

## Phenomenological Views on Intersubjectivity: Towards a Reinterpretation of Consciousness

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**Abstract** Intersubjectivity and consciousness are reinterpreted according to the dynamic and relational coordinates of lived experience. Consciousness is not just another property of the subject, but rather the condition itself of his/her own being-in-the-world. The different aspects of consciousness are the moments and movements which constitute its *intentional* structure. These structures lead us to reinterpret material embodiment, temporality, and intersubjectivity as the “complex” steps taken by consciousness, which in its movements does not turn inward, on itself like a transcendental, reasoning, and self-centred consciousness, but, on the contrary, as an embodied consciousness immersed in *others* and in the world.

**Keywords** Intersubjectivity · Embodiment · Temporality · Consciousness · Phenomenology

In the history of the question of consciousness and the forms that found the origins of thought, Descartes constitutes a significant advancement. According to rationalist epistemological demands, the task is to find an indubitable principle. Mistrust of the senses leads Descartes to establish a method of investigation which, anchored in doubt and sustained by its own limits, is confirmed by an irrefutably true principle: I think. According to the Cartesian interpretation, consciousness has a background, an indubitable residue, which corresponds to thought. The “I” of this thinking consciousness is not the embodied and fragile “I” of Descartes himself, but rather an anonymous, transcendental “I” which is separated from body and world.

Strategically, Descartes suspends the “reality” of the world with the hypothesis that conceives the existence of a malignant genius and a deceiving God who always tries to confuse us. If this were the case, life would not only be an interrupted dream

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of illusions, as Calderon suggested, but, additionally, the whole of life and all of that which is real would be a mere imitation, a spectacle in a discarded, permeable, innocuous, and absurd world. When, in the *Second Meditation*, Descartes (1976) asks himself about the meaning of his own substance as *res cogitans*, he focuses on the task of searching for the fundamental or indubitable properties of his own thinking being.

It is not to be unexpected then, that sensible qualities are established, through methodical doubt, outside the realm of evidence, as when one looks out the window and sees other subjects randomly passing by. We cannot be sure of the real existence of the other, since we only see hats and coats, which could belong to specters or to machines activated by springs. Thus, it is doubted whether these bodies that are established outside me are, indeed, things; it is possible that the perception I have of them is a mere illusion. The uncertainty of things expands to include the reality of the *other* who, after all, is also a sensitive being. The experience of perception and contingency of being in the world is replaced by the transcendental experience of consciousness and thought.

### **The Change from Essence to Existence in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty**

Phenomenology is born as a possibility of the recuperation of “the things themselves.” Husserl frames this intent within the requirements of a transcendental consciousness. Through the employment of a *transcendental epoché* (reduction), that is, an exercise in the suspension of judgements respective to the world and to oneself, Husserl (1992) aims to break with natural, commonplace attitudes in order to “recover” the lost—or forgotten, as Heidegger would say—structures of our original experience of being in the world. This method of connecting with experience is carried out through the search for essential “invariants” of phenomena, with reference to their fundamental and constitutive qualities.

The move with regard to the husserlian perspective, generally denominated “transcendental” or “idealist,” is accomplished by Merleau-Ponty (1945). From the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the execution of the move from essence to existence is made explicit. This step is significant for the purpose of this essay because the intentional consciousness of Husserl’s phenomenology was constituted by an operative consciousness that connected the data of experience through the eidetic data of a transcendental subjectivity. Now then, as Merleau-Ponty says, everything shifts when a phenomenological movement is carried out: “Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy proposes as a task not that of explaining the world or ‘discovering its conditions of possibility’, but of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world that precedes all reasoning about the world.” (Merleau-Ponty 1966:48).

It must be emphasized that phenomenology is a movement of the recovery of experience and consciousness in relation to lived experience and to the conditions of subjectivity, which are not understood as subjective, in the sense of being actions enclosed within themselves; on the contrary, they are actions and dispositions of the intersubjective encounter with others and the world. The world becomes experience, relation, meaning, and opening.

The phenomenological task does not simply consist of the construction of a theory of knowledge, but rather, above all, a new point of view about the relations that bind us to the things in themselves. Such “return to the things in themselves,” Husserl proclaims to mean a return to the very foundations of the concrete experience of being in the world, i.e., a reassessment of the embodied consciousness in a *body proper* (*Leib*).<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology is a displacement of the essences by concrete existence “... phenomenology is also a philosophy that replaces the essences in existence, and does not believe that man and the world can be comprehended in any other way, unless it be through facticity” (Merleau Ponty 1945:I). Facticity in this case evokes global experience and the condition of already being in the world. In this manner, the experience of *being a body*, and not just having a body (*Körper*), forms part of the primary existential conditions of our becoming in the world.

This description aspires to recover the dimension of experience forgotten by the empirical sciences, whose traditional task consists, precisely, of the reduction of experience to simple formulas; that is, the establishment of formulas about the causal unidirectionality of the given phenomena.

Descartes was correct when he sustained that there is no real difference between illusion and perception; however, sensory uncertainty is not a decisive argument for the separation of body and spirit. Descartes’ error—as was indicated years ago by Damasio—consisted of disconnecting perception from thought (Damasio 1995). From the perspective of phenomenology, perception is inseparable from thought and vice versa, as thought does not correspond to an a priori content of experience, and the subject is not an absolute spectator in the becoming of the world.

Thought is a posteriori to the experience of the world, which always precedes us, because it is the world and not thought that is “already there.” The move towards existence indicated by Merleau-Ponty does not mean that phenomenology surrenders to the transformation of purely subjective or solipsist experiences, impossible to translate philosophically or from the point of view of the sciences of cognition. On the contrary, it deals with the description of the fundamental experiences of existence through the intentionality of consciousness, which is no different from the intersubjective relations that the subject establishes with the *other*.

### **The Horizons of Temporality: from Embodiment to Intersubjectivity**

Subjectivity now names the moments and machinery of consciousness, and time evokes its fundamental horizon, which is reinterpreted as flowing and movement. To indicate that consciousness is made temporal means saying also that it is embodied, “lived” in relation to the world and to others. Now then, relation in phenomenology

<sup>1</sup> The German language has a linguistic advantage over other modern languages, as it has two forms that correspond to the word “body,” both of which have been adopted by the French phenomenological tradition since its inception. On the one hand, there is the idea of object body, called *Körper*, which corresponds to the body of radiographic measure and of physical structure. On the other hand, there is *Leib*, also denominated *body proper*, which indicates the lived body’s dimension, embodied in a concrete subjectivity.

is always manifold, and exceeds the habitual idea of relations between binary terms, whether these are like or unlike. Relations are more like networks, rather than lineal links between isolable points.

The flowing of consciousness is time, or at least, it is one of its manifestations. The classic distinction that Ricoeur (1991) makes between *time of the soul* and *time of the cosmos* permits surely the distinction of time lived by consciousness and time conceived as movement and measure. Time of the soul, like time of the cosmos, is relative; that is, it is always in relation, be it to a subject or an observer, as is the case with the Theory of Relativity. Strictly speaking, the present, past, and future are the most visible face of consciousness: being and time are intertwined; as Castoriadis (1999) will say: they are part of the same machinery, but neither of the two is an independent system of the subject or a simple meta-concept.

The fundamental phenomenological affirmations are, in the first place, actions and not judgments of understanding, and in this same measure, they always assume the temporal axis to be the proper “place” of its possibilities and realizations. Therefore, the action of the recovery of subjectivity along phenomenological lines, does not mean the sustentation of a virtual or imaginary act of an abstract intelligence, but rather the recognition of embodiment as a concrete action, existentially lived and ineluctable.

The affirmation, “I am my body,” has a certain equivalence and correspondence to other concomitant affirmations and actions, such as the affirmations, “I am in the world,” “I am for-another,” since—as Varela says—*consciousness is a public affair*. This affirmation, just as the first of the body subject, are originary actions; i.e., actions that configure us. I am because there is a world, and the world is in reciprocity of our concrete existence. Circularity between the subject and the world is not vicious because the correspondence between them is in the difference and co-determination, more that in the identity and synonymy. The existential lived experience is fundamentally heterogeneous because its roots are temporal, and its reference is always in relation to the *other*.

The heterogeneous experience of time means that, although evidently there are instants and intervals, in the plane of consciousness there are no points that are absolutely isolable. The geometric point fragments space into possible segments, but not time, which is always a global and, at the same time, multiple episode.

This temporal horizon does not only mean that the relation of consciousness to the world is concrete because there is a subject; it is also because there is always an *other*. As indicated by Ricoeur, (1990) the *itself is like an other*. Strictly speaking, there is neither an absolute identity, nor a pure analogy. The relation to the *other* is the unfolding of the *itself* that is found in the movement towards the *other*.

The inevitability of the subject is the other. Levinas (1990) is the philosopher who, although an heir to the phenomenological tradition, is also the most critical of Husserl for his transcendental conception of consciousness. Levinas’ “answer” consists basically of radicalizing the place of the other in the intersubjective relation. The other precedes us not only in chronological terms, but also from the point of view of the concrete experience of being in the world. The presence of the other is pre-phenomenological in the sense that it is pre-descriptive. Indeed, in the contact with the other the look is not one of observation, but rather, of recognition. The genuine encounter with the other “skips” the social place of the other; the physical condition is left behind because the *face of the other* is irreducible.

The link to the world is always mediated by the *other*; the world has a texture, and this corresponds to the intersubjective ties of the subject (*soi même*) to the other (*autre*). The position and relation to experience are no longer reduced to the *factum* of things, but, rather, they are oriented towards the axes of action from which we comprehend and interpret the world. The movement from essence to existence means, then, the passing from a fixed position in reference to the ideational contents of some experience, to a position that highlights the structures and relations at the base of any possible experience through the interference of perception, corporeity, temporality, intersubjectivity, and the world.

### Projections and Commentaries

Phenomenology is one possible path of interpretation of the actions of subjectivity that are reciprocal to those of consciousness. The most decisive qualities of consciousness are its flowing and its intentionality. This crossing is, at the same time, the source of the folds of the subjective consciousness and the world, just as in the Gordian knot of the encounter between the idea of the embodied consciousness, with the conception of a subject opening to the world and to the other.

Perhaps the most decisive example in this regard is the presentation made by Varela in *Phenomenology of Life* of the four lines of the cognitive sciences. The first point shows the necessity of reaffirming the notion of the *body subject*, and embodiment, establishing the principle: *The mind is not in the head*. This formula, from neurophenomenology, means to say, as we have stated, that it is not thought that determines experience, but rather, that it is the experience of perception and emotion that configures thought. As occurs in the case of the *ghost limb* already studied by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, experience and perception of the body in its subjectivity are global and not reducible to organic functions, be it those of the osteal apparatus, or of a system of the body (*Körper*). The mind or, more precisely, consciousness is a delocalized phenomenon.

The third point presented refers to the question specific to the roots of intersubjectivity; now the principle is: *This mind is that mind*. Evidently, it does not involve the identity of my mind with another mind, nor an analogy, and even less so my mind's deduction of the existence of another mind. Rather, the question plays out in what Varela terms "co-determination of I and the other." Such co-determination corresponds to the incessant movement in which the self of the embodied consciousness is intertwined with the world. This intertwining does not correspond to a second act of correlation, or to simple interdependence or reciprocity of the subject with the other and the world, but rather, to one more fold of consciousness, which is fundamentally opening and intentionality. Identity and difference are convergent, and the "exit" (intentional) of consciousness does not suppose an absolute external side outside of itself. The world and things are not exterior objects in-themselves, but, rather, in relation. The first co-determination corresponds to the conjunction of the level of the interior of the subject with the external world. The intentional consciousness is for things and, reciprocally, things are for consciousness. The being for-itself as subjectivity is, for this same reason, always for *other* as intentionality and intersubjectivity.

The whole of co-determinations are thus understood based on a reinterpretation of the subject, knowledge, and the world, which, from now on, are conceived *in-action*; that is, situated in a group of reciprocities and biological, but also subjective, relations, and no longer based on a determined representation of a subject that passively apprehends the properties of a world neutralized solely by reason. In this way, what we call the objective world “de-objectifies” to the extent that they are no longer the representations “in-themselves” of the world, nor the connections of the subject, the decisive points in the exercise of knowledge, but rather the idea of the phenomenological relation in a strictly phenomenological sense. This fundamental relation between consciousness and world, which is not a simple binary or linear relation, but rather complex, is sensed intuitively by Varela (2006) in his early work, and appears within the notion of *enaction*. This term corresponds in principle to the theoretical decision of linking, at the same time, the subject of lived experience—in his or her own and irreducible experience, and who expresses him or herself as a *first person* who speaks and feels—with the study of neurobiological processes, activated in the brain by the ensemble of neuronal networks or assemblages, expressed in a third person who, in this case, is the same subject who speaks and feels (Depraaz 2002).

Neurophenomenology (Varela 2000) presumes, radically, the idea of biological *emergence*, which shows that biological unfoldings are installed through a global process of self-organization, on the basis of nonlinear schemes that connect the parts with the whole. The processes, their parts, and the corresponding systems, do not obey causal results of ordering nor determinations of properties already given by an *a priori* structure; rather, they obey dynamic structures that “close” operations (*operational closure*) in the sense that these are co-determined in a dynamic proper to *emergence* and *auto-organization*.

Now then, these nuclear concepts (*autopoiesis*, auto-organization, emergence) display some epistemological leaps, and in some cases, certain theoretical oppositions (Ibañez 2005). However, if the whole of these biological interpretations and their relations with neurophenomenology are dealt with, these conceptual discontinuities have certain “logic,” given that there is a level on which there is an epistemological distance that is not salvageable. This refers to a determined idea of objectivity which comes into play, and which is decided according to the rank and protocol of the empirical sciences—as opposed to what Dilthey denominated the “spiritual sciences.” These are more oriented towards the comprehension of the phenomenon, than towards the linear explanation of determined processes or their simple correlations. What is relevant consists in the establishment—just as was proposed repeatedly by Varela—*bridges between two views*, in which the oppositions and, in some cases the limits of the cognitive sciences and their empirical sources, are only a part of the whole phenomenon considering that subjectivity and the embodied consciousness correspond to complex, and thus irreducible, dimensions.

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