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Phenomenology and the life sciences: Clarifications and complementarities☆

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1295, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper first clarifies phenomenology in ways essential to demonstrating its basic concern with Nature and its recognition of individual and cultural differences as well as commonalities. It furthermore clarifies phenomenological methodology in ways essential to understanding the methodology itself, its purpose, and its consequences. These clarifications show how phenomenology, by hewing to the dynamic realities of life itself and experiences of life itself, counters reductive thinking and "embodiments" of one kind and another. On the basis of these clarifications, the paper then turns to detailing conceptual complementarities between phenomenology and the life sciences, particularly highlighting studies in coordination dynamics. In doing so, it brings to light fundamental relationships such as those between mind and motion and between intrinsic dynamics and primal animation. It furthermore highlights the common concern with origins in both phenomenology and evolutionary biology: the history of how what is present is related to its inception in the past and to its transformations from past to present.

> . . . there also belongs to me a *basis of lived experiences* and a *basis of nature* ("my nature") which is manifest in the play of lived experiences. This nature is the lower psychic layer, but it extends even into the sphere of position taking: the position taking Ego is dependent on its substratum insofar as I, in order to be motivated in my position-taking, must have precisely the motivating lived experiences, and these latter stand in an associative nexus and under rules of associative dispositions.
>
> (Husserl 1989, p. 293)

Insofar as attention plays a role for. . . constitution of transcendent unities and multiplicities, we have there implicitly an Ego that is accomplishing some kind of comportment. The ultimate, however, is a *background that is prior to all comportment* and is instead presupposed by all comportment. . . In a certain sense there is, in the obscure depths, a root soil. . . a lower level of all spiritual existence. Every spirit has a "natural side." This is precisely the underlying basis of subjectivity. Husserl 1989, pp. 291–292.

The Ego always lives in the medium of its "history;" all its earlier lived experiences have sunk down, but they have after effects in tendencies, sudden ideas, transformations or assimilations of earlier lived experiences, and from such assimilations new formations are merged together, etc. . . . all this has its natural course, thus even each free act has its comet's tail of nature. Husserl 1989, p. 350.

Since the specifically somatological is not a separate reality, but rather a higher stratum of being that is built upon material reality, the theoretical experience and cognition of the somatic being also requires material experience and corresponding material cognition. But the latter belongs, logically speaking, in material natural science. Therefore, when we call the science of animate organicity somatology, it is material science to the extent that it investigates the material properties of the animate organism. But to the extent that it is specific somatology, it is something new, something distinguished by a new basic form of experience. But if one looks at it more closely, this double position applies to all zoological sciences, e.g., the physiology of man and of the brutes. They are natural sciences, in the narrower

☆ I have been invited to contribute to this volume on the basis of my writings, all of which have been informed by Husserl's phenomenology. I am not a Husserl scholar, but I am quite familiar with a broad range of his work. My clarifications are based on this background and the knowledge it affords. May references to my own work thus not be taken as self-glorifications but as an acknowledgment of an enormous debt owed to Husserl's writings and to the rigorous and exacting methodology Husserl formulated and practiced.

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sense, with regard to the materiality of the animate beings; they are somatology to the extent that they systematically establish relationships to the spheres of sensation in the physiology of the sense organs and the nervous system (which is better called the doctrine of the feelings of animate organism). Obviously the somatological experimental apprehension predominates here, and without it nothing somatological whatever can be found or indirectly reconstructed. The foundation is finally the direct *somatic perception* that every empirical investigator can effect only on his own body and then the somatic interpretation that he performs in the interpretive apprehension of perceived alien animate organism as such, and performs in a manner which lends to this interpretation the character of an *experience* that may confirm itself through further similar empirical apprehensions and positions, may determine itself more precisely, and perhaps rectify itself—in short, legitimate itself. Husserl 1980, p. 7.

1. Clarifications: I

As should be apparent from the above epigraphs, Husserl's phenomenology already takes Nature into account, indeed into sizeable account. It is thus not in need of naturalizing nor is it a form of Idealism. Husserl in fact begins the second of his series of three books titled *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (commonly known as *Ideas I*, *Ideas II*, *Ideas III*) with near 100 pages on "The Constitution of Material Nature." Moreover this section of the book is followed by 85 pages on "The Constitution of Animal Nature." By the word "constitution," Husserl directs our attention to the fact that humans do not make sense of the world they touch, see, hear, taste, or smell in one fell swoop, but in the course of experiencing "profiles" of objects from now this perspective, now that perspective, now this perspective, now that perspective, and so on. Hence, constitution refers to the "*how*" of knowledge, that is, to the "*how*" of the meanings and values humans find in the world, how they literally make sense of what they sense—thus how in their everyday perceptions, they put the world together in meaningful ways. In brief, by his detailing in full measure the cognitive dimensions of perceptual experience, Husserl shows how in perceptual experience *we go beyond the sensuous*, *beyond sensing to sense-making*, *to meaning*. This epistemic fact is not Idealism, as Stuart Kauffman identifies it (Kauffman, this volume). This fact is Reality, the reality of experience in everyday life, the reality of the nature of human beings, and the reality of the nature of human experience, whether in China, Nigeria, Canada, Indonesia, Brazil, The Netherlands, the United States, Australia, the Arctic, or any other country or place in this global world.[1]

The above compressed summary of Husserlian phenomenology in relation to nature in no way implies that Nature cannot be more fully encompassed within phenomenology. It surely can, and in ways Husserl precisely recognizes as "the root soil," "the comet's tail of nature," and the "*background that is prior to all comportment*" (Husserl, 1989, pp. 292; 350, 291, respectively); precisely too in terms of his not uncommon references to nonhuman animals in conjunction with human ones (e.g., ibid., pp. 185–186; Husserl, 1970a, pp. 187, 219; Husserl 1977, pp. 40–41, 78, 99–100), a linkage that implicitly attests to *his recognition of evolutionary continuities in animate life*, continuities that are in fact sorely missing in his immediate so-called "followers" such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.[2] Certainly of moment too is his consistent use of the term "*animate organism*," which provides both explicit and incontrovertible evidence of his foundational recognition of Nature, a recognition that is apparent straight off in the opening section of *Ideas II* titled "The Constitution of Material Nature." (*Ideas II* is subtitled "Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution." See also Husserl, 1980 [*Ideas III*], pp. 103–112 on "The Connection of Psyche and Animate Organism").

A further clarification of phenomenology and its relation to nature is had in the reading of *Ideas III*, the topic of this book being "Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences." Particularly in its first 60 pages, Husserl addresses "those realities that are either themselves material nature or founded in material nature" (Husserl, 1980, p. 18). The particular domain of science that Husserl examines is psychology, but his findings concerning the foundational objectivity of all sciences in material nature is of equal moment. Husserl in fact discusses physics in these pages and in ways of interest in relation to psychology.

In addition to the above briefly noted clarifications of Husserlian phenomenology, it is of singular importance to clarify phenomenological methodology and to show, however briefly, that it is in no need of either revision or expansion. In particular, the methodology is of two strands: static phenomenology and genetic phenomenology. The former should not be misunderstood as being without a history, for the sensing and sense-making of an object has a history, certainly as is apparent in the developmentally achieved concepts and meanings formed in infancy and early childhood. The latter should not be misunderstood as being lacking in a social and cultural history, for meanings and values can and do evolve over time in a global sense, even in the sense of there being a global world. Husserl's renditions of perception and of internal time consciousness are exemplary of the former methodological strand (Husserl, 1983, 1964); his rendition of the mathematics of geometry is exemplary of the latter (Husserl, 1970b). The former phenomenology—a "static" phenomenology—leads to essential aspects of the phenomenon in question; the latter—a "genetic" phenomenology—leads to understandings of the origin of the phenomenon in question and its cognitive-theoretical development over time. To be noted and underscored is the *methodological reduction* integral to phenomenology together with its purpose and its consequences, a methodological reduction that separates phenomenology in definitive and even distinctively elevated ways from the charge of anchorage in theory-laden observations. In particular, the *practice* of phenomenology begins with a bracketing of beliefs, assumptions, tenets, and so on, concerning the object of inquiry. One thus separates oneself from what Husserl terms "the natural attitude," including separation from what one expects to find, from what motivates one to inquire, and the like

[1] In this context, a reviewer asked for an example of "culturally unmediated experience." A number could be given, beginning with reaching for something one would like to explore, turning something over to see what is on the other side, kicking in conjunction with the realization that doing so makes the mobile above one's head move, thus discovering that one can make things happen. Such reaching, turning, and kicking are readily observable in infants, though this is not to exclude their reality in later child and adult life nor is it to exclude basic experiences of walking toward or away from something that either attracts one or repulses one. One could also, of course, mention the startle reflex, which is not only "culturally unmediated" but non-species-specific (see Landis and Hunt, 1939).

[2] For a constructive perspective and a critical perspective on Heidegger, see respectively, Sheets-Johnstone 2003a, 2008, Chapter 2; and Sheets-Johnstone 2015 unpublished, in submission. For a critical questioning of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Sheets-Johnstone 1999/2011, Chapter 6).