



Faculty of Humanities



# Phenomenology of consciousness I

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# What is the problem of consciousness?

- There isn't one
- There are many
- To focus exclusively on the mind-body (consciousness-brain) problem is to flagrantly oversimplify



# What is consciousness?

- 40 hz oscillation in the brain
  - Neural correlate of consciousness
  - Assuming it is true, would it be a satisfying answer?
- Phenomenality
  - Subjective experiences, what-it-is-like(-for-me)-ness, temporality
- Intentionality
  - Correlations, non-existing objects
- Rationality
  - Normativity, truth-tracking, misrepresentation, rational coherence, epistemic responsibility, metacognition



# Problems

- How can neurophysiological processes give rise to pain quale?
- Vs.
- What is the relation between perceptual, pictorial and imaginative forms of consciousness?
- How is consciousness affected by social interaction and language use?
- What is the relation between experience and expressivity?
- What is the relation between self-consciousness and object-consciousness?
- What is a self?
- Questions like these must be tackled by interdisciplinary collaboration



## Interdisciplinary complications

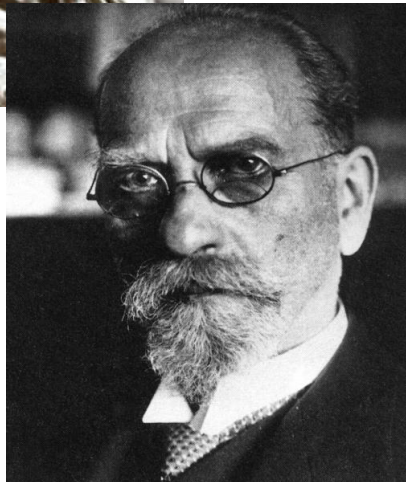
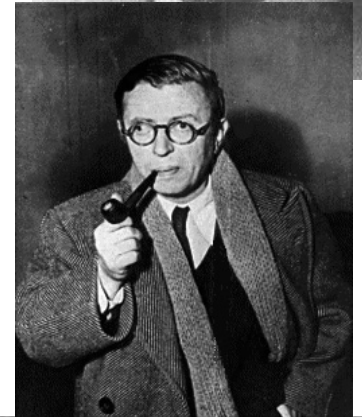
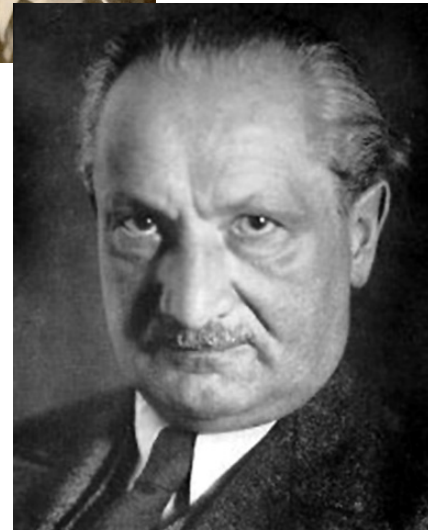
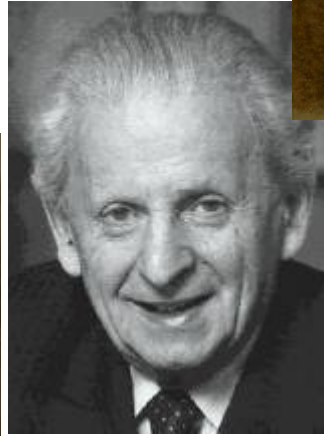
“I have grown accustomed to the disrespect expressed by some of the participants for their colleagues in the other disciplines. ‘Why[. . .]’ ask the people in Artificial Intelligence, ‘do you waste your time conferring with those neuroscientists? They wave their hands about “information processing” and worry about where it happens, and which neuro-transmitters are involved, and all those boring facts, but they haven’t a clue about the computational requirements of higher cognitive functions.’ ‘Why,’ ask the neuroscientists, ‘do you waste your time on the fantasies of Artificial Intelligence? They just invent whatever machinery they want, and say unpardonably ignorant things about the brain.’ The cognitive psychologists, meanwhile, are accused of concocting models with neither biological plausibility nor proven computational powers; the anthropologists wouldn’t know a model if they saw one, and the philosophers, as we all know, just take in each other’s laundry, warning about confusions they themselves have created, in an arena bereft of both data and empirically testable theories. With so many idiots working on the problem, no wonder consciousness is still a mystery.”



# Phenomenology

- Phenomenology as one of the most important traditions in 20th century philosophy
- The cornerstone of Continental philosophy
- Ricoeur: The history of phenomenology is the history of heretics
- But let us not overlook the similarities and overarching common concerns





# Prominent phenomenologists

## **Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)**

- *Logische Untersuchungen*, 1900-01
- *Ideen I*, 1913
- *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 1929
- *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, 1936

## **Max Scheler (1874-1919)**

- *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, 1913
- *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, 1923

## **Edith Stein (1891–1942)**

- *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, 1916

## **Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)**

- *Sein und Zeit*, 1927

## **Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)**

- *La Transcendance de l'ego*, 1936
- *L'être et le Neant*, 1943

## **Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961)**

- *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945

**Gurwitsch, Schutz, de Beauvoir, Ricoeur, Derrida, Henry, Levinas, Waldenfels, etc.**





# The relevance of historical resources

- Consciousness might be a relatively new topic in cognitive science, neuroscience, etc., but it has been explored for a very long time by philosophers
- Consciousness is so complicated that we need to consider all available resources, and it would be counterproductive to ignore existing insights and spend precious resources on reinventing sliced bread.



# The phenomena

- Phenomenology = the science or study of the phenomena
- What kind of phenomena does phenomenology investigate?
- What is a phenomenon?
- Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Aron and their visit to a Parisian bar.



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# Investigating a cake

- How would a scientist investigate a cake? What features does it have? What ingredients is it made of? How nutritious and healthy is it? How does the heat of the oven affect its solidity etc.
- What vs. How
- How does the cake appear, what kind of phenomenon is it?
- Talk about it, see a photo of it, see and taste it.



# Joseph Kosuth: "One and three plants"



# The phenomenological analysis

- **Perspectival givenness**
  - We never see the entire cake at once – and we are not in doubt that there is more to the cake than what is currently presented
- **Horizon and context**
  - Seeing the front of the cake as the front of the cake involves an interplay of presence and absence
- **Embodied spectator**
  - Perspectivally given for whome?
- **Action-perception**
  - We explore the cake by engaging bodily with it
- **Temporality**
  - Exploration is temporally extended and presupposes a certain temporal configuration of consciousness
- **Sociality – intersubjectivity**
  - I buy the cake because of future plans: Present for someone
  - The cake is public and is experienced as such. It is a cake that also exists for others



# Phenomenological method

- From analysis to method
- Slogans: Back to the things themselves... The performance of a special kind of bracketing, the epoché
- Phenomenology as a descriptive enterprise
- Taking experience seriously
- What has to be bracketed?



# Descriptive botanist

- Unprejudiced turn to the object: Bracket preconceived ideas, habits of thoughts, theoretical baggage
- The aim of phenomenology is to explore and describe the object of experience in as many details as possible and with due focus on its unique features
- Flaubert: “We have fallen into the habit of remembering, whenever we use our eyes, what people before us have thought of the things we are looking at. Even the slightest thing contains a little that is unknown. We must find it. To describe a blazing fire or a tree in a plain, we must remain before that fire or that tree until they no longer resemble for us any other tree or any other fire”





# Introspective psychology

- We should bracket our normal preoccupation with objects.
- We normally live in a kind of self-forgetfulness
- The aim of phenomenology is to describe our inner experience
- The aim of phenomenology is to “reveal the basic facts of consciousness” by means of some special “introspectionist bit of mental gymnastics” (Dennett)
- “there are no major differences in acts between phenomenological ‘reflection’ and psycho-phenomenological introspection” (Vermersch)
- Titchener provided a description of what he felt when reading the sentence *Infinity broods over all things*: “The most prominent thing in consciousness was a blue-black, dense arched sky, which palpated, as if with immense wings, over a solid convex surface” (Titchener 1910: 517-518).



# Phenomenology and mindfulness

- Should we appreciate Husserl's phenomenological work as a collection of fine-grained descriptions of experiences?
- Is the aim of the phenomenological method to "detect laterally occurrences that are not in the main focus of attention" (Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013: 179)?
- Is it about revealing the margins "of our experience that are overlooked as long as exclusive concern for objects prevails" (Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013: 179)?
- Will a technique that broadens our field of attention in such a way as to allow us to discover hitherto unreflected and unnoticed aspects and details of lived experience make us into better phenomenologists?



# Picture book phenomenology

- Phenomenology is neither about retreating into our interiority in order to examine it as carefully as possible
- Nor is it about describing various appearing objects in as many details as possible
- Not only do both suggestions overlook the specific correlational character of phenomenological analysis
- Neither world nor mind, but the dyad mind-world or triad mind-world-sociality (self-other-world)
- They also miss out on the distinct philosophical ambition of phenomenology
- *Bilderbuch* phenomenology – picture book phenomenology



# Constitution

- „the objects of which we are 'conscious', are not simply *in* consciousness as in a box, so that they can merely be found in it and snatched at in it; but that they are first *constituted* as being what they are for us, and as what they count as for us, in varying forms of objective intention“ (Husserl).
- The greatest and most important problems in phenomenology are related to the question of how objectivities of different kinds, from the prescientific to those of the highest scientific dignity, are constituted by consciousness.
- Indeed, “investigating, in the most all-encompassing way, how objective unities of every region and category are ‘constituted in keeping with consciousness’ is what counts“ (Husserl).
- It is for this very reason, that Husserl can write that there is not only a *phenomenology of natural scientific thinking*, but also a *phenomenology of nature* (qua correlate of consciousness).
- To think otherwise, is to seriously misunderstand the nature and purpose of phenomenological reflection.



# Correlationism

- By adopting the phenomenological attitude, we pay attention to the givenness of public objects (trees, planets, paintings, symphonies, numbers, states of affairs, social relations, etc.).
- But we do not simply focus on the object; rather we investigate the object qua experienced as well as the structure of the respective object-experience.
- That is, by attending to the objects precisely as they are given, we also uncover the subjective side of consciousness, thereby becoming aware of our subjective accomplishments and of the intentionality that is at play in order for the objects to appear as they do.
- The topic of the phenomenological analyses is consequently not a worldless subject, and phenomenology does not ignore the world in favour of consciousness.
- Rather, phenomenology is interested in consciousness because it is world-disclosing.
- It is in order to understand how the world appears in the way it does, and with the validity and meaning it has, that phenomenology seeks to investigate intentional consciousness.



## Back to the epoché

- The aim of the epoché is to bracket or suspend our natural attitude, i.e., a certain taken-for-granted metaphysical perspective on the world
- In ordinary life we take it for granted that the world exists independently of us, and that true knowledge amounts to some kind of flawless mirroring of a pre-existing reality
- Philosophy cannot just take such commitments for granted, but has to examine their justification
- Rather than simply naively accepting the ready-made character of the objective world, we need to understand how the world for us comes to acquire its character of true, valid, and objective.
- It is only by suspending our automatic belief in the mind-independent existence of the world that the true significance and contribution of consciousness can be revealed.



## Husserl in *Natur und Geist* (1927)

“every historically available scientific discipline and even part of what normally belongs to philosophy, including formal logic, psychology and ethics, conduct their research in a natural – though in a certain way necessary – naivety. All their questions refer to a world which is given to us – with an obviousness belonging to life – prior to all science, but they fail to notice that this pre-givenness conceals a true infinity of enigmatic problems, which are not even noticed from within the natural perspective. I am referring to the transcendental problems, and it is only the truly scientific philosophy which has made their disclosure possible” (Hua 32/7).



# The transcendental project

- One way to interpret Kant's revolutionary *Copernican turn* is by seeing it as amounting to the realization that our cognitive apprehension of reality is more than a mere mirroring of a pre-existing world.
- Thus, with Kant the pre-critical search for the most fundamental building blocks of reality was transformed into a transcendental philosophical reflection on what conditions something must satisfy in order to count as real.
- What is the condition of possibility for the appearance of empirical objects, what does it mean for the world to count as real and objective?
- Phenomenologists share the conviction that the critical stance proper to philosophy necessitates a move away from a straightforward investigation of objects to an investigation of the very framework of meaning and intelligibility that makes any such straightforward investigation possible in the first place.
- Indeed, rather than taking the objective world as the point of departure, phenomenology precisely asks how something like objectivity is possible in the first place.
- How is objectivity constituted?
- How is it that the world can be manifested or revealed to us in the first place?





## End of part one

- So much for phenomenological methodology
- In my next lecture I will turn to the question of how phenomenology can contribute to contemporary consciousness research



Thanks for your attention!

