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Enriching the Pragmatics of Neurophenomenology, Still Starting from Phenomenology

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> Abstract • I argue that it is possible to improve and methodologically enrich the pragmatic dimension of neurophenomenology by searching for points of contact and possibilities for integration between its phenomenological grounding and various first-person and embodied methodologies and practices, referring in particular to somatics, somaesthetics, and emersiology.

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« 1 » The authors of the target article, Jakub Petri and Artur Gromadzki, start from the consideration that, despite its promise, Francisco Varela's neurophenomenological research program has not been developed as much as it could have been. As argued by Claire Petitmengin (2017), one reason is that most of the implementations of this project have downplayed its "radical" character, developing a "mild" neurophenomenology that is limited to investigating the correlation between first-person analyses of experience and third-person analyses of the brain. This is in contrast with the radicality of the original proposal, which seeks to investigate the process of co-constitution of the subjective and the objective poles of cognition within lived experience (Petitmengin 2017). According to Petri and Gromadzki, however, another reason for the underdevelopment of neurophenomenology is its exclusive reference to the phenomenological method of investigation of experience (§4). This constitutes a "severely limiting perspective" (§4), which needs to be enriched by including different first-person methodologies coming from "disciplines separate from the phenomenological tradition" (§24). In particular, the authors illustrate the potential of three disciplines: somatics, somaesthetics, and emersiology.

« 2 » I consider this proposal of enrichment very interesting and fruitful. However, I am not convinced by a certain empha-

sis on the part of Petri and Gromadzki in claiming that these disciplines are somehow in contrast with phenomenology. In various places in the article, the authors even stress an alleged opposition with the "phenomenology in neurophenomenology" (§17) (and, as we will see, with the mindfulness-awareness practice that is also central to Varela's neurophenomenology). My concern is: why emphasize an alleged separation and opposition between these approaches, when they are just different and, more importantly, largely compatible? In the following, I would like to highlight this compatibility, arguing that the phenomenological method lends itself well to integration with these disciplines.

« 3 » In particular, the first-person methodologies to which Petri and Gromadzki refer are focused on bodily experience. On this point, the authors take up the phenomenological distinction between the body as an object of third-person inquiry (*Körper*), and the living and lived body that is experienced in the first-person (*Leib*). In §26, the authors quote Evan Thompson, according to whom, in the phenomenological view that is taken up by the enactive approach and neurophenomenology, *Körper* and *Leib* are "two modes of appearance of one and the same body" (Thompson 2004: 384). However, when analysing the concept of the body that comes into play in somatics, somaesthetics, and emersiology, they seem to neglect this clarification. Regarding somatics (which derives from Edmund Husserl's term "somatology"), in §27 they quote Thomas Hanna's claim that *soma* is "pulsing, flowing, squeezing, and relaxing" (Hanna 1985: 35), arguing that this is the "exact opposite of the neo-phenomenological understanding of *soma* (*Körper*), which is defined as the object of natural science" (§27). Indeed, the features of *Körper* as the object of investigation of the natural sciences could seem to be in contrast with the features of the body that appear when adopting the first-person, phenomenological point of view. However, as stressed by the previous quote from Thompson, in the phenomenological view there is no radical opposition between these two concepts of the body. *Körper* and *Leib* are two modes of appearance of the same phenomenon: the corporeality of a living and sentient being.

This analysis implies that *Körper* is never just an objective body (except in the case of a corpse). The body can become the object of scientific investigation, but this is just an abstraction that is useful for the pursuit of a certain objective (e.g., anatomical study to pursue a surgical operation). Therefore, in the phenomenological view, it is possible to investigate those rich features of the soma that make it possible for it to be a living and lived body and that are experienced in specific ways from the first-person perspective.

« 4 » The alleged insufficiency of the phenomenological conception of corporeality is also called into question by Petri and Gromadzki when discussing Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. They stress that somaesthetics is an offspring of "non-dualist, pragmatist philosophy" (§36) and that its objective is the heightening of somatic awareness through reflection or introspection. In §37, they then refer to the rich analysis of sensations in somaesthetics, such as the "subtle proprioceptive feelings dealing with posture, tension, breathing, body temperature, energy level, etc." (Shusterman 2013: 67). However, a similar analysis can also be found in Husserl's phenomenological analyses of corporeality, where we find a detailed taxonomy of various bodily sensations and feelings. In particular, in *Ideas II*, Husserl (1989) distinguishes at least five kinds of bodily sensations: kinesthetic sensations (sensations of movement); representing sensations (by means of which the sensible properties of the perceptual object are constituted: color, roughness, taste, etc.); the localized sensations of contact (*Empfindnisse*); the sphere of sensitive feelings (pleasure, pain, wellness, etc.); and various sensations "that form the material substrate for the life of desire and will, sensations of energetic tension and relaxation, sensations of inner restraint, paralysis, liberation, etc." (Husserl 1989: 160). The phenomenological description of these bodily sensations is suitable to be enriched through practices such as somaesthetics, precisely because there is compatibility between these disciplines.

« 5 » A point of departure of somaesthetics from phenomenology is Shusterman's criticism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea that *reflection* on our bodily feelings interferes with the spontaneous flow of life.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty criticizes a certain tendency (that he sees also in Husserl's phenomenology) of "freezing" life by reflecting on sensations, but in doing so he emphasizes a dimension of *self-awareness* that underlies the spontaneous flow of life. This is what in the phenomenological tradition has been called *pre-reflective self-awareness* (Zahavi 2003, 2010; Thompson 2004): a form of self-consciousness that precedes and makes possible the explicit act of reflection. Indeed, most of our ordinary experience is characterized by an implicit, non-thematic self-manifestation that is, as Rudolf Bernet (2013), Thompson (2004), and Dan Zahavi (2003, 2010) have claimed, the pre-reflective self-affection of the body, i.e., the body that feels itself. The boundary between pre-reflective and reflective self-awareness can be crossed through the exercise of the will and the direction of attention, as sought by practices such as somaesthetics. Therefore, if we take this phenomenological analysis into account, it does not seem to be in contrast with the role recognized by somaesthetics for reflection on bodily feelings to heighten somatic awareness. It seems to me that it is more a matter of pragmatic enrichment of the phenomenological approach.

« 6 » Finally, regarding emersiology, with its dynamic of environmental immersion and emersion of performers and the consequent "activation of the body through its ecologization" (§30), Petri and Gromadzki stress that it reveals a "similar kind of dissatisfaction with phenomenological methodology with regard to the first-person experienced living body to Varela's" (§41). In doing so, they refer to a certain dissatisfaction that is expressed by Varela, Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind* concerning the lack of a pragmatic dimension in phenomenology (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 19; Martiny 2017). However, various scholars such as Thompson (2007: 413–416) and I (Pace Giannotta 2017), have argued that this dissatisfaction was influenced by a partial reading of phenomenology conceived of as a purely theoretical enterprise that leads, in the end, to a disembodied and abstract view of subjectivity. While this reading may be appropriate regarding certain aspects of the "transcendental phenomenology of constitution" (*Ideas I*, Husserl 1983), look-

ing at the overall development of Husserl's project leads us to tone down this criticism and to focus, on the contrary, on those developments of phenomenology that are centered on the role of corporeality, alterity, intersubjectivity and immersion in the world (Bernet 2013; Zahavi 2002; Pace Giannotta 2022a, 2022b) – i.e., those aspects enclosed in the concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*, Husserl 1970). Furthermore, when presenting emersiology, Petri and Gromadzki point out the contrast between this practice of body ecology that "promotes the deepening of self-awareness through movement activities performed interactively" (§43), and "self-observation in meditation techniques performed in isolation" (§43). On this point, however, I would like to stress that the practice of mindfulness-awareness meditation – which is central to Varela's neurophenomenology and is very close to the phenomenological method (Varela 1996: 331, 346) – is never "performed in isolation." It is a practice that is bodily grounded and whose focus is often bodily sensations (breath, posture, sensations of warmth, cold, etc.), essentially including also interaction between practitioners and mindful immersion in a certain environment (from the meditation room to natural environments, e.g., in walking meditation). Furthermore, mindfulness-awareness is extended by practitioners to every aspect of ordinary life (e.g., eating a meal, drinking tea, etc.). Would it not be more useful to look at the compatibility and the possibility of integration between these practices, which can lead to reciprocal enrichment within the framework of phenomenology and neurophenomenology? ¶ In particular, it would be interesting to extend Petri and Gromadzki's call to include off-radar first-person methodologies also to other corporeal disciplines, ancient and new, such as yoga, martial arts, bioenergetics, etc.

« 7 » In the end, the open-ended character of neurophenomenology and its openness to improvement and methodological enrichment, which is stressed by the authors of the target article, can only benefit from the search for points of contact and possibilities for dialogue and integration between its phenomenological grounding and various first-person, embodied methodologies and practices.

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Authors’ Response

How Open Should Open-Ended Neurophenomenology Be?

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> Abstract • We provide additional explanations regarding the constant refinement methodology and the integration of various first-person disciplines within neurophenomenology. In particular, we discuss the issues of our pragmatist approach, the compatibility of methods, and the parametrization of first-person disciplines.

« 1 » To begin with, we would like to express our thanks to all the commentators for their insightful contributions. We are delighted that our article was able to initiate such a lively (sometimes polarizing) exchange of opinions. In this response we would like to clarify some details, answering all the questions posed along the way.

Of theories and misunderstandings

« 2 » The first misunderstanding revolves around theory construction, with **Aleš Oblak** (§11) pointing to the general problem of neurophenomenology – the lack of a more standard-science, formal theory construction/hypothesis-testing type of inquiry – but is also present in **Kristian Moltke Martiny’s** commentary (§16), where he warns that our open-ended proposal might succumb to a “whatever works strategy.” In our opinion, the problem seems to be caused by a misconception of the “pragmatist strategy” (**Martiny** *ibid*), which constitutes the core of the project of re-embodiment neurophenomenology. One can get the impression that the commentators’ understanding of it is rather close to the idea of “bricolage,” a form of experimental activity of constructing knowledge through accidental means (Lévi-Strauss 1966), or the very common understanding of pragmatism in terms of practi-