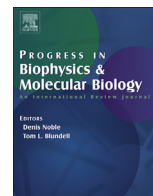




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pbiomolbio

Situated phenomenology and biological systems: Eastern and Western synthesis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 2 July 2015

Keywords:

Phenomenology
Experience
Situated cognition
Eastern
Western
Cybernetics
Robotics
System
Biology

ABSTRACT

Phenomenology was born with the mission to give foundations for science of experience and to open consciousness to scientific study. The influence of phenomenology initiated in the works of Husserl and continued in a wide range of works of others was immense, but mainly within the confines of philosophy and the humanities. The actual attempts to develop a scientific discipline of the study of consciousness and to carry out research on cognition and consciousness were always based on the methods of traditional science in which elimination of the subjective has been always a primary tenet. Thus, focus was mainly on neurological correlates of conscious phenomena. The present paper is an attempt to initiate an extension and revision of phenomenological methodology with the use of philosophical and scientific experience and knowledge accumulated in a century of inquiry and research in relevant disciplines. The question which disciplines are relevant is crucial and our answer is innovative. The range of disciplines involved here is from information science and studies of computation, up to cultural psychology and the studies of philosophical traditions of the East. Concepts related to information and computation studies provide a general conceptual framework free from the limitations of particular languages and of linguistic analysis. This conceptual framework is extending the original perspective of phenomenology to issues of modern technology and science. Cultural psychology gives us tools to root out what in phenomenology was considered universal for humanity, but was a result of European ethnocentrism. Most important here is the contrast between individualistic and collectivistic cultural determinants of consciousness. Finally, philosophical tradition of the East gives alternatives in seeking solutions for fundamental problems. This general outline of the research methodology is illustrated by an example of its use when phenomenology is studied within the conceptual framework of information.

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1. The biological self and its consciousness

Consciousness is a subjective experience. We can test whether someone is conscious only by inducing overt behavior associated by our own subjective experience with consciousness. However, this association can be illusionary. In order to be able to study consciousness it is necessary to develop a methodology of the study of subjective experience. If this methodology is intended as scientific, we are encountering the precipice on which in spite of many attempts no firm bridge was ever built, despite of the existence of some brave, but only delineated attempts (Varela and Shear, 1999). At a certain level, we can observe by fMRI the neural correlates that

happen inside the brain while we observe situations in which we feel us as 'conscious'. This is a starting point because the feeling of the existence is also distributed across the body (proprioception, emotional bodily mapping,...) and this common neural correlation approach focuses exclusively into the brain.

No matter what epistemological position we assume, scientific methodology is concerned with the truth or its achievement. From the methodological point of view the problem of scientific study of the subjective starts from the question about the status of the concept of truth in the context of subjective experience. My own experience of the red apple is unquestionable. If I experience that the apple is red, it is definitely true that my experience of red color is true. My subjective experience of being conscious is obviously true, as is my subjective experience of existence, but my actual existence in the objective world does not belong to subjective experience. This common conviction about the truth of subjective

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experience led Descartes to his apparently undeniable statement “I think, therefore I am.” Its use as a foundation for philosophical argument is of course a result of the confusion between sentences “I think” and “I thinks”, and sentences “I exist” and “I exists”. Yet, Descartes did not give priority to subjective experience. Despite of his *rationalist* approach to consciousness, he divided reality into two realms of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (mind/soul and body as separate substances). In order to secure the truth of own existence he referred to the presence of God as the one who could certify that I would not be cheated by my senses about my own existence (the malignant demon thesis).

The recognition that the attempts to analyze subjective experience in terms of logic based on the criterion of truth were futile motivated Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his development of aesthetics understood as a science of subjective experience based on the concept of beauty. Unfortunately, his program did not find followers, probably due to the increasingly influential tendency to identify science with the objective and the relegation of the subjective to the domain of the humanities. The concept of beauty returned to the domain of art criticism and its role as one of the subjective criteria of evaluation was trivialized by the frequently quoted statement made by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, interpreted as an expression of mistrust in its value. Two Cultures of C. P. Snow were born (Snow, 1959). The divorce of the two cultures was accelerated by Romanticism, which appealed to the opponents of scientific methodology, and appalled its adherents.

2. Western studies of consciousness: phenomenological approach

In philosophy, but not really in science, the revival of the hope for science of subjective experience came with phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. In this paper, we attempt to adapt his phenomenological analysis to the present state of knowledge accumulated in the studies of consciousness. Our phenomenological commitment is limited. It is limited to the firm foundation in the subject of the study – subjective experience of reality, and to his methodological principles of searching for the way from this subjective experience towards the construction of reality. It can be said that our approach is eidetic, transcendental and constitutive, but our conceptual framework is quite different from that of Husserl, and therefore the meaning of these characteristics is altered.

There are many differences between our approach and the original phenomenological system of Husserl. In our opinion, Husserl (Husserl, 1901), as well as the entire phenomenological tradition, is heavily dependent on the traditional philosophical analysis of language and traditional logic. Seminal ideas of Brentano (Brentano, 1874), and the Munich Group (the realist phenomenologies made by Theodor Conrad, Johannes Daubert, Moritz Geiger, Alexander Pfänder or Adolf Reinach (Schumann, 1997; Kuhn et al., 1976) followed also this epistemological approach based on the basic role of consciousness into the rational processes. Later, existential phenomenologists headed by Heidegger (1977) were focused into the experience of the Self, this understood as an individual process. Hanna Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas or Jean-Paul Sartre followed such an individualistic approach to the feeling of the experience: a philosophical position that created semantic nets from the person towards the world.

Our approach is using as the point of departure a very general notion of phenomenological information, which is not limited to its basic linguistic form. The dependence on language and traditional logic can be seen for instance, when Husserl is talking about reduction through bracketing, but also in many other statements regarding the content of our subjective experience expressed in the

linguistic form. The belief that subjective experience can be adequately expressed in language and that it can be analyzed in terms of traditional logic is clearly the result of cultural bias. In fact, the knowledge is the result of a collective project. Furthermore, the concept of subjective experience presupposes some sense of self, which in the works of Husserl is very clearly influenced by the Western cultural tradition. The concept of the subjective is also very clearly identified with the individual human being.

3. The Eastern view of phenomenology

The seminal work of Hazel Rose Marcus and Shinobu Kitayama “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation” (1991) presents the cultural diversity of the concept of self. In our view, subjectivity is not necessarily identical with individuality. Subjective experience is inherently dependent on collective, cultural environment. It is very clearly visible in the Eastern philosophical and cultural tradition, but even in the work of Husserl it is present in the linguistic and cultural conventions. Thus, it is necessary to take into consideration the consequences of cultural differences in the way the Self, and therefore subjective experience is formed. This view allows us a very innovative approach: to synthesize and merge Western and Eastern phenomenological traditions, something that has been extensively discussed by Jon Shear in his book on experiences in meditation (Shear, 2006), but following a more classic and philosophy-based approach. We are suggesting a more interdisciplinary analysis of the phenomenological study, as we will show throughout next sections. In recent cultural psychology studies (Nisbet, 2003) we can find support for the view of a fundamental difference between philosophical positions in different cultures: Western philosophy is based on the Belief in the Self, and Eastern traditions are based on the conviction about Illusion of the Self. The extension of this Self does not matter, because according to some traditions it will be called individual ‘self’ or cosmic ‘Self’. This difference can be found for example in the understanding of the *shūnyatā* concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism Yogācāra and Mādhyamika schools, usually translated just as ‘emptiness’, but understood differently in these schools, or can also be found in the distinction of *purusha* and *prakriti* in Vedānta. It is important to notice that beyond any ontological debate about the nature and range of this ‘self’, the meaning of it is the existential experience of being, which is a unified feeling across cultures, religions and rationalizations. Even very recent interesting contributions such as those of the neurologist Antonio Damasio (2012), who differentiates between proto-self, core-self, and extended-self, are the cultural, but not functional interpretations of consciousness. The experience of being can be felt and expressed only through a cultural, symbolic, or more generally “informative” process, because otherwise it is just a big *quale*. Eastern thinkers, as well as Western thinkers such as Descartes, Hume or Kant, with direct descendants in Husserl and Heidegger, express this misunderstanding, because they all thought that it was possible to experience consciousness beyond any symbolic (or informational) structure.

Anyhow, we should notice that Western philosophical systems tend to be individualistic and Eastern ones, collectivistic. It is fundamental for our purpose because most of Western phenomenological studies analyze (see Husserl, Heidegger or (Merleau-Pony, 1945) – the latter influenced by Okakura (1906)) the existence and the own perception of the individual person. On the contrary, Eastern attempts like those of Watsuji Tetsuro (1961) put the emphasis on the notion of collective existence or of ecological existence (*Fudo*). This is a good point to think again about the phenomenological experience: the Self looks into her/his interior thanks to collective tools (language, symbols, cognitive

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