with a generally accepted phenomenological datum P , is found. (To be concrete, let us take the Müller-Lyer illusion for example again: suppose that P is the phenomenological datum that two lines of the same length in the Müller-Lyer figure usually look as if they differ in length, and that N is the hypothetical neuroscientific datum that subjects who see the figure are usually in the neural state in which we are known to be when two lines look to be the same in length.) It is true that the existence of N questions the adequacy of P , and motivates us to seek for some alternative phenomenological datum that is compatible with N . And if such a datum is found, we may accept it and thus revise the phenomenological description. However, if no such datum is found, the first thing we should do to remove the conflict is not to abandon P just because N is given, but to re-examine the presupposed interpretation of N . Thus, it seems to be legitimate to maintain P as long as it is phenomenologically unchallenged.

The Müller-Lyer illusion is a case where any other phenomenological description than the standard one (i.e. P in the above) is unlikely, if not impossible, to be given. However, the point is not applied only to such indisputable cases: Phenomenological descriptions in general have the methodological autonomy.

This is intuitively obvious enough for me, but why? I shall make two considerations. First, although phenomenology and the neuroscientific research on consciousness address the same subject matter, they differ in their approaches: the former is concerned with the *personal level* account of experience, whereas the latter is concerned with the *sub-personal level* account of it. And there is no simple isomorphism between conscious experiences at the personal level and their neural substrates at the sub-personal level (cf. Zahavi 2013). Second, neuroscientific findings about consciousness involve hypotheses concerning correlations between conscious experiences and their neural substrates. Such hypotheses themselves are established by subjects’ first-person reports, and there seems to be no warrant that these reports adequately capture subjects’ experiences. In order to confirm that these reports are adequate, we must engage in phenomenological investigations (cf. Overgaard 2004). These considerations support the claim that we must admit the methodological autonomy of phenomenology I introduced above.

If, as I argue, phenomenology has the methodological autonomy, the upshot is that cognitive sciences cannot impose any *direct* constraint on phenomenology. It is true that phenomenologists can be *motivated* by empirical findings to re-examine whether their descriptions are adequate or not. However, the adequacy of phenomenological descriptions cannot be *determined* by these findings.

What does this amount to? Pessimistically saying, the expectation that phenomenology and cognitive sciences can get along with each other is only a bet. In other words, we must recognize the possibility that

phenomenology might turn out to be unintegrated with the system of empirical knowledge concerning our conscious experience. This would be tantamount to the decline of the status of phenomenology as a reliable method. Still, given that phenomenology and cognitive sciences address the same subject matter, and given the self-correctible nature of phenomenology exhibited at least in some cases, it is not without hope that their results would converge after all. Then my worry would prove misplaced.

6 Conclusion

My points can be summarized as follows: I am not for purism, and I am not against the overall project of naturalizing phenomenology (though in fact I am somehow suspicious about the details of neurophenomenological methods, such as training subjects). In my view, phenomenology has no ontological autonomy. As well as cognitive sciences, it tries to unveil facts of the natural world. As such, it can inform and be informed by the scientific research. Especially, through exchanging with cognitive sciences, phenomenology can make available an opportunity to get out of futile controversies. However, I want to emphasize the need to respect the methodological autonomy of phenomenology: any phenomenological description of experience can be overcome only by some other phenomenological description(s). The epistemic connection between phenomenology and cognitive sciences is more complicated than often thought. I am afraid that naturalists tend to oversimplify it.

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