THEORETICAL / PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER

What Does a Phenomenological Theory of Social Objects Mean?

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Abstract

What are social objects and what makes them different from other realms of scientifically studied reality? How can sociology theoretically account for the relationship between objects of social reality such as norms and social structures, and their existence as objects of experience for living human actors? Contemporary sociology is characterized by a fundamental dissensus with regard to this question. Ironically, this is the very problem Alfred Schutz tackled in his phenomenological critique of Max Weber's sociological theory. As Schutz demonstrated nearly a century ago, phenomenology's egological method is indispensable to a non-reductionist theory of intersubjectivity, namely, one that does full justice to embodied conscious life while demonstrating the relative independence of the intersubjective (social) sphere. In the process, Schutz's mundane phenomenology results not only in a thorough rejection of all kinds of philosophical solipsism but also warns of the dangers, one that Husserl himself succumbed to, of granting collective structures transcendental status. Through a critical reading of Schutz's early theory in the Phenomenology of the Social World, alongside key texts by Husserl, this paper shows the continued relevance of Schutz's phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity to serve both as ontological grounding of "the social" and a method for investigating and describing concrete social objects in their transformation into theoretico-analytical objects amenable to empirical observation.

Keywords Schutz · Phenomenology · Egology · Intersubjectivity · Sociological method

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Introduction

Phenomenology's jarred reception-or non-reception-in the social sciences produced many misgivings with regard to phenomenology's contributions to sociological analysis (Luckmann, 1978; Schutz, 1975a; Wagner, 1973; Wilson, 1970). This paper clarifies the phenomenological theory of social objects proposed in the groundbreaking social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. The paper reconstructs the steps of analytical construction that begins with phenomenology's egological method and develops towards the constitution of the field of objects of sociological analysis. The paper, therefore, demonstrates the indispensability of phenomenology in defining the distinct ontological status of the social world and its objects (Bhaskar, 1979). This ontological status is unique in the sense that objects of *social* reality cannot be described in metaphysical or ideal terms. Neither can they be reduced to objects of purely material, physical, biochemical-and other reality. The founding Durkheimian tradition of sociology is clear in its demand that sociologists treat social objects, inclusive of terms such as social relationships, cultural norms, and rites of institution, as hard and irreducible "facts" of reality (Durkheim, 1982). Yet this tradition never quite clarifies what is the *differentia specifica* of such objects and what makes them distinct from the rest of "reality" of natural and non-human objects, let alone the variation in subjective meanings which are attached to social objects of any generic type.

One radical solution to this problem, stemming from radical constructivist perspectives and poststructuralist theories of the discursive and linguistic constitution of reality, is to treat *all* of reality (including natural reality) as linguistically-and hence, by extension, socially-constituted (Harré & Gillett, 1994). In this view, the status of language as a social product is sufficient to confer all objects of reality a "social" nature. Yet, this position takes as its base assumption what should come at the conclusion of sociological analysis, which is to explain *how* and *why* a given collective interpretation of reality comes to prevail over other possible interpretations-which are also linguistic and discursive in nature. This view provides blanket interpretations for reality as "social," and in doing so disarms and preempts sociological analysis and explanation before it has begun. Similarly, in spite of the growing acknowledgment of the importance of cognitive categories to social life (e.g., Lizardo, 2014; Turner, 2007; Vaisey, 2009), their proposed study in separation from lived experience directs social science increasingly towards the study of *forms of cognition of the social world* as separate from the critical task of studying *the social world as itself a meaningfully ordered world* (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The other solution, which also seeks to bring the question of social reality to a final rest, comes from within sociology. It claims that the essential nature of social reality lies in its "relational" construction. Social science is not a science of constituted objects of any kind, but rather a science of relations, of the "reality in between" (Donati, 2011: 60). The "relational turn" proposes and celebrates a world of things in which every object exists as a non-essential entity and an effect of a confluence of forces. This radical theory of social ontology-radical because it seems to stand opposed to the basic experience of reality as

composed of constituted unities of beings and objects-appears to radically "sociologize" the world. The world consists of objects, none of which exist as a "for-itself," but as the always contingent and provisional outcome of continuously unsettled vectors of forces. In its various guises, this approach treats "identity" as a byproduct of an underlying original reality of relational matrices of networks within which human individuals happen to be caught (White, 1992). In another view, relational matrices grant reality and social agency to both human actors and non-human "actants" whose causal responsibility is claimed as co-equal (Latour, 2005). More typically, however, "relationality" is offered in sociological theorizing mostly as a philosophical slogan, with reference to neither constitutional act nor constituted object, what Archer rightly criticizes as "relationism without *relata*"(2003).

The phenomenological method is not deployed, as some social scientists and philosophical detractors erroneously assume, to *reduce* objects of the social world into artefacts of mental representation. In this view, phenomenology accounts for social reality exclusively through its reflection in mental events, and is confined to the analysis of such events (e.g., Benzecry & Winchester, 2017). The egological method of phenomenology has often been used as a charge against phenomenology itself, beginning from those working within the tradition to those opposed to it on philosophical and other grounds. This includes phenomenological disciples such as Heidegger, who in no uncertain terms rebuffed and scorned Husserl's egology in place of a search for authentic knowledge of *Dasein* (in an ontology that, as Adorno (2019) observed, ultimately ends up in a poetic mysticism of Being). It includes those like Sartre, who fetishized the egological starting point and discovered in the *cogito*'s existential dread the ultimate evidence of being's self-alienation, self-creation, and the impossibility of real sociality. The egological method has been used by critics ranging from Adorno (1940) and Habermas (1992) to Bourdieu (1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to reject phenomenology as serving little to no purpose in social analysis due to its "subjectivist" and "solipsistic" method (Pula, 2021).

Many of these positions have rested on misreadings and mischaracterizations of Husserl's phenomenology and its applicability to social analysis. Husserl's phenomenology was intended neither as an ultimate metaphysics of reality in ways that aims to outdo and outbid the descriptive results of science nor as an effort to restore to science a long lost "proper" philosophical foundation. Instead, Husserl saw the phenomenological project ultimately as a *pre-science* that bridges "ordinary," "common-sense," and scientific knowledge, by providing an accounting of the latter's basis in the former, and thereby define the transcendental conditions of scientific knowledge. Against the classic phenomenological metaphysics of the idealist tradition that sought to restore the unity of the world in the philosophical moment of absolute truth, Husserl's goal instead was to philosophically account for the *plural* nature of reality and the corresponding *regional ontologies* that scientific knowledge establishes as manifold orders of reality (Russell, 2006; Zahavi, 2003, 2017).

Nowhere does the relationship between ordinary and scientific knowledge require more clarification than in sociology.[1] The work here is not of "restoring" nor "bridging," but rather of *disentangling* scientific from ordinary concepts, given that sociology does not enjoy the privilege of encountering its object externally, but rather confronts it "from within," so to speak. This very problem constitutes the basic ontological problem of social analysis-what is "the social" and how is it distinct from the reality of the conscious, human actors that make up "society"? What distinguishes social reality from the personal, subjective reality of its constitutive actors, their intentionalities, and individual actions? Does social reality (defined as any array of "social facts") causally *precede* the social actors who are merely its passive vessels, or do the actions of human actors *create* social reality of which institutions, norms, relations, culture, etc. are deliberately produced elements? Over the century of sociology's existence as a scientific discipline, the problem has manifested itself in a variety of guises, most infamously in the duality of agency and structure.

In recent decades, sociologists found ingenious ways of having their cake and eating it too. Relying on composite, multivalent concepts like *habitus* (Bourdieu) and "structuration" (Giddens) sociological theory could claim that social reality is both an historically constituted set of "structures" (institutions, norms, culture, etc.) and a reality actively constructed through the behavior of the very same socialized actors. This is due to the latter's "ontological complicity" with the reality that their respective activity generates. Such theoretical syncretism has generated its own set of problems. This is not because the solution is necessarily mistaken in its basic assumption, but because it fails to establish ontological priors, conflates the temporal ordering and the mode of being of analytically distinct moments of originary constitution and acts of reproduction, does not distinguish between the determination of facts of external reality and the determination of facts of the actor's inner modes of being, and only vaguely defines the distinctiveness of the field of objects given to sociological interpretation from other fields of scientifically known reality (of natural and built environments, of tools and machines, of viral agents and biospheres, etc.). In the most extreme (but plausible) interpretations of such syncretic accounts, the result is either a quasi-agency (since every action is also structure), or a radical sociologism in which even the inner-most realms of subjective existence are externally staged and manufactured through the body's deep internalization of social structures.

Another approach is taken by studies of science. Commencing variously from philosophical and/or sociological starting points, they have arguably done a better job than other forms of social theorizing in integrating the objective materiality of tools and instruments and situating them in relation to practices and to the subjectivity and agency of human actors. For Latour, this has meant reconceptualizing tools and other objects from their external relation to actors and into their figurational standing and position within social relations. In doing so, Latour thematizes the position of tools, instruments, and other varied "things" from passive background elements of social relations to material "actants" that constitute, constrain, and

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[1] I speak here of sociology for the sake of convention and convenience, but the remarks apply to social science more generally.

transform as they relate to each other in systems of "interobjectivity" (Latour, 1996, 2005). The metaphorical and theoretical push to center objects in the analysis of social relations and highlight the latter's dependence on the mediations of the former is also found in Knorr Cetina's program for "objectualization". The position is based on the recognition that in late modernity, non-human objects come to increasing serve as "sources of the self, of relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and social integration" and therefore constitute a novel form of "object-centered sociality" (Knorr Cetina, 1997: 23). From another direction, Ihde's (1993, 2016) "postphenomenology" proposes to reevaluate the role of instrumentalities from the standpoint of classic phenomenology. While re-thematizing the body's relation to the instrument, it proceeds also by the inclusion of the "politics of the artefact" (1993: 111) into the phenomenological account and hence the historically variable relationship between technical instrument, embodied perception, and scientific knowledge. In doing so, postphenomenology brings to light the historical co-constitution and co-dependence, largely ignored in classic phenomenology, of instrument and perception (Ihde, 2016).

These interventions have introduced important revisions to the prevailing perspectives on science and technology that characterizes a great deal of contemporary social theory, which continues to hold on to a "nonmodernist"-and even "antimodernist"-nature/culture duality (Ihde, 2021; Latour, 1993). However, the largely "postsocial" perspective of the shared program for a "sociality with objects" (Knorr Cetina, 1997) (and, in Ihde's case, a postphenomenology without sociality) overshadow the more fundamental problem of the science of social relations-that of intersubjectivity. While instrumentalities and their mediations prove critical in the study of science and its practices, as well as in highlighting the keen and complex ways human relationships with non-human objects have changed in late modernity, a general science of social relations cannot take as its epistemic starting point the existence of social relations, to which are then added objects-or vice versa. Rather, the problem of the science of sociality is of the objectivity of the relations themselves, and the related status of sociology as a science which constructs its *own* peculiar object, one that is neither an instrument nor merely a mediatory artefact, nor exhibits any obvious materiality (Krais, 1991).

The above theoretical "clearing of the path" is not intended as a wholesale rejection of aforementioned approaches, and the highlights exaggerate certain positions without considering nuances. However, they enable us to contrast recent perspectives with the classic phenomenological solution to the same question, one that has been unfortunately obscured over many decades of social theorizing. This paper does so by revisiting the solution developed classically by Alfred Schutz in *Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967[1932]), building upon the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The paper recounts the manner in which Schutz mobilized the problem of phenomenological constitution in the egological sphere towards establishing the ontological status of the intersubjective sphere. The phenomenological process explicates the grounds for the mutual existence of shared objects of a reality that, due to this phenomenologically revealed disposition, is given to knowledge as inherently social in its constitution.

The Egological Method

The aim of Husserl's egology is to explicate and describe fundamental rules of consciousness, explored reflectively through the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, and formally described in Husserl's transcendental logic. Unlike formal logic that operates through sets of formally prescribed rules, Husserl's transcendental logic is designed to express *intrinsic* and *universal* structures of embodied consciousness, which make possible meaningful experience of the world in the context of one's ordinary, pre-reflective, "pragmatic" orientation to it (Husserl, 2001). The egological method is, in other words, intended as a rigorous and methodical exploration of embodied conscious experience, not as reflection upon *my* private or personal experience of the world, but in terms of explicating the universal processes through which consciousness comes to develop certainty about facts of the world, and thereby reliably *think* it and *act* in it.

Husserl's egology is intended and carried out as a philosophical endeavor. Schutz's appropriation of Husserl's egological analysis follows Schutz's own efforts to resolve the problem of the determination of meaning that Max Weber introduced in sociological theory. The problem is quite basic, in the sense that Weber's classic definition of sociology as the study of *meaningful* social action does not clarify from whose standpoint, the actor or the observer, is the meaning of action determined (Schutz, 1967[1932]). Schutz realizes that the problem is not simply an observational one. Namely, the problem does not lie in the fact that the sociological observer cannot "get into the heads" of social actors and thereby "objectively" determine the internal, subjective context of meaning of any given social behavior. The behaviorist solution is to treat the problem as purely methodological in nature, and in which the solution lies in overcoming observational limits in social science through the constant improvement of observational techniques (such as through continuously improved standardized questionnaires and the permanent quest for expanding behavioral data points). Alternatively, the living human actor is replaced with theoretically more expedient and pliant models of behavior (such as the self-maximizing individual), resulting in a purely deductive explanatory science. Schutz is satisfied by neither of these solutions. For him, the problem is much more fundamental. The resulting problems

> do not as such belong to the social sciences. They refer rather to that *substratum of objects of the social sciences*... namely, the level at which the social world is constituted in Acts of everyday life with others-*Acts, that is, in which meanings are established and interpreted.* (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 17)

Put differently, Schutz sees the problem not as methodological but *ontological* in nature. It is herein that phenomenology finds its entry as a means of establishing the precise nature of the "substratum of objects of the social sciences". Addressing the problem requires examining the constitution of meaning at three interrelated levels: first, Ego's existence in a social world shared with others; second, Ego's acts of interpretation of meaning of Alter's actions, and third, the

mode of the sociological observer's determination of the objective meaning of social interaction between Ego and Alter.[2] Phenomenological analysis accomplishes the latter not by enabling the social scientist to engage in some mystical penetration into the inner consciousness of social actors, but to determine, on the basis of eidetic analysis, the constitutional rules of *general structures of meaning* as pertaining specifically to action in the social world.

Following Husserl, the problem of meaning is neither a purely linguistic question, nor one that can be resolved by reference to a "higher" idealism (or, alternatively, a "lower" materialism). Instead, it is the process by which living human actors ordinarily generate meaning in their mundane, pre-reflective encounter with the life-world. Husserl's basic problem of the constitution of meaning *in lived experience* furnishes the bridge between sociology's methodological problem and phenomenological analysis. Both problems thus find their starting point in the *epoché* of the pragmatic and pre-reflective "natural attitude".

Here, it is important to distinguish between two phases of Husserl's phenomenological project. Its original problem was the psychological question of intentionality[3] and its external (objective) correlate, in which he dealt with constitutional problems of reality within the sphere of subjective existence, in the manner of *phenomenological psychology*. The radicalized Cartesian method seeks to bracket out the world to enable introspection in the eidetic mode in order to explicate basic and fundamental structures of consciousness upon which human reality rests. In his later work, Husserl argues that the descriptive focus of phenomenological psychology makes it an insufficient basis for a science of transcendental subjectivity, which Husserl eventually adopts as the overarching goal of the philosophical project of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970). His later project, therefore, develops along a second pole, which is *transcendental phenomenology*. For Husserl the question of transcendental phenomenology arises inevitably because, "[we are] supposed to be dual beings-psychological[ly], as human objectivities [things present] in the world, the subjects of psychic life, and at the same time transcendental[ly], as *the subjects of a transcendental, world-constituting life-process*" (quoted in Kockelmans, 1994: 207, emphasis added). In transcendental phenomenology one moves beyond eidetic reflection to examine the constitution of the very world whose existence has been bracketed in the reduction, and with it the analysis of the Ego itself in its transcendental mode of existence. The first step toward such a *transcendental reduction* (the "second reduction") is recognition of the existence of others and thus the intersubjective existence of intentional objects (as objects for others and for the phenomenologist). The second step is more radical by involving the objectivation of the reflective ego itself, a "reduction of the reduction," resulting in a transcendent or absolute ego as the ultimate objectivation of a "being of being". In *Cartesian Mediations*, Husserl (1960) suggests that intersubjectivity itself is conditional upon the constitutional act of the transcendental Ego, i.e., that the transcendental reduction suffices as a means for revealing the fundamental structures of intersubjectivity. The transcendental Ego

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[2] The capitalized "Ego" here refers, as in Schutz, to the ego of Husserl's egology, rather than any psychological meaning of the term.

[3] Section 3 offers a more sustained discussion of Husserl's concept of intentionality.

can thus speak to the essences of *the entirely of the world* and its living subjects in their collective existence.

The point is important because Schutz is highly critical of Husserl's position on the transcendental Ego. Schutz sees insurmountable problems in the manner in which Husserl describes the goals and method of transcendental phenomenology in relation to intersubjectivity. Rather than follow Husserl's efforts to derive an ontology of collective life through the doubling down on egological analysis in the radicalized transcendental reduction, Schutz maintains the primacy of intersubjectivity as a constitutional accomplishment of the mundane order, i.e., as a fact of the lifeworld.

> Intersubjectivity is not a problem of constitution which can be solved within the transcendental sphere, but is rather a datum (*Gegebenheit*) of the lifeworld. It is the fundamental ontological category of human existence in the world. ... It can... be said with certainty that only ... an ontology of the lifeworld, not transcendental constitutional analysis, can clarify that essential relationship of intersubjectivity which is the basis of all social science-even though, as a rule, [intersubjectivity] is [in social science] taken for granted and accepted without question as a simple datum. (Schutz, 1975b: 82)

While appreciating the need to move beyond the limits of phenomenological psychology for the purpose of carrying out analysis at the level of intersubjectivity, Schutz is much more committed to the idea that the original *epoché* can bring to light intersubjective reality in the form of an objective world that is shared inter-monadically (because it is a world that also exists *intra*-monadically). Put in more contemporary terminology, Schutz wished to maintain the "relational" character of transcendental objects as ones *co-constituted* within the intersubjective sphere, premised upon the (phenomenologically apodictic) recognition of the *distinct* and *irreducible* ontological status of this sphere, and which can be described in ontic, rather than transcendental, terms. In terms of Schutz's own philosophical project, this meant beginning from the egological standpoint, but taking a different turn at the level of transcendental constitution. Most crucially, this task required Schutz to develop a different approach to the problem of the intersubjective constitution of reality, and it is understandable how Weber's sociology proved a critical ally and collocutor in the endeavor.

For Schutz, then, the egological task is directed towards an aim that is different from Husserl's, because it is already aiming at the problem of the constitution of intersubjective reality which calls for an explication of the very sphere of intersubjectivity in the "we-relationship" of Ego and Alter. In the we-relationship, Ego does not encounter Alter as a material body, nor as simply an "other consciousness". Instead, the we-relationship is a distinct mode of being in which two durations are temporarily attuned to one another and "harmonized". The result is not only bringing the other's being to recognition as another object in the world, but *living* in a relationship of empathetic understanding of Alter. Empathetic understanding is accomplished through mutual experiences of Alter's modes of expression, which involve not only communication via speech, but through the entirely of the body as a

"field of expression" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).[4] For Schutz, it is the lived sensuality of the face-to-face interaction that originally constitutes sociality, and from which all other forms of (indirect, mediated, discontinuous, etc.) sociality are derivative.

In this sense, the we-relationship is described and understood by Schutz not as a set of formal properties of joint action and interaction (as in symbolic interactionism [e.g., (Blumer, 1966)]), but as a distinct mode of embodied temporality and being, one captured in Schutz's appropriation of Bergson's notion of "growing old together".

It may seem paradoxical to establish the grounds of intersubjectivity through a deep, introspective analysis of the inner duration of subjective experience. However, the starting point is not arbitrary, for if the social world is not a purely material world (though it has a physical-material substratum), nor a purely spiritual world (though it abounds in spiritual objects with transcendental and metaphysical import), but a mundane world produced in ordinary, pragmatic, and pre-reflective acts of meaning, then explicating the relationship between meaning, behavior, and conscious life in the natural attitude, of what Husserl calls a descriptive study of appearances as such, is the absolutely necessary starting point.

The task generates a paradox, in the fact that the revelation of the social self also reveals the limits of sociality, and thus an *asocial* domain of the self. The insight results from the phenomenological investigation into the constitution of meaningful experience, through the reflective study of the inner duration, or what Henri Bergson called *durée* and William James the "stream of consciousness". Underlying consciousness is a substratum of *pure duration*, of "pure being" as an undifferentiated stream of consciousness, the basis of Leibniz's *petites perceptiones*. This heterogeneous stream of formless coming and passing moments is pre-phenomenal in nature. It is only the act of reflection, i.e., the stream's being caught in the "net of reflection" which introduces differentiations that produce consciousness of one's states of being, i.e., consciousness proper (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 45). Put differently, consciousness is produced in the very act of selection, of the creation of differentiated unities from the undifferentiated stream of sensory and inner experience. For Husserl, this marks the shift from the "flux-form" of primal lived experience, to "intentional unities" formed by acts of selection and differentiation from the flux. The intentional activity of consciousness is what turns the formless flux of (pre-) experience into acts of (experienced) meaning.

There is an epistemological significance to this in that it points to the limits of personal experience that is known and knowable. The basic rule is that, "reproduction [of an experience] becomes all the less adequate to the experience the nearer it comes to the intimate core of the person," resulting in "an ever greater vagueness of reproduced content" (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 53). Recollection of experiences of the external world can be characterized by lower or higher degrees of specificity. By contrast,

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[4] Schutz refers to this theoretical formulation as the "general thesis of the alter ego" (1967[1932]: 97–102).

[i]ncomparably more difficult is the reproduction of experiences of inter-nal perception; those internal perceptions that live close to the absolute pri-vate core of the person are irrecoverable as far as their How is concerned, and their That can be laid hold of only in a simple act of apprehension. Here belong, first of all, not only all experiences of the corporeality of the Ego, in other words, of the Vital Ego (muscular tensings and relaxings as corre-lates of the movements of the body, "physical" pain, sexual sensations, and so on), but also those psychic phenomena classified together under the vague heading of "moods," as well as "feelings" and "affects" (joy, sorrow, disgust, etc.). (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 53)

The fact that such inner experiences or pre-phenomenal flux are not immediately given to reproduction and thus sensible expression is relevant also to the possibility of their ideal objectivation and "rationalization," in the manner the term is used by Weber.

The limits of recall coincide with exactly with the limits of "rationalizability," provided that one uses this equivocal work-as Max Weber does at times-in the broadest sense, that is, in the sense of "capable of giving a meaning." Recover-ability to memory is, in fact, the first prerequisite of all rational construction. That which is irrecoverable-and this is in principle always something ineffa-ble-can only be lived but never "thought": it is in principle incapable of being verbalized. (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 53)

For phenomenologists like Max Scheler, the existence of the pre-phenomenal flux is demonstrative of an "absolutely intimate self" or "core self," i.e., an underly-ing substratum of experience upon which the intentionalities of consciousness are erected. "About the [absolutely intimate self] we know both that it must necessarily *be there* and that it remains *absolutely* closed to any sharing of its experience with others" (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 52, emphases in original). In spite of the possibilities of bringing such experience to the level of consciousness, aspects of this substra-tum are characterized by a certain degree of fundamental obscurity that evade even careful introspection.[5] While it is important not to overstate the degree of closure of the absolutely intimate self, it nonetheless indicates an existential level of the self which is part of every personal existence, yet cannot be "rationally" described and communicated, and thus remains effectively outside the realm of proper *socialized* existence.

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[5] As Scheler writes, "only a part of our total mental and cognitive existence is capable of becoming an object for us, and only a very small proportion of that part can itself be observed and repeated" (2008: 223). While Scheler's criticism was directed against experimental psychology, it is consistent with Schutz's view of the limits of introspection and the possibility of fully explicating inner lived experience. Such a view speaks against criticisms which suggest that phenomenology rests on the Cartesian belief of the full transparency of one's subjective mental life to oneself.

The fact that at the most fundamental level, existence is personal, is a phenomenological insight which (as phenomenologists like Scheler and Levinas recognized) carries with it not only scientific but also ethical implications.[6] For sociology, this insight results in a clear methodological implication, because it demarcates aspects of the self that can be brought meaningfully to bear in the external world and thus into socialized existence, from those aspects that, because they evade the Ego proper, are not available to any form of sociality. In the more radical sense, the existence of an "irrational" substratum of the self that evades even the Ego's efforts to reign it in through rational sense-making, suggests limits to one's socialization in general, as such substratum appears inaccessible even to differentiation by available linguistic units of meaning that mediate the intentional constitution of inner experience and makes possible their communication to others (Luckmann, 1983).[7] In doing so, it demarcates the limits of sociological claims, thereby indicating the untenability of totalizing concepts (like *habitus* or "discipline") according to which the entirety of one's personal being reflects the embodiment of an external (social) reality. There is always a part of the self that remains asocial.

The Constitutional Activity of Consciousness and the Relative Independence of the Intersubjective Sphere

If phenomenology reveals that existence is ultimately personal, how is social life possible? Are we condemned to a Leibnizian monadology as the only possible form of anything approaching a social science? Schutz's answer to this problem is to return to the fact of intersubjectivity.[8] On the one hand, the fact of intersubjectivity bars access to a transcendental Ego that can reveal essential knowledge of collective structures merely through the lonely phenomenologist's deepening of the *epoché*.

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[6] Because existence is personal, that does not mean that it is therefore "private" in the traditional Western metaphysical sense of Descartes and Locke, which constitute the tradition behind the psychologism which Husserl turns against. For a classic statement on the personal self in philosophy and its ethical implications, see Taylor (1989). Taylor however draws from the Heideggerian rather than Husserlian phenomenological tradition in his study. In sociology, Smith (2010) has more recently argued for the need for a "thick notion of persons," as has Archer through her notion of the "internal conversation" (2012). Ethically and methodologically, social phenomenology has much to contribute to the dialogue between realist social science and philosophical and moral understandings of the person.

[7] One might notice parallels here with the Freudian unconscious. Though there are similarities between the phenomenological and the Freudian theory of the structure of consciousness, phenomenologists do not necessarily subscribe to the Freudian interpretation of the constitution of the unconscious, especially the latter's determinative function in conscious life. Moreover, in the psychoanalytic understanding, the unconscious can, in principle, in the course of psychoanalytic treatment, be brought into consciousness, since it reflects sedimented, but at one time sensibly experienced moments of the subject's past psychic life (as in Freud's Oedipal drama). By contrast, for many phenomenologists, moments of the pre-phenomenal flux are forever foreclosed to the possibility of proper meaning and thus do not perform the same function as the Freudian unconscious (thus only finding "poetic" expression in modern artistic forms).

[8] This highlights problems with critiques (e.g., Pendergrast 1986) that Schutz followed Austrian economics' recipe of "methodological individualism". Schutz's method is instead better described as "methodological egologism".

On the other hand, the very existence of the we-relationship as a phenomenologically irreducible fact is indicative of the existence of a distinct field of reality-a *regional ontology* to use Husserl's term-which, due to its grounding in structures of meaning, obeys its own laws of constitution. These laws are not independent of, but co-extensive with, the constitutional acts of the subjective Ego in the natural attitude. The co-extensiveness of the intersubjective sphere with subjective life on the one hand and objectively experienced reality on the other, presents a distinct ontological problem. The same is raised by Eugene Fink in addressing Schutz's criticism of Husserl's transcendental reduction. That problems lies in establishing the "ultimate" constitutional basis of intersubjective reality-is such basis transcendental (as Husserl wishes to argue) or is it mundane (as Schutz maintains)? According to Fink, "it seems to me that one cannot establish between objectivity and intersubjectivity a relationship such that the one or the other is prior; rather, objectivity and intersubjectivity are perhaps co-original" (quoted in Schutz, 1975b: 86). For Schutz, acknowledging the co-originality of objectivity and intersubjectivity does not require, at least for the purpose of laying an ontological grounding of the social sciences, the search for an ultimate transcendental grounding. Unlike the transcendental philosopher, the social scientist's task is much more pragmatic. It suffices that, in the mundane order of the lifeworld, objectivity and intersubjectivity are *experienced as* co-original. With this in mind, the purpose of the phenomenological interrogation of social reality is not to unveil the latter's transcendental basis (as the "being of being") but rather investigate and describe all the *senses* in which social reality is *experienced as transcendent* by the mundane social actor. Maintaining the *transcendental status* of intersubjectivity in the mundane we-relationship while dropping any claims to the *transcendental truth of any of the facts of intersubjectivity*, the task at hand for the analyst becomes to perform a constitutional interpretation of objects of meaning in manner that accounts for the "de facto world in respect of its 'accidental' features," one that offers an ontic and *relative* (rather than transcendental) intelligibility of the world (Husserl, 1960: 137). This is the task of sociological interpretation proper.

The social world in its "totality" is not a concrete but a transcendent fact, in the sense that it is a reality known to exist intransitively, i.e., one that in its spatio-temporal horizons transcends the immediacy of one's surrounding lifeworld, one's we-relationships, and the finitude of one's biographical being. This accounts for the fact that one's direct experience of the social world is always confined to a small subsection of near infinitely possible social relationships. The insight carries implications for the symbolic mediations that structure knowledge and experience of "distant" social worlds, as well as the constitution of the concept of "society" itself (Knoblauch, 2019). Given the focus of this paper on the specific problem of intersubjectivity, these are separate themes that cannot be adequately pursued here.

The more pertinent question with regard to intersubjectivity is how *sensory experience* of the world is turned into *meaningful experience* of a concrete lifeworld, and how are the apparently disparate meaningful experiences of monads join into unities of objects of experience that form an intersubjectively shared reality? Tackling this problem requires a return to Husserl. For Husserl, beyond the pre-conscious substratum of the core self lies the Ego and its acts of intentionality. Intentionality

serves as the bridging concept between experience as "raw" sensory data (*hyle*) and meaning (*Sinn*) as constituted unities of sense. Intentionality involves the Ego's temporal operation in acts of predicative and pre-predicative judgment and synthesis, of retention and protention, of recollection and anticipation, and related acts of cognition and embodied action. From this results the key insight that acts of meaning are acts committed upon an experience that, so to speak, has already run its course.

> [W]e must contrast those experiences which in their running-off are undifferentiated and shade into one another, on the one hand, with those that are discrete, already past, and elapsed, on the other. The latter we apprehend not by living through them but by an act of attention. This is crucial for the topic we are pursuing: Because the concept of meaningful experience always presupposes that the experience of which meaning is predicated is a discrete one, *it now becomes clear that only a past experience can be called meaningful, that is, one that is present to the retrospective glance as already finished and done with*. (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 51f., emphasis added)

This point helps clarify the relationship in phenomenology between experience, intentionality, and meaning in the proper sense. For Husserl, intentionality is the fundamental act of consciousness that constitutes the possibility of all *lived* experience. The act of intentionality forms the basic unit of analysis of phenomenological psychology. Intentionality refers to the *directedness* of consciousness towards an object, a process that reflects, on the one hand, the mode of operation of consciousness in the formal descriptive sense, and on the other hand, its essential being as such (in the fundamental sense that consciousness is always *consciousness of*). As a constitutive process, intentionality does not *posit* an object as a "content" in the form of a predicate or an image (to which then corresponds, as in classical empiricism, an immanent object of the world, a metaphysical idea, etc.). Rather, intentionality *constitutes* the object as a mental *presentation* of *some-thing* given (presented), and always given (presented) *in a certain way* (as judged, as questioned, as desired, as repulsive, etc.). The intentional act is, therefore, the basic datum of phenomenology and whose "content" is revealed in the *epoché*, and which can be analyzed independently of any possible sensuous or ideal "referent" to which the intentional act points. Formally speaking, the intentional act can be directed toward any object that can be presented mentally-or, more precisely, *what* is presented mentally and the *manner* it is presented in, *is* the intentional object as a constituted unity of meaning. This can be a real (sensuous) object (whether immanently given or simply posited as existing in the world), a mathematical formula, a fantasized object, an emotive state, etc. As such, intentionality does not refer to a "willed" act understood in the positive philosophical sense, but rather to an elementary process of consciousness that founds one's lived experience as a conscious being.

Formal phenomenological analysis reveals underlying structures of consciousness as constitutive of objects of knowledge by ultimately clarifying intentional objects' *intentional essence*. E.g., I can posit an equilateral triangle, a unicorn, or a simple arithmetic problem and through the *epoché* turn back on the act of positing to investigate the intentional acts that constitutes each object as a discrete unity of meaning. Such an investigation reveals the basic structure of intentional

acts and the corresponding intentional essence of the cogitated object. However, in ordinary mental life intentionality does not operate on the basis of singular objects presented discretely and independently, as when one considers them from a position of detached philosophical reflection. Rather, intentionality is directed towards *complexes of acts* that are at any time given to consciousness as *complex unities of meaning*. Any given complex state of affairs (and where the definition of *complexity* is indubitably relative)-for example, a problem of advanced calculus, a complex molecular interaction, or a situation of conflict in which one is confronted with several parties with incongruent interests and goals-is not understood by actors' positings of discrete constitutive objects which are then mechanically compounded into aggregates of meaning, but given as *synthetic unities* of (polythetic) intentional objects combined in various structural and logical forms into a single (monothetic) complex. As Husserl argues in *Logical Investigations*,

> just as the thing does not appear before us as the mere sum of its countless individual features, which a later preoccupation with detail may distinguish, and as even the latter does not dirempt the thing into such details, but takes note of them only in the ever complete, unified thing, so the act of perception also is always a homogeneous unity, which gives the object 'presence' in a simple, immediate way (Husserl, 2001[1970]: 284).

Intentional essences are important because they allow intentional acts to form the semantic basis of ideal objects of the world, i.e., their constitution as objects of representation in the form of *sensibilities* and *unities of meaning*. This is relevant for the intersubjective realm because, as Husserl points out, an intentional essence (and thus the sensible or semantic essence) of an object can be shared even if constitutive intentional acts differ in their egological particularlity across individuals. "The presentation I have of Greenland's icy wastes certainly differs from the presentation Nansen has of it, yet the object is the same" (Husserl, 2001[1970]: 123). The *sameness* of the object stems not from the identity of the mode of the object's presentation in the cogitations of actors, but in the identity of the object's intentional essence, that which forms the basis of its unity of meaning in the ideal sense.

This point clarifies how intentional acts that are non-identical can nonetheless produce an identical intentional essence. It provides the basic possibility of mutual communication and understanding. In the simplest example, we can both share the experience of seeing the same oddly-shaped house, even if you are viewing it from the northwestern side and I from the south. The actual object outlines present in our respective visual fields are different. However, the unity of the object comes not from the particular contours, angles and shades given to our respective views, but because we share the intentional essence of the object "presentified" to each of us as one of type house, and oddly-shaped-house more specifically. Schutz takes this insight to its sociological implications: the continuum of possibilities of congruence and incongruence between intentional object and ideal meaning (and hence the epistemological relativism of the social world).

Schemes of Experience and Schemes of Interpretation

The discussion thus far has signaled the relative independence of the intersubjective sphere, but seems to make intersubjectivity entirely dependent on intentional activity at the level of monads, and, therefore, lack any proper objectivity or reality of its own. It also does not clarify what makes communication as an intersubjective process ontologically distinct from intentional activity, i.e., why intersubjectivity cannot be treated merely as co-extensive with other types of mental events. This leads to two additional points. First, intersubjectivity is not co-extensive with all forms of mental events, because intersubjectivity (as an intentional communicative act) requires an event in the external world. A wink, a wave of the hand, an utterance, and other such outward activity of the body is required to signal meaning to Alter, and cannot be accomplished by *covert* intentional acts (a thought, a wish, a fantasy, etc.). Thus, our shared experience of a frightful scene while seated in a dark movie theater is not an intersubjective experience, unless the shared experience is mutually communicated and retrospectively acknowledged after the fact. Second, barring unusual situations (and the radical assumptions of ethnomethodology), communication is not constituted de novo in mutual intentional acts, as actors who approach each interactive encounter or situation as new, original, and unique. Ego approaches each social situation with Alter by recourse to and with the "baggage" of past experience. The baggage of the past each carries in them-and more precisely, synthetic elements of it relevant to the situation at hand-form for each actor their *context of experience*. From the sociological standpoint, what manifests in any situation of interaction are not only bodies, but also biographical and social histories.

Contexts (or schemes) of experience represent patterns or layers of syntheses of past experience. However transitive or intransitive the nature of objective reality, every element of *knowledge* as one's "possession" of the objective world is a synthetic construct created out of past lived experience in that world. While phenomenological reflection brings to light the fact of intentionality in the constitutive function of consciousness, intentionality is rarely a "pure" act that is not itself founded upon (or, using a spatial metaphor, "built on top of") a prior synthesis. In Husserl's terminology, "simple" lived experiences that reflect in consciousness through monothetic acts are combined into higher polythetic unities of synthesis. While it is in principle possible to deconstruct polythetic judgments into their constitutive monothetic elements, and further refer each of those elements to other monothetic judgments, and ultimately the constitution of those judgments to "lower" constitutive experiences (sensory, perceptive, etc.), we can often do so only analytically in the context of the *epoché*. In everyday, "naive" lived experience, the series of elements and acts of synthesis by which we generated in our (now past) temporal flow of lived experience an element of knowledge currently on hand, is rarely transparent to us. That is, they are rarely given to recollection in the form of reliving (though in principle not impossible, as in the reliving of a life event in a highly vivid memory) the actual series of monothetic judgments, each with its own horizonal *halos*, modifications of attention,

and associated retentions and protentions, which produced the synthetic unity of a polythetic judgment. What *is* available to us, however, is the system of synthetic judgments retained in memory, which become elements of our taken-for-granted assumptions of the world. These elements in principle can, and in practice are, continuously recalled and reactivated in particular contexts of meaning as single, constituted, unified acts.

The accumulated fund of such elements of knowledge that form one's habitual *modus operandi* constitute what Schutz calls the "stock of knowledge". While the stock of knowledge is genetic by definition, in that each of its constituent elements stems from an originating experience, schemes of experience form what can be termed the "active element" of one's habitual stock of knowledge. They establish the taken-for-granted grounds of the world as one's actively lived present (or, what Husserl calls its *passive doxa*).

> A scheme of our experience is a meaning-context which is a configuration of our past experiences embracing conceptually the experiential objects to be found in the latter but not the process by which they were constituted. The constituted process itself is entirely [obscured], while the objectivity constituted is taken for granted. (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 82)

Schemes of experience as constituted meaning-contexts serve as bases for coherent experiences of the world.

> [in] every Here and Now there is a total coherence of our experience. This means merely that the total configuration of our experience is a synthesis of our already-lived-through experiences brought about by a step-by-step construction. To this synthesis there corresponds a total object, namely, the content of our knowledge in the Here and Now. (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 82)[9]

Analytically speaking then, any meaningful experience of the world consists of two layers. There is a *genetic* level in which the totality of one's lived experiences exist in the body as staggered systems of synthetic unities (what Husserl calls sedimentations). The "contents" of such experiences can only be explicated on the basis of phenomenological reflection, but which can never be known in their totality (one can never know and account for their "total" experience). Yet, the constitutional recuperation and explication of such syntheses is not at all necessary for them to function as an *active* level of schemes operative within every Here and Now. As an active function, schemes of experience do not only orient acts of intentionality in the generative sense (in the sense of orienting one's behavior in the world), but also function in the process of making sense of objects and events in the world, i.e., in acts of ordering lived experience under schemes given in one's stock of knowledge. Put differently, constituted schemes of experience function concurrently as *schemes of interpretation*, which means they function as *already given* patterns for

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[9] In the same passage, Schutz adds, "Of course, within this total coherence of experience, contradictory experiences can occur without impairing the over-all unity". In other discussions Schutz describes the possibility of an experience referencing incongruent schemes. An experience may also "explode" a scheme when its anticipations become unfulfilled.

the explication of meaning. Schutz clarifies this apparently dual role of schemes of interpretation as both embodied patterns of constituted meaning, and as grounds for generative constitutional acts of meaning-bestowal.

> When we think of the interpretive scheme as something ready to be applied to some datum of lived experience, then we are thinking of it as an already constituted "logical objectification," an ideal object of formal logic. On the other hand, when we think of the interpretive scheme as itself something dependent upon a particular Here and Now, then we are thinking of its genesis, in terms of its constitution, and so we are dealing with it in terms of transcendental logic. ... the equivocation [in the concept of "schemes of interpretation"] is only another illustration of the fundamental opposition we have already pointed out between the constitution of the lived experience in pure duration, on the one hand, and the being of the constituted objectification of the spatiotemporal world, on the other, between the modes of awareness proper to becoming and being, life, and thought. (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 85f.)

Schemes direct perception through the act of attention to an object, which is concurrently an act of *recognition* in which the apperceived object is situated in, referenced to, classified, or "subsumed" under a unity of meaning on hand in the stock of knowledge. Schemes of interpretation hence "consist of materials that have already been organized under categories" (Schutz, 1967[1932]: 84) and hence function as a kind of "categorial mapping" of the world and one's active navigation in it. Insofar as the categorial structure of one's schemes of interpretation relative to an experience is not purely idiosyncratic, it also reflects systems of "logical objectification," some of which may be externally embodied and exist as what Husserl calls "ideal objectivities" or what Berger and Luckmann call "objectivated knowledge" (1966: 62). It is with respect to categorial structures that one transitions from the psychological to the sociological, insofar as these reflect systems of shared meaning within ideal, objectified systems of symbols and discourse through which one organizes the world and situates oneself in it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Conclusion

Schutz demonstrates the steps involved in the movement from Husserl's egology to the social phenomenology of the immediate we-relation and through to the categorial structure that characterizes the objectivated realities of the social world. In doing so, Schutz establishes the basic ontological foundation of the social world as one co-originating in the relationship between cognition and ideal (categorial) meaning, as determined by the structure of agents' biographical situation and temporal-historical being. This, by its very nature, is not a fixed, transcendental and transhistorical ontology, but one that is multiply and actively constituted in a temporal unfolding. It is a reality that exists in the tension between the level of ideality and practical acts of interpretation, displaying a categorial structure that is socio-biographically constituted and found within embodied schemes of experience.

The fact of experience is the necessary referent for any sensibly existing object, and a *reciprocally intuited* and *sensibly shared experience* is definitionally necessary for anything to qualify as a *social* object. This point suggests the fundamental reason why, from the phenomenological standpoint, the second-order definition of an a social object is possible only *after* the underlying constitutional process of an object of meaning, with its corresponding constitutive experience, has been determined. Such a clarification is not a linguistic exercise, in the sense of a definitional or interpretive problem in the purely formal and ideal sense. Neither is it simply an "empirical" process that can follow a straightforward methodological recipe. Insofar as empiricism involves observation, it presumes the prior determination of the object observed. The determination of the object, its sensuous, categorial, or (as is more commonly the case in the social world) "mixed" form, is a phenomenological exercise first and foremost.

Rather than an analysis that begins from a reified social reality and then makes its way down to subjective knowledge (as proposed classically by Berger & Luckmann, 1966), this reading shows that Schutz's relational matrix of thematic and interpretive relevances and socio-biographical articulation highlights the existence (and thus the givenness to phenomenological description) of objects that possess polyvalent, fragmentary, and even contradictory meaning given differently situated actors. Hence, rather than try and eliminate ambiguity by the social scientists' development of "pure" descriptive categories of a reified social reality, the Schutzian approach suggests that the sociological objectivation of the social world includes the fact of ambivalence as constitutionally determinate of the object's very existence, i.e., as part of its very nature as a social object.

This points to an additional methodological conclusion with regard to phenomenology's role in social analysis. Rather than a purely descriptive exercise, phenomenology offers a method for explicating constitutionality in both the egological and sociological sense. This is a useful corrective both to standard sociological approaches that assume their object as already pre-given and pre-determined, and goes against the current overvaluation of empirically based causal analyses as the only form of explanatory social science. Not only is constitutional analysis, when performed using phenomenological tools, as much *explanatory* as empirical causal analysis (as argued by Wendt, 1998), but the underlying empiricism of social analysis is a mostly theoretical empiricism when it is one lacking valid descriptive links to first-order experiences of social actors, links whose necessary tie back to basic forms of sociality can neither be understood nor developed without the insights of phenomenology.

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