

25. Phenomenology as Philosophy of Mind: Scientific Theories as Fictional Realities

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Abstract: Among the numerous approaches to the study of consciousness, phenomenology occupies a special place. Firstly, phenomenology is an approach to the study of consciousness that emerged in continental philosophy in opposition to mainstream analytical one. This applies primarily to transcendental phenomenology, which is based on ideas of F. Brentano and E. Husserl. In contrast, the phenomenologies of K. Jaspers and M. Merleau-Ponty, as well as other phenomenological and post-phenomenological conceptions, can be integrated into the analytical tradition.

Secondly, phenomenology generates a different philosophy of science, placing subjective experience at the foundation of all human knowledge. This primacy of subjective experience is an entirely atypical position for the analytical tradition and it provides a different perspective on scientific knowledge. If subjective experience is the basis for all other knowledge, any scientific knowledge becomes an attempt to conceptualize a specific domain of the subjective experience. This approach transforms any scientific theory into a fictional world or fictional reality. And this reality is aimed at and also is limited by subjective experience, simultaneously ignoring the possessor of this experience. As a result, the typical neurocognitive model of human beings as an embodied brain in a specific body becomes a literary alter ego of the possessor of subjective experience, while phenomenological approach provides several intuitions about the relationship between consciousness and scientific knowledge and is able to reinterpret the existing puzzles without its destruction.

Keywords: Philosophy of Mind, Problem of Consciousness, Phenomenology, Neurophenomenology, Transcendental Phenomenology, Naturalism, Antinaturalism

Introduction

As the answer to the question of how the brain produces subjective experience, the Hard problem of consciousness became the real multidisciplinary fundamental problem of the XXI Century. The explanatory gap¹ between our knowledge of how the brain and nervous system works (data from the third person perspective) and our subjective experience and its reflexive accessible features such as unity, intentionality and privacy (data from the first person perspective) become a great puzzle for numerous researchers: there is a continuum of the possible solutions from stating the Hard problem as a pseudoproblem (and denying the existence of the subjective experience²) through reinterpreting this problem (by stating subjective experience and its features as illusions³ or by reducing consciousness to information or integrated information⁴) to recognize the existence of this problem beyond the limits of human knowledge (like transcendentalists view⁵). However, there is no consensus among these solutions.

This continuum of solutions has been developed by many philosophers and scientists around the world. Thus, the Hard problem of consciousness is a multidisciplinary problem that spans different philosophical and scientific disciplines, paradigms, and traditions. As for philosophy, I mean the continental and analytical tradition. Nowadays analytical philosophy of mind is both the main source of the Hard problem of consciousness and a mainstream approach to studying consciousness and its problems in general⁶.

Nevertheless, mainstream approach does not mean the only ap-

¹ Joseph Levine, "Materialism and Qualia, the Explanatory Gap," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (1983): 354–61.

² Daniel C. Dennett, *Sweet dreams: Philosophical obstacles to a science of consciousness* (MIT press, 2006).

³ Keith Frankish, "Illusionism as a theory of consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 23, no. 11–12 (2016): 11–39.

⁴ Larissa Albantakis, et al. "Integrated information theory (IIT) 4.0: Formulating the properties of phenomenal existence in physical terms," *PLoS computational biology* 19, no. 10 (2023): e1011465.

⁵ Diana E. Gasparyan, "Phenomenology without a transcendental subject: neurophenomenology and enactivism in search of a first-person perspective," *The Philosophy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2020): 95.

⁶ David J. Chalmers, *The conscious mind: in search of a theory of conscious experience* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

proach. There are no rigid boundaries between analytical and continental philosophers, and this could be proven by the existence of neurophenomenology – the approach to study consciousness that combines both philosophical traditions as well as scientific methodology⁷. Moreover, the prevalence of analytical philosophy does not mean that continental philosophy of mind is useless. According to I. Lakatos, any research programme could be progressive or degenerative in concrete historical circumstances⁸.

And one of the key continental schools that study consciousness is phenomenology from its predecessors in the XIX Century to contemporary representatives. In this article, I would like to discuss several unexpected consequences of phenomenology as an approach that is aimed to be an alternative to the naturalistic and psychological view on consciousness, because taking these consequences seriously could shift our understanding of the Hard problem and its ontological and epistemological status.

Phenomenology as the philosophy of mind

Among the numerous approaches to the study of consciousness, phenomenology occupies a special place. Firstly, phenomenology is an approach to the study of consciousness that emerged in continental philosophy in opposition to mainstream analytical one. This applies primarily to transcendental phenomenology, which is based on ideas of E. Husserl⁹. Moreover, since its occurrence between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX Centuries, phenomenology became a philosophical alternative to naturalistic study of consciousness.

In 1874, the E. Husserl's mentor F. Brentano published the monograph "Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt" [Psychology from empirical standpoint]¹⁰, in which he criticized W. Wundt attempt to develop psychology in between philosophy and physiology and to solve mind-body

⁷ Mirko Di Bernardo, "Neurophenomenology and intersubjectivity: An interdisciplinary approach," *Axiomathes* 32, Suppl 2 (2022): 95-111.

⁸ Imre Lakatos, "History of science and its rational reconstructions," *PSA: Proceedings of the biennial meeting of the philosophy of science association*. Vol. 1970 (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁹ Diana E. Gasparyan, "Phenomenology without a transcendental subject: neurophenomenology and enactivism in search of a first-person perspective," 95.

¹⁰ Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (Duncker & Humblot, 1874).

problem combining philosophical reflection and scientific methods as inner and outer observation¹¹. The main idea of Wundt's physiological psychology was to find elements of consciousness and connect them to separate neurons. However, at the end of the XIX Century this attempt could be executed only theoretically. In contrast, Brentano tried to explore psychological or mental phenomena in themselves and study their main features via his own philosophical reflection, literary sources and conversation with other people. This approach allowed him to discover the intentionality of consciousness as the main difference between physical and psychological phenomena. According to Brentano, intentionality is the focus of our consciousness on an object, and every psychical phenomenon like imagination, judgment, and love is intentional¹².

Using these premises, phenomenology continued to discover the laws and structures of the subjective experience itself. This approach distinguished mental phenomena from both *Lebenswelt* [life-world] as external conditions of experience and cognition and pure consciousness as the result of transcendental reduction. According to Husserl, phenomenological study needs a series of reductions that help researchers to study consciousness. One of these reductions is the phenomenological reduction that includes *epoche*, a thought procedure that excludes every bias about subjective experience and its nature. These biases could be both everyday ideas about consciousness and scientific knowledge about it¹³.

In other words, this procedure left any previous theories and conceptions about consciousness beyond the scope of phenomenological research. As a result, subjective experience was placed at the foundation of knowledge, and the value of scientific knowledge to phenomenological study was challenged. This led to a fundamental incompatibility of approaches. On the one hand, such a distinction made it possible to focus on the laws of consciousness itself. It allows Husserl and the other phenomenologists to conceptualize the pure consciousness and to distinguish between the knowable and the unknowable aspects of human consciousness¹⁴. On the other hand, not all phenomenologists were prepared to ignore the obvious progress of

¹¹ Wilhelm M. Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* (Engelmann, 1874).

¹² Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*.

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2012).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

scientific and humanistic knowledge: they tried to utilize this knowledge in their work. For example, philosophical anthropologists (especially H. Plessner) concluded that both subjective experience and bodily organization as a fundamental properties of human being¹⁵.

So, this distinction between phenomenology and the other philosophical and scientific approaches to the human mind was both fruitful and full of limits that the later philosophers tried to overcome. Simultaneously, this overcoming allowed us to take a different look at the relationship between established philosophical traditions. For example, phenomenology (phenomenological psychiatry) of K. Jaspers and M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception are used in contemporary collaboration of continental and analytical study of consciousness – neurophenomenology¹⁶.

Phenomenological philosophy of science

As an alternative approach to studying consciousness, phenomenology also generates a distinct philosophy of science that was developed independently of positivist and postpositivist ones. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology placing subjective experience at the foundation of all human knowledge. This primacy of subjective experience is an entirely atypical position for the analytical tradition, which is based on the primacy of scientific knowledge. Moreover, phenomenological philosophy of science provides a different perspective on scientific knowledge.

In his “Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie” [The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy], Husserl criticized the mathematization of sciences, stating that using mathematical laws in their fields, scientists lose laws of their sciences. In contrast to mathematization, Husserl claimed that his transcendental phenomenology should be the primary field of knowledge¹⁷. M. Merleau-Ponty continued to develop this idea concluding that scientific knowledge is the result of sensory data and its' following mental processing¹⁸.

¹⁵ Helmut Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2019).

¹⁶ Mirko Di Bernardo, “Neurophenomenology and intersubjectivity: An interdisciplinary approach,” 95-111.

¹⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, et al. *Phenomenology of perception* (Routledge, 2013).

These theses lead us to the key difference between analytical and phenomenological philosophy of science: analytical philosophy of science concludes that scientific knowledge is primary in relation to subjective experience and seeks to identify the key features of this knowledge. In this way, subjective experience could be regarded as a product or epiphenomenon of the world governed and explained by the laws of science. A striking exception here would be various positions close to scientific anti-realism, for example, conventionalism and/or empiriocriticism, for which scientific knowledge is not objective but an agreement among researchers¹⁹. In contrast, phenomenological philosophy of science defended the primacy of subjective experience, that raised scientific knowledge. This idea also leads us to a strong version of scientific anti-realism, for which the real world remains transcendent²⁰, while various scientific theories are only a useful but an incomplete interpretation of the causes that give rise to the diversity of our sensations. In other words, phenomenological philosophy of sciences consider scientific knowledge as fiction, so K. Popper's 3-rd world as a world of scientific theories becomes a fictional world.

Scientific theories as fictional realities

As has been noted above, if subjective experience is the basis for all other knowledge, any scientific knowledge becomes an attempt to conceptualize a specific domain of the subjective experience, for example, sensations. This approach transforms any scientific theory into a fictional world or reality, that was created by possessors of subjective experience to explain the causes of such an experience. These statements could be mistakenly interpreted as a form of Luddism and as a devaluation of scientific knowledge.

However, this form of scientific anti-realism does not deny scientific knowledge or takes him seriously. Putting subjective experience first inverts the usual hierarchy of knowledge and experience, but does not exclude any elements from it. Scientific knowledge or scientific theories, as products of human cognition, remain well-founded and ac-

¹⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

²⁰ In Kant's terminology, transcendental is something unable to be cognized. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of pure reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

curate, but they lose their objective status. There are only intersubjective human beings, and these theories, these fictional realities, become part of our subjective experience, something we can share with each other.

It is also important to note that such theories as fictional realities are aimed at and also are limited by subjective experience, simultaneously ignoring the possessor of this experience²¹. This becomes possible because the primary source of our scientific knowledge (according to phenomenology and its philosophy of mind) is our senses. On the one hand, this allows us to conceptualize not only the objects and phenomena we experience, but also the experience itself, the process of its possession, but not the possessor, which becomes only an erroneous homunculus in XIX Century neuroscience²². In contrast, phenomenology allowed such a research by examining the possessor of experience as something transcendental, which is partly represented in our consciousness as the ego²³.

So, if we conceptualize scientific theories as fictional realities that arise from our attempts to understand the causes of our sensations, these theories reveal nothing about the possessor of subjective experience that lies beyond sensations and their possession. The aforementioned transcendence of the ego prevents us from formulating a reliable and convincing conception of our essence. In turn, the typical neurocognitive model of human beings as an embodied brain in a specific body becomes a literary alter ego of the possessor of subjective experience, which cannot be related to our key features that lie beyond the scope of our subjective experience. In other words, such aspects of our cognition prevent any theory of consciousness, which is formulated via analytical tradition, to be compared with our consciousness. Such theories remain only descriptions, without any connection to what they describe.

Consequences for the consciousness research

To sum it up, the phenomenological approach turns the Hard problem of consciousness inside out. In order to reconsider the Hard problem, we need to take subjective experience and scientific knowledge seriously²⁴.

²¹ Konstantin V. Anokhin, "Cognitome: in search of fundamental neuroscience theory of consciousness," *Zhurnal vysshey nervnoy deyatel'nosti* 71, no. 1 (2021): 39–71.

²² *ibid.*

²³ According to Sartre, Ego itself is also transcendental. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The transcendence of the ego: A sketch for a phenomenological description* (Routledge, 2004).

²⁴ David J. Chalmers, *The conscious mind*.

However, taking seriously does not mean taking seriously in an equivalent role. From an analytical point of view, scientific knowledge stays in first place, and subjective experience stays in second place. This could result in considering subjective experience as non-existent or illusory. From a phenomenological point of view, subjective experience stays at the first place. This view corresponds to M. Velmans' view on public and personal experience, according to which we usually dismiss²⁵.

Phenomenology also reinterprets the Hard problem as the problem of the insufficiency of the biological or neurocognitive model of human beings to fully explain consciousness in all of its aspects. As a part of scientific knowledge any third person view on consciousness becomes something less than subjective experience itself. This insufficiency is rooted in the place where phenomenology placed any scientific knowledge. The primacy of subjective experience makes every scientific theory only part of an individual's phenomenal experience and the product of researcher's transcendental ego. In turn, this insufficiency is based on both limits of human knowledge, which are obvious to transcendental philosophy and phenomenology, but not to analytical philosophy. Moreover, this insufficiency is also based on the limits of the naturalistic worldview that, according to phenomenology, fundamentally ignores inner aspects of subjective experience. According to the phenomenological point of view, this ignorance comes from the fact that scientific theories are based on sensation, ignoring the transcendental nature of human essence. Moreover, this highlights the scientific anti-realism of phenomenology.

As a result, consciousness in the first place and scientific theories in the second place do not ruin both experience and knowledge but provide an alternative hierarchy of data. In this hierarchy scientific theories lose their objective character, but obtain their place as the result of mental processing or the search for external causes of sensations. Therefore, this hierarchy legitimizes both first-person and third-person perspectives. From this point of view, third-person perspective becomes the incomplete but necessary part of the first-person perspective. And this revision provides a new perspective on the Hard problem of consciousness.

²⁵ Max Velmans, *Understanding consciousness* (Routledge, 2009).