



Faculty of Humanities



Phenomenology of consciousness II

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The contemporary relevance

- How can phenomenology contribute to the scientific investigations of consciousness?
- Appreciating the systematic significance of consciousness
- Getting the explanandum right (and offering relevant conceptual tools)



What is the status of consciousness?

- If we really want to understand consciousness, we shouldn't approach it as a peculiar object in the world
- What makes consciousness special is not that it is a more complex object than other objects, or that it has strange (phenomenal/experiential/subjective) properties
- Not about qualia, it is not about finding room or space for an object which has particular properties that seem in a natural world view
- Rather than merely being an *object in the world*, consciousness is also *a subject for the world*
- Principled reflections on the relation between mind and world, between subjectivity and objectivity, between first-person perspective and the third-person perspective



First-person and third-person perspectives

- Without conscious subjects to interpret and discuss them, meter settings, computer printouts, x-ray pictures, and the like remain meaningless.
- Rather than being a hindrance or obstacle, consciousness turns out to be a far more important requisite for objectivity and the pursuit of scientific knowledge than, say, microscopes and scanners.
- This is also why the usual opposition of first-person vs. third-person accounts is misleading.
- It makes us forget that so-called third-person objective accounts are accomplished and generated by a community of conscious subjects.
- There is no pure third-person perspective, just as there is no view from nowhere.
- A third-person perspective is, precisely, a perspective from somewhere.
- It is a view that we can adopt on the world.



Objectivity and the scientific community

- Science is not simply a collection of systematically interrelated justified propositions.
- Science is performed by somebody; it is a specific theoretical stance towards the world.
- This stance is not a view from nowhere, it did not fall down from the sky, nor did it emerge fully formed and readymade like Athena from Zeus' forehead, rather it has its own presuppositions and origin.
- Science is performed by embodied and embedded subjects, and if we wish to comprehend the performance and limits of science, we have to investigate the forms of intentionality that are employed by the cognizing subjects
- Objectivity is certainly something to strive for, but scientific knowledge is knowledge that is shared by a community of experiencing subjects and presupposes a triangulation of points of view or perspectives.



Mind and world

- To assume that consciousness is simply an object in the world prevents one from disclosing let alone clarifying some of the most interesting aspects of consciousness, including the true epistemic and ontological significance of the first-person perspective.
- Frequently, the assumption has been that a better understanding of the physical world will allow us to understand consciousness better and rarely that a better understanding of consciousness might allow for a better understanding of what it means for something to be real.
- However, one of the reasons why the theory of intentionality occupies centre stage in Husserl's thinking is precisely because he considers a study of the world-directedness of consciousness to provide us with insights into not only the structure of subjectivity, but also into the nature of objectivity.
- That something like a conscious appropriation of the world is possible does not merely tell us something about consciousness, but also about the world.



Prediction error minimization theory

- The brain as a prediction machine
- The brain doesn't process all the information it receives, but focuses its resources on unexpected input
- In order to minimize costly surprises, the brain is constantly seeking to anticipate and predict what signals its sensory organs will be receiving.
- It does so by constructing internal models of the likely causes of these inputs; models that are constantly updated and revised.
- The goal is to minimize the 'prediction error', i.e., the discrepancy between the predicted and the actual input.
- This model is committed to a strong form of representationalism
 - Frith, C. (2007), *Making up the Mind: How the Brain Creates Our Mental Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
 - Metzinger, T. (2009), *The Ego Tunnel*. New York: Basic Books.
 - Hohwy, J. (2013), *The Predictive Mind*. New York: OUP.



Neuro-representationalism

- The claim is not that our access to the external world is mediated by neural representations
- The claim is that the content of our experience is a neural construct, a brain-generated simulation
- What we perceive is not the world, but our brain's model of the world (Frith)
 - “The apricot-pink of the setting sun is not a property of the evening sky; it is a property of the internal *model* of the evening sky, a model created by your brain. The evening sky is colorless. The world is not inhabited by colored objects at all. [...] Out there, in front of your eyes, there is just an ocean of electromagnetic radiation, a wild and raging mixture of different wavelengths” (Metzinger 2009: 20)
- What holds true of colors, holds true of all perceptual objects
- The seen rose, the touched icecube, the heard melody, the colleague, the group of refugees, they are all internal to and contained in the brain



Cartesian internalism and skepticism

- There is a strict and absolute division between inner and outer
- Epistemically speaking, our bodies are as remote as distant galaxies
- The brain is informationally secluded from everything beyond its own boundaries and only has direct access to what is on the inside
- We never have direct contact with an observer-independent external reality, since the latter remains hidden behind the representational veil
- Our representational filters prevent us from seeing the world as it is in itself, and since we can never crawl outside our own brains, skepticism looms
- But skepticism is of no significance. What we need to know is whether our model works. Whether it is true, whether it really corresponds to the world itself, is irrelevant



Phenomenological realism

- Phenomenology is in many ways opposed to the internalist, sceptical, representationalist model just presented
- So that is not the relevant analogy
- The comparison is primarily intended to show how contemporary cognitive science (influenced by neo-Kantianism) might itself be admitting that brain, mind and world are interrelated in ways that contradict ordinary naïve realism



Explanation and understanding

- We want to naturalize consciousness.
- How do we go about doing that?
- A necessary requirement for any coherent naturalization is that we have a good grasp of what it is that we want to naturalize.
- Without a proper account of the explanandum, the explanatory effort is doomed to failure
- If one starts out with a vague or misleading account of consciousness, the empirical search for its putative natural basis will necessarily be led astray.
- Consciousness = sensation of pain
- Imagination = pictures in mind
- Empathy = shared affects
- Phenomenology can contribute to this effort by – at the very least – providing detailed descriptions of the explanandum



Borrett, Kelly & Kwan (2000)

“[T]he right relation between phenomenology and brain science is that of data to model: brain science is ultimately concerned with explaining the way the physical processes of the brain conspire to produce the phenomena of human experience; insofar as phenomenology devotes itself to the accurate description of these phenomena, it provides the most complete and accurate presentation of the data that ultimately must be accounted for by models of brain function [...]. Thus, the phenomenological account of a given aspect of human behavior is meant to provide a description of the characteristics of that behavior which any physical explanation of it must be able to reproduce” (Borrett et al. 2000: 214).



Changing the explanandum

- This suggestion is way too modest, however.
- Phenomenology can do more than simply offer more refined descriptions of an already fixed explanandum,
- Phenomenology can do more than merely provide more data to existing models.
- Phenomenology is not merely in the descriptive business.
- Phenomenology also offers theoretical accounts of its own that can challenge existing models and background assumptions and which might occasionally lead to the discovery of quite different explananda.



Significant areas of research

- Perception
- Imagination
- Body-awareness
- Time-consciousness
- Episodic memory
- Social cognition
- Self and self-experience
- etc.



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Mirrors and self-consciousness

- The mirror-recognition task has occasionally been heralded as the decisive test for self-consciousness.
- From around eighteen months of age, children will engage in self-directed behaviour when confronted with their mirror-image, and it has been argued that self-consciousness is only present from the moment the child is capable of recognizing itself in the mirror (cf. Lewis 2003).
- Needless to say, this line of reasoning makes use of a very specific notion of self-consciousness.



The social dimension of mirror self-recognition

- Facial self-recognition is not a fundamental form of self-experience
- To see oneself in the mirror is to become a spectator on oneself
- The felt me has an exterior dimension that can be witnessed by others
- To test facial self-recognition is to test the self as social object

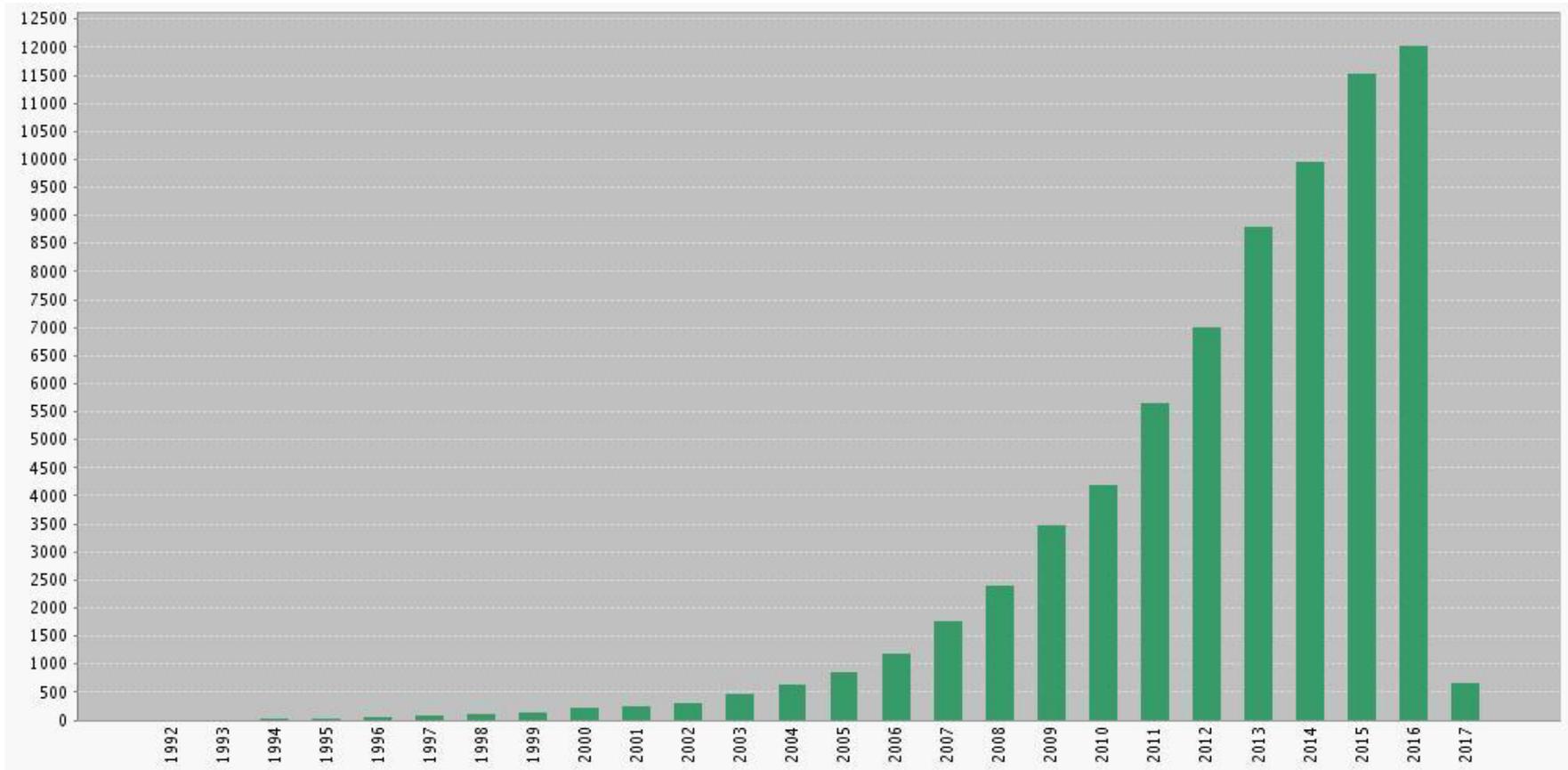


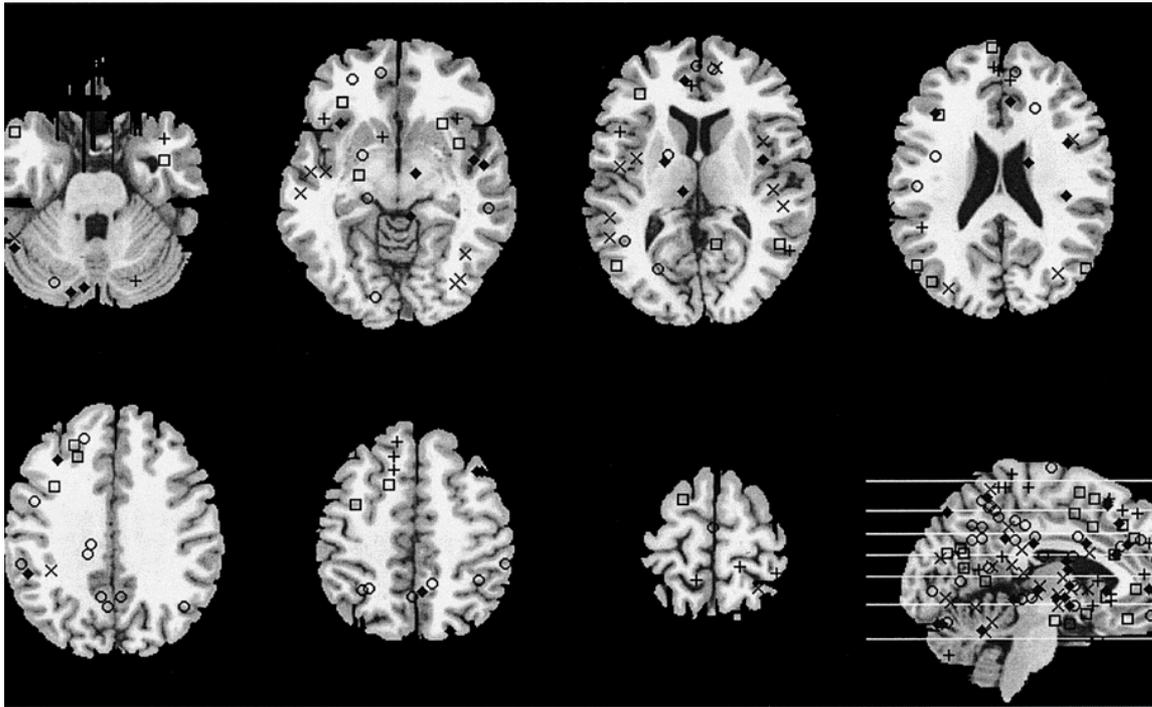
The phenomenological contribution

- Rather than simply offering new data, phenomenology might also offer an alternative theoretical framework for work on self- and self-experience
- Phenomenological work might guide our design of the experimental paradigm
- It might for instance seek to detect the presence of more primitive forms of self-consciousness, such as, for instance, one that is involved in our body-awareness.



Self in neuroscience On ISI Web of Knowledge: Citations





The neurale correlate(s) of self

Gillihan, S. J., & Farah, M. J. (2005). Is Self Special? A Critical Review of Evidence From Experimental Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(1), 76–97.

Autism

- Individuals with autism
 - are mindblind and unaware of their own mental states
 - can judge their own inner states only by their actions
 - can tell of inner feelings and experiences with great detail
 - lack introspection and self-awareness
 - possess self-knowledge
- Autism is characterized by
 - an absent self
 - a total focus on self



Simon Baron-Cohen

- “The idea that as a result of neurological factors one might lose aspects of the self is scientifically important, in that it offers the promise of teaching us more about what the self is. In this chapter I do not tackle the thorny question of how to define the self. Rather, I accept that this word refers to something we recognize and instead raise the question: are people with autism trapped – for neurological reasons – to be totally self-focused?”



The complexity of self

- A single notion is not sufficient
- The self is so multifaceted a phenomenon that various complementary accounts must be integrated if we are to do justice to its complexity
- This complexity necessitates conceptual clarification, it doesn't make it superfluous



Naturalized phenomenology

- Make phenomenology a part of natural science vs. mutual enlightenment
- Phenomenology might not only contribute with its own careful descriptions of the explanandum, but might also question and elucidate basic theoretical assumption made by empirical science, just as insights developed in phenomenological analyses might aid in the development of new experimental paradigms and inform the way experiments are set up.
- At the same time, empirical science can present phenomenology with concrete findings that it cannot simply ignore, but must be able to accommodate; evidence that might force it to refine or revise its own analyses.



Thanks for your attention!

