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Phenomenology and the metaphysics of mind

Abstract

My paper consists of five parts. In the first part I explain what I mean by the phenomenology of mind. In the second part I show that in contemporary analytic philosophy the prevailing metaphysical theories of the mind are typically not connected to the phenomenology of mind. Views on the nature of the mind are developed without considering the phenomenological facts. In the third part I outline a notion of metaphysics connected to the phenomenology of mind, then in the fourth and fifth parts I give some examples to illustrate how I envision the nature of this connection.

Keywords: phenomenology of mind, metaphysics of mind, mind-body problem, perceptual experience, mental causation.

1. The Phenomenology of mind

By phenomenology of mind I mean an investigation of the mind which explores its phenomena from the point of view of *how is it like for the subject to experience it*. Thus I mean by phenomenology of mind the analysis of the *experiences of the subject from a first person or subjective perspective*; the investigation of how things appear *for* the subject, from the *point of view of the subject*, from the *perspective* of the subject.

From this standard definition of phenomenology follows a particular methodological principle which is called *phenomenological reduction* in the phenomenological literature. This principle was defined by Edmund Husserl in one place as follows:

[According to phenomenological reduction]: everything transcendent (everything not given immanently to me) is to be assigned the index of zero, that is, its existence, its validity is not to be assumed as such, except as at most the *phenomenon of validity*. I may have recourse to the sciences only as phenomena, and therefore not as systems of valid truths, or as premises, or even as hypotheses that I could use as points of departure — for instance, the whole of psychology or the whole of the natural sciences. (Husserl 1907/1999: 63-64)

This definition says: when we investigate the mind in a phenomenological manner, we must be especially careful not to be influenced by our common sense opinions and scientific convictions about the mind. In the course of phenomenological research we must – as the saying goes – „put into brackets” all of these. Only in this way can we focus on the *intrinsic* characteristics of the subject’s experience – that is, on those characteristics which characterize the experience of the subject from the point of view of the subject.

But to focus on the experience is not enough in itself. The phenomenology of mind is not about describing *particular* experiences from the point of view of the subject, but is about

revealing the phenomenological nature of certain *types* of experience. This distinguishes phenomenology from mere introspection. For example in the case of visual experience the phenomenological analysis should not be like: „this thing appears to me visually in such-and-such a way and that other thing in such-and-such a way” but rather it has to reveal the *essential phenomenological characteristics* of visual experience itself. It has to reveal those phenomenological marks, which are *shared by* every visual experience, and which at the same time *distinguish* visual experience from all other kinds of experience. In short: it has to reveal the *inherent and distinctive* phenomenological marks of visual experience. This research process is called in the phenomenological literature *eidetic phenomenology* – or, to use an expression with not-too-fortunate connotations – *Wesenschau*. As Husserl put it:

Phenomenological psychology in this manner undoubtedly must be established as an „eidetic phenomenology”; it is then exclusively directed toward the *invariant essential forms*. For instance, the phenomenology of perception of bodies will not be [simply] a report on the factually occurring perceptions or those to be expected; rather it will be the presentation of invariant structural systems without which perception of a body and a synthetically concordant multiplicity of perceptions of one and the same body as such would be unthinkable. (Husserl 1929/1997: 165)

To summarize these two methodological principles of phenomenology, built on each other:

If the phenomenological reduction contrived a means of access to the phenomenon of real and also potential inner experience, the method founded in it of „eidetic reduction” provides the means of access to the invariant essential structures of the total sphere of pure psychical process. (Husserl 1929/1997: 165)

What is the relation between the phenomenological essence-oriented classification of mental experiences and the folk psychological classification of mental entities (like bodily sensations, moods, emotions, perceptual experiences, etc.)? I think the following: the folk psychological classification of mental entities is all right from a phenomenological point of view. It is rather sketchy, but not fundamentally mistaken. Furthermore I think that the folk psychological classification of mental entities is proper and satisfying, because the types of mental entities it distinguishes really do have – inherent and distinctive – phenomenological traits. In other words: the folk psychological classification of mental entities fundamentally *reflects phenomenological differences* between these entities, which all of us experience in the course of our mental life.

Thus, if there is a view which I, as a phenomenologist, must reject, it is the view of the later Wittgenstein; what he wants to say with the „private language argument” (Wittgenstein 1953: 243-315.§.). One of the intended conclusions of the private language argument is that the *identity of sensations are partly constituted by* the rules of language use. Wittgenstein so argues (surely his argument is wrong – see Ayer 1985: 74-77, Robinson 1994: 91-118), that without a firmly established linguistic practice we wouldn’t be able to identify our different bodily sensations. Wittgenstein’s „picture” of language thus suggests that when we try to define the different types of experience, we should give priority to folk psychological practice over phenomenology.

I don’t have conclusive arguments against the Wittgensteinian approach. But nor do I believe that such arguments are possible. I think that in this case – as in most cases of priority issue – we could argue only in a circular way. I say: the folk psychological classification of mental

entities reflects phenomenological facts; it classifies mental entities in the way it does, because the types of mental entities in question have just those inherent and distinctive phenomenological marks as they do. The Wittgensteinian says: it appears to you that the different types of mental entities have such-and-such inherent and distinctive phenomenological marks, because they are classified by folk psychology in such a way as they are. Which is prior, phenomenology or folk psychology? For me it is trivially phenomenology, for the Wittgensteinian it is trivially folk psychology. I believe that the Wittgensteinian is in error, he believes that I am.

2. The prevailing metaphysical theories of mind in analytic philosophy

Most of the prevailing metaphysical theories of mind in analytic philosophy do not care about phenomenological facts. They establish their views on the nature of the mind in such a way that they ignore the phenomenology of mind.

The slight of phenomenology is perhaps best illustrated by the dispute on mental causation over the last 40-45 years or so. The debate on mental causation is briefly the following. (1) It is our natural conviction that the mind is a causally efficacious entity: mental events can cause physical events. (2) According to the natural sciences the physical world is causally closed: physical events have sufficient physical causes. (3) It is plausible to suppose that there is some difference between causally relevant and irrelevant properties of causes. (4) Therefore, mental properties are identical to neurophysiological (physical) properties. In broad outlines this is the argument for type-identity (Lewis 1966, Armstrong 1968). (5) However, due to multiple realizability, type-identity is empirically implausible: it is implausible to think that pain in a human and in an octopus is realized by the same type of neurophysiological states (Putnam 1967/1991). (6) One possible solution: let's not identify mental properties with physical properties; rather let's claim that mental properties supervene (globally or locally) on physical properties. (7) But if we do not identify mental properties with physical properties, then – given the *exclusion argument* (Kim 1989/1993), which presupposes (3) – we must either accept epiphenomenalism (which we don't want at all, because of (1)), or else must say that mental and physical properties jointly overdetermine their physical effect, some overt action, which is again implausible.

Similarly simply put, the following strategies have been devised to circumvent the above problems. Some (like Davidson 1970/1980, 1993) deny that we have to distinguish the causally relevant and irrelevant properties of a cause, and argue that it is the only way to evade the exclusion argument and also maintain (1). Others (like Lewis 1972/2004) claim that multiple realizability is not a conclusive objection to the type-identity theory, because we must identify mental and physical (neurophysiological) properties within species. Still others (like Jackson 1998: 1. chapter) argue that we don't need the type-identity theory in order to maintain the causal efficacy of mental properties: mental and physical properties are different, but the latter necessarily determine the former. Yet again others (like Shoemaker 2001, 2007) hold that not every kind of overdetermination is wrong; they distinguish between redundant and non-redundant overdetermination, and argue that with the latter we can solve the problem of mental causation which does not have any of the above defects.

I won't carry on, for it should be clear that phenomenological considerations *do not appear* in the main premises of the contemporary debates about mental causation. (This debate has about as much to do with phenomenology as the debate about perdurantism-exdurantism-

endurantism, or the especially sexy problem of the existence of arbitrarily detached parts.) The simple fact is that the participants of this debate consider *exclusively* the property of the mind (of mental events) that it is able to exert a causal influence in the world, and they make their standpoint on the question of such a great importance as the relation between „mental” and „physical” on the basis of the analysis of this one property of the mind.

Of course one could say that our natural conviction that the mind has causal influence on the world really *does* have phenomenological roots, and to this extent the different theories of mental causation are all about the phenomenological mind. I have to admit that the question is a little bit more complicated than that. For it is really a phenomenological fact that the mind is able to cause things in the world, given the fact that our conscious actions do have a phenomenology (we experience our conscious acts.). However, the phenomenology of our conscious actions does *not* show – what is presupposed by all the participants of the debate – that in the course of the action a mental *event* causes a non-mental (physical) *event*. Rather it shows that the *subject itself* (or rather the *body* of the subject, the body as the subject *experiences* it) causes it. Thus the subject itself (or her experienced body) is the relatum of the causal relation, not some event in her mind. So metaphysically or ontologically the real cause is a different kind of thing. Thus (although I’m not totally sure of it), the phenomenology of conscious acts rather fits with a metaphysics of agent-causation (Taylor 1966: chapter 8-9, Chisholm 1976, O’ Connor 2000: chapter 3-4), but this type of metaphysics is almost universally rejected by contemporary philosophers. Almost all contemporary philosophers think about these problems in terms of event-event relations without questioning it.

Of course, not only the metaphysical theories of mental causation have ignored phenomenology, and are about something *other* than the experiencing mind, but generally most of the philosophical theories of mind in analytic philosophy. As far as I can see, neither logical behaviorism, regarding mental entities as behavioural dispositions (Ryle 1949), nor functionalism, individuating the types of mental entities in a causal way (Putnam, 1967/1991, Fodor 1968, Harman 1973), nor eliminativism (Rorty, 1979; chapter 2., Paul Churchland 1981/1991, Stich 1983, Patricia Churchland 1986) or fictionalism (Dennett 1971), or the causal (Fodor, 1987) and teleological (Millikan, 1984) theories of intentionality have *anything to do with* the phenomenology of mind, not to mention the theories of cognitive science, such as computationalism (Pylyshyn 1984) and connectionism (Clark, 1989). They have nothing to do with what it is for the subject to experience, and how things are given, how they appear for the subject from a subjective point of view. The object of the aforementioned theories is simply *not the phenomenological or experiencing mind*, but something *else*.

3. The metaphysics of the phenomenological mind

What I mean by the metaphysics of the phenomenological mind is the metaphysics of *facts revealed by the phenomenology of mind*. Unlike the prevailing metaphysical views in analytic philosophy, the metaphysics of the phenomenological mind does not have to fit our common sense or scientific beliefs about the mind, which are *alien* or *independent* of the phenomenology of mind (such as the causal closure of the physical world), but has to conform to the phenomenological facts about the mind.

Make no mistake. I do not merely say that a metaphysics of phenomenological mind must take phenomenological facts seriously. More precisely: I do not merely say that beside other respects, phenomenological respects has to be considered *too*, just because it is not right that a

metaphysical theory of mind is phenomenologically implausible. I am not just saying what, for instance, John Searle says: „You cannot say anything that is phenomenologically false”.(2005: 335). Seeing it in this way, the phenomenology of mind would only have a *restrictive* role – it would merely serve to rule out certain phenomenologically implausible theories. I make a much stronger claim: the phenomenology of mind *delivers* the phenomenological facts about the mind, and the metaphysics of the phenomenological mind is the metaphysics of *these* delivered phenomenological facts.

I do not contend that contemporary analytic philosophers are not doing phenomenology in a restrictive sense. For instance, the *transparency argument* (Harman 1990/1997, Tye 1995, 2000) against sense-datum theory (and non-intentional qualia theory), or the *inverted spectrum argument* (Block-Fodor 1972) or *inverted earth argument* (Block 1997) against functionalism are phenomenological types of arguments. Such arguments aim to show that the theories in question are unacceptable, because they cannot account for certain phenomenological features of our experience.

I want to say the following. Take functionalism. It's quite clear that functionalism is not a phenomenologically motivated theory, because it individuates mental events with their relational (causal-functional) properties. In other words: it takes these relational properties to be the essential properties of mental events, and not their intrinsic (phenomenological) characteristics. Since then opponents of functionalism have raised many objections to functionalism, some of which *happen* to be phenomenological. In this context phenomenological facts were not brought up with the aim to develop a comprehensive metaphysics which fits with these facts, but rather were just brought up – like I said before – as *certain respects among many* to argue against functionalism. It is this sort of thing that I have in mind when I say that phenomenology usually has a mere restrictive role in analytic philosophy.

Let's see now the metaphysics of phenomenological mind at work! In the next two sections I want to show how it may work through some examples.

4. First illustration: phenomenology and the metaphysical theories of mind

Suppose that complete phenomenology establishes that every mental event is directed at something and every mental event has the characteristic of what it is like for the subject. (If you protest against „complete phenomenology”, then please also protest against „complete physics”!) Thus contrary to the orthodoxy of separatism, every mental event (including bodily sensations, moods and feelings) is intentional and every mental event (including thought processes) is phenomenally conscious.

Suppose also that complete phenomenology establishes that the relation between these two aspects of mental events is not contingent, but *necessary*. That is, it is not the case that a mental event is directed at something due to a certain property and has the characteristic of what it is like for the subject due to a certain *other* property. Hence it's false that the mind instantiates *two different* and *independently existing* properties, and that it is possible for the mind to instantiate only one of them, although as a matter of fact it instantiates both.

I think that based on this insight of complete phenomenology, we can refute the knowledge argument (Jackson 1982, 1986/1997) and the conceivability argument (Chalmers 1996) for qualia-based property dualism.

I begin with the knowledge argument. Suppose that from her birth Mary lives in a black-and-white room, and acquires knowledge of the external world from a black-and-white TV screen and black-and-white books. (For the sake of the thought-experiment we could also assume that there are no mirrors in Mary's room, that her skin is white, her hair is black, that she does not cut herself and she does not menstruate.) Otherwise Mary is a superscientist: in her black-and-white room she learns *every* relevant physical facts (complete physics) about human vision. She learns the physics of light, the optics of the eye, the anatomy and neurophysiology of the whole visual system. In short: Mary knows *every* physical fact about human vision. Now suppose that one day Mary is released from her black-and-white room. She then sees a red tomato and exclaims: „Hurray, now I know what it is like to see red!”.

That's the thought-experiment, now comes the argument. The supposition was that in her black-and-white room Mary knows every relevant physical fact about human vision. However when she left her room, she learned something *new*, something which she did not know before – namely, what it is like to see red. Now, since (1) Mary knew every physical fact about human vision, and since (2) after she left her room she has learned something new about human vision, it follows that her *prior physical knowledge was not complete*. Therefore, physicalism is false, because not all facts are physical.

What sort of mind-body theory does the knowledge argument imply? The answer is: Qualia-based property dualism. For the intended conclusion of the argument that there are non-physical facts should be understood as the claim that the mind instantiates non-physical properties. (This conforms to the standard definition of „fact” according to which a fact is a particular's property instantiation.) That is: the quale of redness, which Mary gets to know upon leaving her room is *not a physical property*.

How can we argue against the knowledge argument based on thesis of complete phenomenology seen above? This way: the knowledge argument implies property dualism which is a kind of epiphenomenalism. Since if (1) the causal closure of the physical world is true, that is, if every action has a sufficient physical cause (and the argument does not question this), and if (2) phenomenal properties are *not physical* properties – which the argument intends to prove – then phenomenal properties are causally inert.

This sort of epiphenomenalism is possible only if we separate the intentionality and phenomenal character of mental events. That is, only if we say that intentional properties are physical (which they must be, because they have causal efficacy), but phenomenal properties are causally inert (which they must be, because they are not physical). But since complete phenomenology has shown that there is a necessary connection between intentional and phenomenal properties, the knowledge argument which treats them separately is unacceptable from a phenomenological perspective.

The conceivability argument stands in even starker opposition to the thesis of complete phenomenology than the knowledge argument. Here is the conceivability argument: we can conceive zombies. These creatures are our perfect physical duplicates (they have the same physical properties we do), which have exactly the same intentional properties we do, but they live their mental life in complete „darkness”. When the traffic light switches to red, seeing it

the zombie brakes like you or me. When the zombie sips from a tepid coffee he tuts like you or me. When the zombie is stung he shouts like you or me. It's just that for the zombie there is *no such thing as seeing red, no such thing as tasting coffee, no such thing as feeling pain.*

Now since (1) everything that is consistently conceivable is metaphysically possible, and since (2) zombies are consistently conceivable, it follows that zombies are metaphysically possible. But if zombies are metaphysically possible, then physicalism is false, because not all mental properties necessarily supervene on physical properties – given the metaphysical possibility of creatures which have the same physical properties we do, yet do not have phenomenal properties we do.

The majority of contemporary analytic philosophers reject premise (1), saying: from the consistent conceivability of zombies no way follows the metaphysical possibility of zombies. From the perspective of complete phenomenology premise (2) is to be rejected. According to complete phenomenology zombies cannot be consistently conceived, because it would require the separation of the intentional and phenomenal properties of mental events. That is something we cannot do, given the necessary connection between them.

5. Second illustration: phenomenology and the metaphysical theories of perception

Suppose that complete phenomenology shows that our perceptual experience has two basic phenomenological characteristics. One is that in perceptual experience the things which we are aware of (that is: the objects we perceive) are *transcendent*, or *exist independently of our actual perceptual experience*. The other is that in perceptual experience the way in which (intentional) objects are given to us – as opposed to other kinds of intentional events – is *robust, presentative, not just representative*.

„Conjoining” these two phenomenological characteristics of perceptual experience, this is what we get: from a phenomenological perspective, in perceptual experience things that exist independently of our actual perceptual experiences (transcendent entities) are presented to us. To put it in another way, and perhaps more vividly: the qualitative feature of our perceptual experience is experienced *in the world outside*, on the perceived *mind-independent/transcendent object* itself. When we perceive a red tomato, for instance, we experience the way it appears to us *outside*, on the mind-independent/transcendent red tomato itself. To use a slogan: from a phenomenological perspective in the case of perceptual experiences „qualia ain't in the head“ (Byrne – Tye 2006).

We could also put it this way: perceptual experience consists of mental events whose qualitative features are experienced on entities that exist independently of our actual perceptual experiences, *outside* in the world. This peculiar phenomenology is the *distinctive mark* of perceptual experience. These phenomenological characteristics are what distinguish perceptual experience from other types of mental events: thinking, feeling, moods, bodily sensation, after-images and their ilk. These two phenomenological characteristics belong *exclusively* to perceptual experience. These two characteristics define the *inherent and distinctive* mark of perceptual experience. It follows from all of this that if some mental event does not have both phenomenological characteristics, then it is not a perceptual experience, but something else: thinking, mood, bodily sensation, or maybe even after-image.

How can the metaphysics of perception be connected to these phenomenological facts? By taking this phenomenology at *face value* and by raising the question in the following form: what kind of metaphysics must we accept in order for the subject to have the perceptual experience with this phenomenology which she has? It has to be downright Kantian, because it must reveal the transcendental conditions of possibility of the phenomenological characteristics of perceptual experience.

What must we claim? We must claim that the perceived mind-independent object and its properties „shape the outline of the subject’s conscious experience” (Martin 2004: 64), where „shaping” is to be understood not in the causal sense, but in the sense that the perceptual experience’s phenomenal character *depends constitutively* on the nature of the perceived object. Or as Campbell puts it: „[the phenomenology] of your experience as you look around the room, is *constituted* by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you“ (Campbell 2002: 116).

Consequently, the metaphysical theory which takes at face value the phenomenological characteristics of perceptual experience is *externalist*; it individuates perceptual experiences relationally. Still, it differs considerably from the standard Putnam/Burge type of externalism (Putnam 1975, 1988, Burge 1979, 1986). For contrary to their version, this externalism is rooted in the *phenomenology* of perceptual experience. This externalism is based not on the traditional Twin-Earth arguments, but on the phenomenological facts. Accordingly, we have to individuate broadly/relationally the content of our perceptual experience because phenomenology dictates us to do so. From a phenomenological perspective, in our perceptual experience things existing independently of our experiences are presented to us; we experience the qualitative features of our perceptual experiences in the *world outside*.

Let’s not stop! Two more things clearly follow. If the phenomenologically plausible metaphysical theory of perception must be externalist, which has to state that the phenomenology of perceptual experience is constituted partly by the properties of the perceived object, then this metaphysical theory *must reject the thesis of local supervenience*, according to which the phenomenology of mental states is determined only by the subject’s inner states. The phenomenologically plausible theory of perception is only compatible with the thesis of global supervenience.

Furthermore, because it is metaphysically possible that there are hallucinations which are from a subjective perspective indistinguishable from veridical perceptual experience, and because from a phenomenological perspective veridical perceptual experience are to be individuated broadly/relationally, therefore, the phenomenologically plausible theory of perception must say that veridical perceptual experiences are a different type of mental event than the hallucinations which are indistinguishable from them, given that by definition they are not relations to mind-independent/transcendent objects. It must therefore commit itself to the disjunctive theory of perception (Tőzsér 2005, 2009).

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