



## The Landscape of Contemporary Phenomenology

**Marzena Adamiak**

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology  
of the Polish Academy of Sciences  
*madamiak@ifispan.waw.pl*

**Marek Pokropski**

Institute of Philosophy  
University of Warsaw  
*mpokropski@uw.edu.pl*

When looking at contemporary phenomenology, the first impression one gets is that it is a very diverse philosophical movement. Phenomenologists not only develop their own research but, even more often, they also participate in interdisciplinary enterprises. Contemporary phenomenology now looks surprisingly vital, but in the 1960s and 1970s it appeared to be a decadent philosophy pervaded by the metaphysics of presence (e.g. Derrida, 1967/2010). Subjectivity, which is the main category of phenomenology, was deconstructed, demystified and thought to be—together with phenomenology—an outdated philosophical position. On the other hand, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rapid development of cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience suggested that a naturalistic explanation of consciousness (excluding phenomenality and subjectivity from explanandum) was very close. These expectations turned out to be too radical and too optimistic (or pessimistic), according to which side of the discussion one took. In the 1980s, phenomenology was rejuvenated. Phenomenologists, especially in France, returned to fundamental questions about the nature of subjectivity and phenomenality. In the 1990s, phenomenology was critical of cognitive science, but this made possible the emergence of embodied cognition. The earlier crisis turned out to be a vital impulse for the development and rethinking of the fundamentals of phenomenology and its relation to other disciplines.

How to describe the landscape of contemporary phenomenology? According to Dominique Janicaud (1991/2000, 1998, pp. 94–119), phenomenology at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was divided into two tendencies: excessive and minimalistic. The former goes beyond phenomenology in search of the sources of phenomenality itself. This tendency is best represented by philosophers of the so-called “theological turn” (e.g. J.-F. Courtine, J.-L. Marion, M. Henry) who, when investigating the limits of phenomenality, turned towards theological considerations. On the other hand, “minimal phenomenology” focuses on detailed analyses of what is given by intuition: it builds local phenomenologies of various ontological regions (phenomenology of embodiment, phenomenology of perception,

phenomenology of emotions, phenomenology of sexual difference etc.). It seems that after two decades, Janicaud's diagnosis is—at least to some extent—still up to date. However, the landscape of contemporary phenomenology seems much more complex, colorful, and consists of new fields of research, new methodological considerations, and novel conceptual frameworks.

This excessive tendency led to a rethinking of phenomenology's objectives, key notions and methodology, which resulted in new fields of research and the development of phenomenological method. Accordingly, the prime objective of phenomenology is the investigation of the nature of phenomenality itself. Not surprisingly, this approach led phenomenologists to consider liminal experiences (e.g. bodily, artistic, mystic) and to sometimes turn phenomenology into a philosophy of life (Henry, 1973), a phenomenological theology (Marion, 2002), or openness to pure artistic experience (Maldiney, 2000). However, radical objectives require radical means, thus phenomenological methods need to be modified. For instance, in his phenomenology of donation Jean-Luc Marion radicalizes phenomenological reduction and proclaims a new methodological principle: "So much reduction, so much givenness" (Marion, 2002, p. 16).

However, methodological discussion does not limit itself to excessive phenomenology and is also present in the "minimalistic" approach; for example, in the attempt to integrate phenomenology with naturalistic cognitive sciences (e.g. Petitot, Varela, Pachoud, & Roy, 1999). Proposals such as neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996) or front-loaded phenomenology (Gallagher, 2010) aim to use phenomenological methods and conceptual apparatus in the empirical research of cognitive sciences and to correlate first-person data with third-person data from neuroimaging. Others like Eduard Marbach (2010) focus on the objectification of first-person phenomenological description through mathematization. If phenomenology in its primary sense is the method, then all these attempts to rethink and develop the phenomenological method deserve attention because they are relevant for the development of phenomenology itself.

This minimalistic tendency in contemporary phenomenology investigates specific phenomena such as embodiment, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. These issues were always important for phenomenology; however, the achievements of these, so to speak, regional phenomenologies are richer and more original than they are minimal. Phenomenology was never a minimal philosophy in the sense of modesty: it was and still is a philosophy with a huge ambition to ask the most fundamental questions about the nature of reality, consciousness etc. and propose difficult answers. The novelty of contemporary phenomenology is that its results are achieved in often critical dialog and in cooperation with other disciplines such as cognitive sciences, psychiatry, theology, theory of art, literature and gender studies. This openness to other approaches, languages and methods of investigation is the most significant and characteristic tendency of contemporary phenomenology. And—as is usually the case—encounters with otherness are transformative; phenomenology also continuously transforms itself and opens up to new theoretical perspectives and directions of research. Let us recap the main fields and issues.

We open this issue with Nicolas de Warren's philosophical–literary essay “The Maturity of Stupidity. A Philosophical Attempt on Flaubert and Others.” Being a rational enterprise, philosophy has always had a problem with understanding stupidity, which has always appeared to be pure irrationality. De Warren refers to the rich literary tradition (e.g. Aristophanes, Flaubert, Cioran) and reveals the complex dialectics of stupidity and reason. Indeed, the question of stupidity touches fundamental issues of the nature of humanity and philosophy.

One of the relatively less known but rapidly growing tendencies of phenomenology is feminist phenomenology, which began with Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of Jean-Paul Sartre and other thinkers who failed to notice how social conditions influence human existence (de Beauvoir, 2011). Therefore, apart from considering phenomena such as gender, sexuality or sexual differences, the key issue for this field of phenomenology has become the search for a methodology that reconciles the historical and the universalistic approaches. For example, questions are considered such as “what would be the meaning of *époque* from the perspective of historically situated subjects?”, or “how to reach the structure of the lived experience regarding gender or other social divisions?” (e.g. Kruks, 2001; Oksala, 2016). This attitude also provides the opportunity to rethink phenomenology itself: what is phenomenology today, what should it be, and—more important—what are the connections between philosophical theory and politics? In the article “Feminist Phenomenology and the Politics of Wonder,” Bonnie Mann returns to the old philosophical issue of “wonder” and shows how the political foundation of seemingly innocent phenomena can be revealed using feminist phenomenological criticism. Referring to Immanuel Kant, Simone de Beauvoir, Sara Ahmed and critically Luce Irigaray, Mann demythologizes the concept of wonder and considers its normative role in the politics of sexual difference.

Another intersection is phenomenology and psychiatry. Relations between these two have a long tradition (e.g. L. Binswanger, A. Gurwitsch, E. Minkowski, E. Straus). Also, phenomenologists now consider and try to describe the structure of mental disorders and abnormal experiences (e.g. Fernandez, 2014; Ratcliffe 2015). These descriptions, as well as phenomenological concepts and distinctions, are often useful in understanding the nature of mental diseases. For example, Josef Parnas and Louis Sass proposed a phenomenological model of schizophrenia, according to which schizophrenia is a disorder of self-experience with two major symptoms: hyper-reflexivity and diminished self-affection (Parnas & Sass, 2007). In this issue, in the article “Phenomenology of Intuitive Judgment. Praecox-Feeling in the Diagnosis of Schizophrenia,” Marcin Moskalewicz, Michael A. Schwartz and Tudi Gozé argue for phenomenological intuition in the process of psychiatric diagnosis and discuss how such an intuitive diagnosis can be tested.

Similarly, the relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis has a long history, but this relation is not simple. On the one hand, philosophers who were strongly inspired by psychoanalysis (e.g. G. Deleuze) were critical of phenomenology. On the other hand, some phenomenologists (e.g. E. Lévinas) consider psychoanalysis to be distinct and unrelated

to phenomenology. However, if we look between these extremes, we can find phenomenologists who are inspired by psychoanalysis or who believe it is an important field of study (e.g. M. Merleau-Ponty). In this issue, two articles raise the issue of the difficult relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. In the article “Husserl on the Unconscious and Reduction,” Alice Togni discusses the problematic status of the unconscious in Husserlian phenomenology. Togni looks for a new approach to the problem of the unconscious by referring to the theory of reduction and the origin of subjectivity. In the next paper entitled “Unknowability, Persecution, and the Ethical Bind: Reading through the Works of Sigmund Freud and Emmanuel Levinas,” Valerie Oved Giovanini compares Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion with Lévinas’ account of the ethical subject.

Phenomenology also finds its importance in medicine and bioethics, thus becoming a platform of integration for various discourses about the body and bodily processes. The method of describing a first-person experience—which is appropriate for phenomenology—turns out to be helpful in the fields of healthcare and clinical medicine; for example, in understanding illness and related bodily conditions (Carel, 2016). As Māra Grīnfelde shows in her text “Four Dimensions of Embodiment and the Experience of Illness,” this experience takes place in several interconnected dimensions: the material, the affective, the functional, and the social. This is why the language and methods of medical sciences are not able to capture the whole experience of illness. Phenomenology might provide this opportunity.

A significant place in the landscape of contemporary phenomenology is taken by considerations on art and aesthetics. The key theme of these investigations is the lived aesthetic experience (e.g. A. Berleant, G. Didi-Huberman, M. Dufrenne, E. Escoubas, H. Maldiney). Literature, music, painting, photography and other areas of artistic expression give an opportunity and material for phenomenologists seeking to grasp an original and liminal experience. Phenomenological study of esthetic experience may also shed light on fundamental questions about the nature of perception, the origin of sensuality (e.g. M. Merleau-Ponty), or the essence of creation itself (e.g. M. Heidegger). In this issue, the phenomenology of art and aesthetics is well represented; however, these studies are often not limited to aesthetic categories and are treated as part of a deeper investigation. Jessica Wiskus, for example, in the article “From the Body to the Melody: ‘Relearning’ the Experience of Time in the Later Merleau-Ponty,” employs the music metaphor and its connection to the category of time in Merleau-Ponty’s late thought. Wiskus shows how Merleau-Ponty’s argumentation—through the shift from the spatially structured body to the time-structured concept of melody—founds intersubjectivity. Another paper entitled “Musical Phenomenology: Artistic Traditions and Everyday Experience,” written by Małgorzata A. Szyszkowska, is devoted to the aesthetic inquiry more explicitly, but its aim is to reflect on the human experience itself. Through research on musical aspects of everyday experience, Szyszkowska shows that phenomenology can also deal with issues such as time perception or memory, but in a different way than by analyzing the experience of work of art. In Anna Yampolskaya’s article “Metamorphoses of the Subject: Kandinsky Interpreted by Michel Henry and Henri Maldiney,” we can see how strongly aesthetic

issues are related to metaphysical questions. Discussing the two phenomenological approaches of Michel Henry and Henri Maldiney and the problem of artistic creation, on the basis of Wassily Kandinsky's painting *Yampolskaya* reveals their phenomenological approaches and how they influence the problem of artistic creation.

Patrick Martin, in turn, in his paper "Between Hermeneutics and Aesthetics: Reconsidering Truth and Method as an 'Aesthetics of Truth'," examines Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that "Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 164). Reading Gadamer's statement critically in the light of the history of philosophy and art, and particularly referring to Rüdiger Bubner, Martin considers the hermeneutical structure of artwork since the aesthetic experience of a work of art is inseparable from its understanding and interpretation. The relationships between phenomenology and hermeneutics have a long tradition and a great meaning for the transformation of phenomenology itself. The influence of hermeneutics is largely responsible not only for opening up phenomenology to the historical perspective and the revision of Husserl's thesis concerning the pure character of phenomenological investigation, but also disclosing its historical, cultural or linguistic determinations (e.g. M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, P. Ricœur, H-G. Gadamer, M. Scheler).

Another part of the landscape of contemporary phenomenology is the deeply troubling problem of intersubjectivity. One can say that interpersonal relations are one of the most difficult topics within phenomenology, which was initially focused on the internal first-person experience. With questions of intersubjectivity and relationships with others, aforementioned areas such as embodiment, sexuality, sensuality, perception or cognition become entangled. To investigate the subject of intersubjectivity, Elizaveta Kostrova, in her paper "The Dyad and the Third Party: The Traces of Simmel's Distinction in Phenomenology and Family Studies," draws from social sciences—mainly from Georg Simmel's concept of the third party—to juxtapose the findings of social sciences with the ideas of phenomenologists Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion and Bernhard Waldenfels. This comparative research on the essence of the social structure leads Kostrova to family studies and to a conclusion about the key role of the third party, which turns out in this case to be the child. In contrast, Bianca Bellini, in the article entitled "The Link between Intersubjectivity and Self-Shaping in the Light of Phenomenological Philosophy," tries to deal with intersubjectivity by analyzing its relationship to the personal self-shaping phenomenon. She considers how the interpersonal sphere influences one's own process of self-shaping on such levels as the cognitive, moral, agentive etc. Recalling the category of exemplariness as a key notion to the link between intersubjectivity and self-shaping, Bellini refers mostly to Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler, but she also evokes Martha Nussbaum, Leo Tolstoy, Linda Zagzebski and others.

The issue includes selected papers from the conference “Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology,” which took place in Warsaw on 23–26 of March 2017 and was organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Polish Phenomenological Association. The conference was part of a four-year research project on contemporary phenomenology (11H 12 0133 81) founded by the National Programme for the Development of Humanities of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Poland. The main outcome of the grant was the anthology “Główne problemy współczesnej fenomenologii” (2017), which consists of Polish translations of papers from contemporary phenomenology.

This publication has been co-financed by the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw.

### References

- Carel, H. H. (2016). *Phenomenology of Illness*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Derrida, J. (2010). *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*. (L. Lawlor, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1967)
- Fernandez, A. V. (2014). Depression as existential feeling or de-situatedness? Distinguishing structure from mode in psychopathology. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4(13), 595–612.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; D. G. Marshall & J. Weinsheimer, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Gallagher, S. (2010). Phenomenology and Non-reductionist Cognitive Science. In: S. Gallagher, D. Schmicking (Eds.), *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Henry, M. (1973). *The Essence of Manifestation*. (G. J. Etzkorn, Trans.). The Hague, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Janicaud, D. (1998). *La phénoménologie éclatée*. Paris, France: Editions de l'Éclat.
- Janicaud, D. (2000). The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology. In *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*. (B. G. Prusak, Trans.). New York, NY: Fordham University Press. (Original work published 1991)
- Kruks, S. (2001). *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Maldiney, H. (2000). *Ouvrir le rien: L'Art nu*, Paris, France: Encre Marine.
- Marbach, E. (2010). Towards a Formalism for Expressing Structures of Consciousness. In S. Gallagher & D. Schmicking (Eds.), *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.

- Marion, J.-L. (2002). *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. (J. Kosky, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Migasiński, J., & Pokropski M. (Eds.). (2017). *Główne problemy współczesnej fenomenologii*. Warsaw, Poland: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Oksala, J. (2016). *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Parnas, J., & Sass, L. (2007). Explaining schizophrenia: The relevance of phenomenology. In M. C. Chung., K. W. M. Fulford, & G. Graham (Eds.), *Reconceiving Schizophrenia*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Petitot, J., Varela, F., Pachoud, B., & Roy, J.-M. (Eds.). (1999). *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2015). *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Varela, F. (1996). Neurophenomenology: A Methodological Remedy for the Hard Problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3(4), 330–349.