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Genetic Phenomenology and Empirical Naturalism

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Introduction

The phenomenological project is developed in contrast to naturalism, which according to Husserl derives from a certain “rigidification” of the natural attitude that “reifies” and “absolutizes” the world (Moran 2008: 403). Whereas the natural attitude assumes the existence of the world and the relationship between mind and world as unproblematic, the phenomenological inquiry investigates the conditions of possibility of this relationship. In this way, we achieve the transcendental dimension of consciousness, conceived of as a condition of the possibility for every entity to be manifest in experience. In the light of this inquiry, nature turns out to be the correlate of constituting functions of transcendental consciousness. For this reason, Husserl claims that “[Transcendental consciousness] is not a component part of Nature, and is so far from being that, that Nature is possible only as an intentional unity motivated in transcendently pure consciousness by immanent connections.” (Husserl 1983: 95). Given that transcendental consciousness constitutes every transcendent being, it cannot be “naturalized”, because the constituting principle cannot be led to what it constitutes: “The existence of a Nature *cannot* be the condition for the existence of consciousness, since Nature itself turns out to be a correlate of consciousness: Nature *is* only as being constituted in regular concatenations of consciousness.” (Husserl 1983: 96).

However, these passages can be seen as the source of hard difficulties for phenomenology. A fundamental objection is that transcendental phenomenology reaches a concept of “pure” or “absolute” consciousness that is *abstract*, *disembodied* and *unnatural*, i.e. radically detached from the

natural world. This would mean, in the end, that Husserl's phenomenology leads to a form of idealism or even solipsism and that for it the relationship between consciousness and nature remains an enigma.

In order to confront the aforementioned difficulties, one could try to revise the phenomenological perspective to make it compatible with some form of naturalism. However, to assess the feasibility of the "naturalization of phenomenology", we must first clarify the notions of nature and naturalism. In the first section of this work, I shall analyze two different forms of metaphysical naturalism (scientific and naïve), which conceive of nature as an absolute, mind-independent ontological domain that can be known as it is "in itself". I shall therefore analyze the various attempts at naturalizing consciousness within this approach, arguing that these views are not compatible with the transcendental framework of phenomenology. In the second part, I shall consider the genetic development of phenomenology, arguing that this direction of inquiry leads us to define a form of *empirical* naturalism, which constitutes a coherent development of transcendental phenomenology and leads to a specific way of naturalizing consciousness.

1. *Metaphysical naturalism*

In this section, I shall define a form of naturalism that is placed at the base of various attempts at naturalizing consciousness and phenomenology. With "metaphysical naturalism" I refer to a view that conceives of nature as a mind-independent ontological domain that can be known as it is "in itself", independently of its relationship with a knowing subject. I use this notion while drawing on the distinction, which is present in Kant, between two notions of reality: empirical (i.e. relative to the cognitive relation with a knowing subject) and metaphysical (i.e. absolute, "in itself"). In particular, I shall distinguish between two forms of metaphysical naturalism, which are each placed at the basis of various attempts at naturalizing consciousness: scientific naturalism and naïve naturalism.

1.1. *Scientific naturalism*

With scientific naturalism, I refer to a certain metaphysical interpretation of the cognitive reach of the natural sciences and in particular of physics, conceived of as the science that is able to grasp the fundamental ontology of the natural world. This is a metaphysical form of scientific re-

alism, which claims the mind-independent reality of the entities that are posited by physics in order to account for phenomena. Such a view can be found in modern philosophers such as Galilei and Descartes and is strictly linked to a certain way of understanding the relationship between *quantitative* (physical-mathematical) and *sensory* properties of the objects that appear in our perceptual experience. In contrast to Aristotle's ontology, according to which qualities such as colors and sounds are part of the "ontological furniture" of the natural world, a widespread view in modern philosophy conceives of these sensory qualities as merely subjective appearances that are "internal" to the mind of the perceiver. In contrast to the sensory appearances "in the mind", the physical-mathematical properties are conceived of as the "primary properties" of the objects that are grasped through the scientific method¹.

This influential view can also be found at play in the contemporary philosophy of mind, being the ontological framework that is taken as the naturalistic starting point of various approaches for the naturalization of the mind. As David Chalmers asserts, "On the most common conception of nature, the natural world is the physical world." (Chalmers 2003:102) According to Chalmers, the so-called "hard problem" of phenomenal consciousness (Chalmers 1995) arises when one acknowledges the fact that "[phenomenal] consciousness fits uneasily into our conception of the natural world." (Chalmers 2003: 102). With the concept of "phenomenal consciousness", Chalmers refers to the subjectively felt dimension of a mental state, i.e. its qualitative character or "what-it's-likeness", in the terminology introduced by Thomas Nagel (1974).

Within scientific naturalism, one can attempt to naturalize consciousness by tracing it back to the natural world. The reductionist approach to the naturalization of the mind identifies the phenomenal states with certain physical states of the brain. By contrast, the non-reductionist alternative consists in conceiving of the phenomenal properties of mental states (*qualia*) as *new, sui generis* properties that must be added to the ontological furniture of the world, in parallel to the physical-mathematical properties. This is the view that is developed by Chalmers (1996) with his "fundamental theory of consciousness", arguing for the "natural supervenience" or "strong emergence" (Chalmers 2006) of phenomenal consciousness on the physical states of a cognitive system. According to this view,

¹ This view is widespread in modern philosophy but it is also challenged by some authors (e.g. by Thomas Reid).

consciousness is a component of the natural world that transcends what is investigated by physics. When expressed in these terms, this view presupposes a metaphysical form of scientific realism, at the same time arguing that the physicalistic conception of nature must be “enlarged” in order to make room for the phenomenal properties of mental states².

1.2. *Naïve naturalism*

The second option for the naturalization of consciousness and phenomenology on the basis of a metaphysically realist conception of nature is *naïve naturalism*. With this notion, I refer to the view according to which the ontology of the natural world includes not only quantitative, physical-mathematical properties but also the sensory properties with which we are acquainted in perception. This metaphysical conception of nature can be based on certain theories of perception when they are understood as theories about the relationship between mind and world. In particular, naïve naturalism can be seen as a possible metaphysical implication of both *direct realism* and *externalist representationalism*. In contrast to the internalist conception of “qualia”, both these views conceive of the qualitative properties that appear to us in perception as properties of the external objects in the environment (*qualia externalism*)³.

For example, James Gibson’s ecological theory of perception is a form of direct realism according to which in perception we are directly acquainted with the qualities of the objects in the environment, without the mediation of internal sensory “contents”. Gibson develops this view with the aim of supporting naïve realism, i.e. the “naïve belief in the world of objects and events” and the “simple-minded conviction that our senses give knowledge of it” (Gibson 1967: 168). Gibson’s view was reprised and developed by other authors, such as Kevin O’Regan and Alva Noë with their sensorimotor theory of perception (O’Regan and Noë 2001; Noë and O’Regan 2002).

Gibson’s direct realism and its reprise by the sensorimotor theory do not make use of the notion of mental representation. On the contrary, Fred

² However, it must be noticed that Chalmers (2009) argues for an “ontological anti-realism” that implicitly questions the metaphysical realism and naturalism that was at the basis of *The Conscious Mind*.

³ I must clarify that the interpretation of these theories in terms of metaphysical realism and naturalism is relatively straightforward, but one could also adopt them without taking an explicit stance on the metaphysics of perception.

Dretske's representationalist theory of the mind conceives of perception as involving mental representations. However, in contrast to the traditional internalism regarding sensory qualities, Dretske argues that mental representations are constituted by a *vehicle* that is internal to the cognitive system and whose content is *external* to the mind. Dretske calls this view "phenomenal externalism" (Dretske 1996) and develops it within a project for the "naturalization of the mind" (Dretske 1995) that conceives of nature as endowed with qualitative properties.

For both direct realism and externalist representationalism, nature can be conceived of as containing more than what is covered by mathematical physics, being endowed with the sensory qualities that appear to us in perception. On the basis of this qualitative ontology of nature, one can also attempt at naturalizing the mind.

This strategy has been explored by some proponents of the "naturalization of phenomenology". Jean Petitot and Barry Smith (Petitot 1995, 1999; Smith 1995; Petitot and Smith 1997) developed a naturalistic version of phenomenology, which admits the possibility of naturalizing consciousness. According to these authors, this can be done by enlarging our concept of nature (Roy et al. 1999: 68), thus pursuing a "phenomenalization of physical objectivity" (Roy et al. 1999: 55). However, it must be noticed that Petitot is cautious when referring to the issue of realism, claiming that the notion of objective reality can be also interpreted in "Kantian" terms (see Petitot & Smith 1997: 239, 248). This would mean conceiving of "qualitative ontology" or "phenophysics" as a form of empirical and not metaphysical realism. By contrast, Barry Smith (Smith 1995; 1999) explicitly conceives of the qualitative ontology of nature in the terms of metaphysical realism and he does so by combining a realist interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology with Gibson's theory of direct perception (Smith 1999: 317 ff.).

1.3. *Metaphysical versus empirical naturalism*

Both scientific and naïve naturalism can be interpreted in metaphysical terms, as ways of reaching the knowledge of an absolute, mind-independent reality "in itself". In this reading, these views are forms of metaphysical naturalism, which conceive of nature as an ontological domain that can be known as it is independently of the relationship with a knowing subject. For scientific naturalism, this domain is the merely quantitative world that is grasped by mathematical physics, whereas for naïve naturalism it is the common-sense world made up of the objects of our ordinary experience.

The following step in the naturalistic project consists in attempting at tracing back consciousness to the natural world, by reducing it to certain natural processes (reductionism) or by conceiving of it as a new feature of the natural world (natural supervenience or strong emergence). This can be done by assuming, as ontological base of reduction or of supervenience, either physical reality (for scientific naturalism) or the qualitative ontology of nature (for naïve naturalism).

At this point, I would like to highlight how these forms of metaphysical naturalism are at odds with the transcendental framework of phenomenology, being a non viable option for the naturalization of consciousness. This is because these views refer to a notion of metaphysical reality that would be “absolutely transcendent” with respect to the cognitive relationship. On the contrary, Husserl takes up from Kant the inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of experience, which leads us to restrict our cognitive reach to the correlation between subject and object of experience, in contrast to the possibility of having knowledge of a transcendent reality “in itself”.

Husserl especially criticizes the metaphysical interpretation of the object of physics. This object is theoretically construed through a process of mathematization of phenomena that separates the “primary” (physical-mathematical) properties from the sensory properties of the objects that appear in perceptual experience. The resulting object is a theoretical construction and must not be taken for an objective mind-independent reality “in itself” (see Husserl 1970: 51). This analysis rules out the scientific form of metaphysical realism and naturalism, but it can be also applied to the metaphysical interpretation of the qualitative ontology of nature. Also in this case, the transcendental analysis of experience rules out the possibility of reifying the object of ordinary experience, turning it into an absolutely mind-independent reality in itself. In fact, according to Husserl the object of experience is a “relative transcendence”, being relative to constitutive functions of transcendental consciousness. In contrast to certain realistic interpretations of phenomenology, within the transcendental framework of phenomenology the transcendent (or “external”) thing is the result of a process of constitution in the cognitive process⁴.

The projects of metaphysical naturalization of the mind can be seen as

⁴ Concerning the ontological status of the perceptual object in phenomenology see (Zhok 2013), who compares Husserl’s and Gibson’s theories of perception and stresses affinities but also radical differences between them in relation to the ontology of perception.

involving two steps: firstly, one “fixes” the ontology of nature; secondly, one traces back consciousness to the natural domain. The second step is also very problematic from the point of view of transcendental phenomenology. In fact, various naturalistic approaches conceive of consciousness as the object of psychology, whereas Husserl neatly distinguishes between the object of psychology and the transcendental dimension of consciousness. According to Husserl, the latter cannot be reduced to the object of a psychological investigation. Dan Zahavi observes that Husserl clearly “contrasts his own phenomenology of consciousness with a natural scientific account of consciousness” and for this reason “to suggest that the phenomenological account could be absorbed, or reduced, or replaced by a naturalistic account is for Husserl sheer nonsense” (Zahavi 2009: 4-5). This is because “Consciousness rather than merely being an object in the world, is also a subject for the world, i.e. a necessary condition of possibility for any entity to appear as an object in the way it does and with the meaning it has” (Zahavi 2010: 5). This point is stressed by Michel Bitbol, who claims that “consciousness is and remains *methodologically primary*” because “any ascription of existence *presupposes* the existence of conscious experience” (Bitbol 2008: 56-57). For the same reason, Trizio claims the “impossibility in principle of naturalizing phenomenology” and that the idea of a naturalized phenomenology “is simply meaningless” (Trizio 2012: 6-7).

However, we have also seen that the neat separation between transcendental consciousness (constituting) and the natural world (constituted) is the source of hard difficulties for phenomenology, which can be condensed into the problem of solipsism. This is why we must look at the genetic broadening of the phenomenological inquiry, which leads us to reframe the issue of the relationship between consciousness and nature, thus outlining an alternative to metaphysical naturalism.

2. Genetic phenomenology

The above-seen difficulties of transcendental phenomenology arise within a level of inquiry that is conceived of by Husserl as not ultimate but as preliminary to further developments. In fact, the transcendental phenomenology of constitution, which conceives of the objects of the various regional ontologies as correlating to constituting functions of consciousness, is developed within a fundamental delimitation. Through the phenomenological reduction, experiences are turned into objects of investiga-

tion, within an inquiry that considers them as unitary acts of perception, thought, imagination, etc. However, this inquiry explicitly leaves aside the investigation of the inner temporal unfolding of the experiences. In this way, the experiences, which have a processual nature, are somehow “artificially” turned into mental “states”. Conversely, the genetic broadening of phenomenology “deepens” the investigation of experiences, by investigating their temporal structure.

The distinction between two “levels” of the phenomenological inquiry – static and genetic –, which is central in Husserl’s later works, can already be found in *Ideas I*. Here Husserl claims that, “the level of consideration to which we are confined [...] abstains from descending into the obscure depths of the ultimate consciousness which constitutes all [...] temporality as belongs to mental processes, and instead takes mental processes as they offer themselves as unitary temporal processes in reflection on what is immanent” (Husserl 1983: 171). Husserl clarifies that, in the light of a subsequent broadening of the inquiry, it will turn out that “the transcendental-ly ‘absolute’ which we have brought about by the reductions is, in truth, not what is ultimate; it is something which constitutes itself in a certain profound and completely peculiar sense of its own and which has its primal source in what is ultimately and truly absolute.” (Husserl 1983: 163). In the context of *Ideas I* this passage is enigmatic, pointing towards an inquiry that is not further developed in this work. Already there, however, Husserl seems to suggest that some problematic outcomes of the transcendental phenomenology of constitution should be reconsidered in the light of a genetic broadening of the inquiry.

In fact, whereas “static” phenomenology reaches an “absolute” or “pure” field of transcendental consciousness, “genetic” phenomenology investigates the genesis of the cognitive process in the life of a concrete, conscious subject. This is done by investigating the temporal constitution of the field of consciousness, with its threefold structure of impression-retention-protention. According to Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness, each moment of experience is constituted by a *primal impression*, which is a qualitative element in the flow of experience, together with the *retention* of previous impressions and the *protention* towards the expected course of experience. In this way, the analysis of time-consciousness accounts for the way in which continuously flowing experiences are held together in the unitary experience of a concrete subject. The unitariness of a concrete field of manifestation is possible due to the fact that the experiences have the constant structure of impression-retention-protention. Zahavi (2010:

334-335) stresses the link between the analysis of time-consciousness and self-awareness. The inquiry into the temporal structure of consciousness reveals the structure of the pre-reflective self-manifestation of subjectivity, i.e. how the experiences are self-aware before they are possibly turned into objects of reflection. The self-manifestation of experiences makes possible the manifestation of the objects of experience. In this way, genetic phenomenology shows how the process of constitution of objectivity implies the self-constitution of the subjective pole of the cognitive relation, in a process of *co-constitution* of the subject and the object of experience⁵.

2.1. *Phenomenological naturalization*

At this point, we can ask about the implications of genetic phenomenology for the issue of naturalism. In the light of the genetic broadening of transcendental phenomenology, the field of transcendental consciousness turns out to be concretely realized in the experience of a living subject that is embodied and embedded in the natural world. In fact, the core of the process of genetic co-constitution of the two poles of the cognitive relation is the flow of impressions. This qualitative dimension, on the basis of which the subject and the object of experience are co-constituted, is essentially *embodied*, taking place in the self-affection of the living body (*Leib*), i.e. the body that senses itself in the continuous flow of bodily sensations. According to Bernet (2013), in the phenomenological analysis of the living body we find what Husserl considers a “legitimate naturalization of consciousness” (Husserl 1989: 168).

However, the acknowledgment of the essential bodily grounding of consciousness must be neatly distinguished from the various forms of metaphysical naturalism. These views presuppose a concept of nature as pre-constituted and independent from the relation with the cognizing subject. On the contrary, within the transcendental phenomenological inquiry the “legitimate naturalization of consciousness” runs in tandem with a complementary process of “phenomenologisation of nature” (Vörös 2014), which consists in conceiving of nature as the correlate of consciousness in a process of co-constitution of mind and world.

⁵ The concept of the co-constitution of subject and object in reciprocal dependence is placed at the basis of the enactive approach of (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). These authors take back the notion of “dependent co-arising” from the Madhyamaka philosophy and they combine it with Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

Conclusion

We have seen that, in the light of the transcendental framework of phenomenology, the various forms of metaphysical naturalism are not viable options for the naturalization of consciousness, since they make use of a concept of nature conceived of as an absolute mind-independent reality that can be known as it is “in itself”. This concept of nature as absolute reality is ruled out by the phenomenological analysis of experience. In contrast to metaphysical naturalism, I have argued that the genetic development of phenomenology leads to an empirical form of naturalism, which conceives of nature as the correlate of consciousness in a process of co-constitution of the subject and the object of experience. This form of phenomenological naturalism overcomes the difficulties of the static phenomenology of constitution (condensed in the issue of solipsism) and leads us to acknowledge the natural and bodily grounding of consciousness. In this way, the empirical naturalism that is based on the genetic development of phenomenology constitutes a fruitful and promising framework for the collaboration between phenomenological and empirical investigations of the mind⁶.

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⁶ Developments of the phenomenological inquiry in this direction can be found, for example, in the works of Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2005) and in the enactive approach of Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991; Varela 1996; Thompson 2007).

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Abstract

Husserl's phenomenology is developed in explicit contrast to naturalism. At the same time, various scholars have attempted to overcome this opposition by naturalizing consciousness and phenomenology. In this paper, I argue that, in order to confront the issue of the relationship between phenomenology and naturalism, we must distinguish between different forms of naturalism. In fact, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is developed in contrast to a metaphysical form of naturalism, which conceives of nature as a mind-independent ontological domain that can be known as it is "in itself", independently of the cognitive relationship. At the same time, I argue that the genetic development of phenomenology, through the investigation of the temporal structure of experiences, leads to an empirical form of naturalism, which conceives of nature as the objective pole in a process of co-constitution of the subject and the object of experience.

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