On the Necessity of Foundations, Intersubjectivity and Cognitive Science

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> Upshot - I discuss three of the target article’s topics that I find either problematic or important. First, I discuss a potentially dangerous consequence of claiming that empirical phenomenology necessarily calls for a constructivist foundation. Second, I consider the threat to intersubjective validation and the related problem that the author does not specify what technique(s) one should use for training and collecting data in research on experience. Third, I briefly touch upon the question of the integration of empirical phenomenology and cognitive science.

- 1 - One of the main goals of the target article is to show that research on experience needs a constructivist epistemological foundation (§5). However, its author is not entirely clear on how strong this claim is meant to be. I argue that if we take his claim in a stronger sense (i.e., that constructivist epistemology is a necessary condition of empirical phenomenology), we run into the potential danger of being contrary to one of the main tenets of empirical phenomenology, namely the attitude of reduction.

- 2 - On the one hand, in the abstract the author states that empirical phenomenology “requires,” “necessarily calls for” (§5), and “needs” (heading before §22) a constructivist epistemological foundation (stronger senses of the claim); on the other hand, he goes on to maintain that constructivism is a “suitable candidate for a functional framework for research on experience” (§41), the latter being a weaker claim for two reasons. Firstly, it could be interpreted as merely a call for a better theoretical starting point for research on experience, but not as something indispensable to empirical phenomenology, which the stronger sense of the claim seems to imply. Secondly, being a suitable candidate does not entail “requirements” or “necessity.” The claim that a constructivist epistemological foundation is necessary for research on experience seems, on the other hand, to suggest that constructivist epistemology is something we must take for granted, something we cannot subject to doubt.

- 3 - The problem here is not principally of a terminological nature. The way we understand this claim bears on the project of empirical phenomenology as a whole, since the stronger sense of the claim can potentially be contrary to one of the basic tenets of empirical phenomenology, i.e., the attitude of reduction.

- 4 - The danger of taking constructivist epistemological foundations as necessary for empirical phenomenology lies in potentially taking these foundations for granted, i.e., as an implicit presupposition one does not, and perhaps even should not, doubt. What empirical phenomenology in my opinion needs is openness to, and awareness of, its own theoretical (epistemological and otherwise) foundations and presuppositions. Only then could it become a science that, at its core, would deny the notion of “unshakable foundations” (potentially) implied by the stronger sense of the claim.

- 5 - The author, for instance, allows for the possibility that accepting empirical phenomenology into constructivism entails the possibility of upgrading, refreshing (and ultimately changing?) its epistemological (and other theoretical) foundations (as, for example, §21 could be read). Bringing the constructivist epistemology into empirical phenomenology could in this way be interpreted as a call for a more appropriate theoretical starting point for research on experience than that provided by the realism-based cognitive science, but not as something that is indispensable for empirical phenomenology.

- 6 - The second issue of the article I want to touch upon briefly is intersubjective validation, which is threatened by empirical phenomenology. Firstly, I must emphasize that I fully agree with the author’s claim (§§39, 52, 58) that empirical phenomenology should not blindly presuppose, or forcibly strive for, intersubjective agreement or invariants of experience as a starting point for its research endeavours. Presupposing that one’s research must necessarily lead to intersubjective agreement could lead one to conclude falsely that one’s results are similar to the results of other researchers, make generalizations (interpretations) coinciding with one’s expectations and possibly even posit dogmatic beliefs about what one should find when researching experience – a conclusion empirical phenomenology must avoid at all costs. Researchers can thus
only hope that investing time, energy and resources into studying experience will lead to some kind of experiential invariants.

« 7 » On the other hand, if it turned out that researchers of experience did not even agree on the description of the experiential phenomenon (§39), empirical phenomenology would, in my opinion, become nothing more than personal “science” of experience – this is, I feel, something the author and many others (e.g., Petitmengin 2006; Varela 1996) would like to avoid. However, hopes can also be deceiving, and one must take the author’s call for bracketing expectations of obtaining intersubjectively verifiable invariants seriously.

« 8 » The possibility that we could never reach intersubjective agreement in studying experience is, indeed, great. But one must stress that even realism-based cognitive science (including its sub-disciplines, such as psychology and neuroscience) cannot claim to have fully grown into a proper intersubjective science (not even in the sense of §39). For example, research by Carroll Izard nicely shows that the phenomenon of emotion is not a “unitary concept” (Izard 2010: 363), and that researchers (mainly in the fields of psychology and neuroscience) do not agree on its definition and description. Similar problems can be found in metacognition (e.g., Beran et al. 2012) and decision-making research. Taking a close look into the latter, one quickly discovers that researchers are not exactly speaking about the same phenomenon, even though they all use the term “decision-making.” Ap Dijksterhuis et al. (2006), for example, conceive of decision-making as choosing between alternatives; Gary Klein, Roberta Calderwood & Anne Clinton-Cirocco (2010) as a sort of intuitive recognition that does not include comparing alternatives and choosing between them; Hauke Heekeren, Sean Marrett and Leslie Ungerleider (2008) as intuitive rather than deliberative. It is not clear whether the author means to include these differences or not, but it remains open to the uncertainties that realism-based cognitive science is desperately trying to sweep under the rug. One of the aspects of Kordé’s proposal is precisely to find a way of surpassing these problems that plague cognitive science, i.e., to “ground” (and potentially transform) concepts of the mind experientially. I cannot resist adding that if we had invested as many resources in experiential research as we have had in neuroscientific research in the last two decades, problems and puzzles of experience research would at least be much clearer than they are today.

« 9 » Thus, what holds potentially for empirical phenomenology also holds – at least to a certain degree – for realism-based cognitive science. One could add that empirical phenomenology, being a science-in-the-making, is in a better position, since it remains open to the uncertainties that realism-based cognitive science is desperately trying to sweep under the rug. One of the aspects of Kordé’s proposal is precisely to find a way of surpassing these problems that plague cognitive science, i.e., to “ground” (and potentially transform) concepts of the mind experientially. I cannot resist adding that if we had invested as many resources in experiential research as we have had in neuroscientific research in the last two decades, problems and puzzles of experience research would at least be much clearer than they are today.

« 10 » The threat to intersubjectivity stems from a more practical problem of the target article. In conclusion, the author suggests “systematic, meticulously recorded gathering of samples” (§62) as a starting point of empirical phenomenology that might or might not lead to intersubjective results. The suggestion of starting with gathering data is not problematic in itself. What is missing from the author’s account, if the project of empirical phenomenology is to take off from the ground and not remain a theoretical endeavour, is a specification of training technique(s) that would allow one to carry out phenomenological reduction and specification of criteria for doing it properly. For the collection of the first-person (phenomenal) data seems to necessarily presuppose the researcher to be well trained in phenomenological reduction and be able to bracket her natural attitude (§§55f). If, on the other hand, phenomenological reduction is not successfully carried out, the data gathered cannot count as phenomenal data, but merely as data gathered by naïve, armchair introspection (see e.g., §30), and therefore as invalid from the perspective of empirical phenomenology. Hence, specifying these practical matters would be necessary for different researchers even to be able to claim that their results are intersubjective or not. Alternatively, the author should explain why the explication of basic techniques and criteria is not a necessary starting point of an empirical project such as empirical phenomenology.

« 11 » Finally, even though the author’s proposal is more or less solely a call for appropriately epistemologically grounded empirical science of experience, one cannot help but wonder how empirical phenomenology – as opposed to its naturalized version – could be applied to cognitive science. The question is pertinent for two reasons. Firstly, cognitive science, as was argued for, and shown, by many (cf. Froese, Gould & Barrett 2011; Petitmengin et al. 2013; Strel 2013; Vörös 2014), urgently needs to allow rigorous research of experience to become its integral part. Secondly, most qualitative approaches to studying experience do not “fully adopt the phenomenological attitude” (§29), and empirical phenomenology grounded in constructivism is claimed to be a better candidate for research on experience than its naturalized version (§42). And although the author does not seem to be opposing naturalizing phenomenology or phenomenologizing natural sciences (§42), this begs the question as to why attempts should not be made to try and integrate empirical phenomenology with cognitive science.

« 12 » What this question presupposes is that experience is not all there is to mind (i.e., that experience is not identical to the mind) – a claim with which the author might possibly disagree (e.g., in §20). Secondly, the question presupposes that other fields of research (e.g., neuroscience) can tell us something about the mind that empirical phenomenology alone cannot. Let me provide two examples. Firstly, molecular processes in the brain are not accessible to our conscious experience as such, but knowledge about them provides us with information about how the mind functions and can be used as a means for alleviating certain mental disorders. But it is hard to imagine how one could acquire this knowledge purely by research on experience, however rigorous. Secondly, standard sciences of the
Phenomenology as Critique, Discovery, and Justification

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Phenomenology as Critique

Phenomenology is a very hard problem that is most probably not only epistemological, but also ontological in nature. The question, of course, is whether bringing empirical phenomenology into cognitive science (or cognitive science in empirical phenomenology for that matter) is even possible. If it is, how would merging the two transform cognitive science – for it it would seem this is bound to happen, since cognitive science could not remain a realism-based science of the trivial? More radically, is empirical phenomenology the only possible science of the mind? It would be interesting to see whether the author would even consider bringing together cognitive science (transformed?) and empirical phenomenology and how, if at all, such an endeavour would be possible without losing the character of a non-trivial science.

Phenomenology as critique

The tradition of phenomenology also points out how subjectivity tends to conceal itself in disclosing the objects of experience, and this includes concealment of a perspective, a set of assumptions, and a set of skills. Objects and events appear as they do, not as achievements of subjectivity. When I use a computer mouse cursor, my attention is often focused on the cursor, or my hand, but on the object of my action, e.g., a folder or a document file. In a sense, the mouse cursor is concealed; because my extended practice with it relegates it to the background of my experience (Noë 2012; cf. Heidegger 1962: 99). Thus, I am largely unaware that the responsiveness of the cursor to my movement could, in principle, be magnified, reduced, or reversed. I am similarly unaware that the plane on which my hand moves is perpendicular to the plane on which the cursor moves. Using tools and technology involves extension of my sensorimotor agency (Gozli & Brown 2011), but it also involves relegateing new parts of the perceptual world to the background of experience. Phenomenology offers a way of coming to contact with what is often concealed, the origins of experience, and understanding how my experience, which might seem independent of my perspective, my assumptions, and my skills, is in fact their outcome.