

## **In What Sense Is Phenomenology Transcendental?**

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### **Abstract**

Dan Zahavi raises doubts about the prospects for combining phenomenological and analytical approaches to the mind, based chiefly on the claim that phenomenology is a form of transcendental philosophy. I argue that there are two ways in which one might understand the claim that phenomenology is transcendental: (1) as the claim that the methods of phenomenology essentially involve addressing transcendental questions or making transcendental arguments, or (2) as the claim that phenomenology is committed to substantive theses of antirealism and the like, which are sometimes thought to follow from a transcendental approach. I argue that while (1) is appropriate, it in no way leads to conflicts with analytic work in philosophy of mind. Moreover, adopting this method and practicing phenomenology in no way commits us to claims of type (2) that might be thought to conflict with common assumptions in analytic philosophy of mind.

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While he begins by approving of the renewed focus on the first-person perspective and the renewed interest in work that crosses the boundaries between the phenomenological and analytic approaches to the mind, Dan Zahavi aims mainly to voice some reservations about both of these projects. On the first, he usefully points out that we should not embrace the importance of the first-person perspective at the price of misconstruing our (second-person) ways of understanding others, taking the former to involve “direct, introspective” access, and the latter to involve merely probable intellectual inferences based on behavioral observations. Understanding others, he insists, is not a matter first of perceiving meaningless behavior and then introjecting a psychological side hidden behind this. Instead (as such phenomenologists as Merleau-Ponty—and, I might add, Alfred Schutz and Martin Heidegger—have pointed out) our normal experience of others simply at the start involves seeing them as other persons, seeing their actions as meaningful and expressive. I think this is a useful reminder and warning, with which I am in thorough agreement.

Zahavi’s other reservations concern the relationship between phenomenological and analytic approaches to philosophy of

mind. He acknowledges that, on many issues, the two may work together, and even that analytic work on the mind may presuppose some work in phenomenology, since “any appraisal of whether a naturalization of consciousness is possible requires an understanding and detailed description of the main features of consciousness” (Zahavi, 69). But he issues two cautions about the recent enthusiasm for unifying these approaches. First, he warns that those analytic philosophers who currently use the term “phenomenology” often use it in a way at odds with the work done by historical phenomenology. More specifically, phenomenology is often presented in the analytic literature (e.g., Dennett 1987, 154, 157–58; 1991, 44) as an introspective method of gaining knowledge about the “feel” of one’s own experiences. But this characterization is antithetical to Husserl’s phenomenological methods; in fact, he often explicitly inveighed against this approach to phenomenology. I think this is an important corrective, and in fact I attempt to identify, root out, and correct this same mistake in my “First-Person Knowledge in Phenomenology” (2005).

But once we have corrected that misunderstanding, the truly interesting question remains: If phenomenology is not a matter of introspecting the intrinsic “feel” of our own experiences (from the first-person point of view), what is it? Zahavi gives a bold answer to that question: Phenomenology is “a special form of transcendental philosophy” (77). And that, in turn, he takes as grounds for raising further, more serious concerns about the extent to which it can be made compatible with much recent work in analytic philosophy. It is here that my own doubts and worries arise.

I think there are at least two ways of understanding the claim that phenomenology is essentially transcendental:

- (1) As holding that the methods of phenomenology essentially involve addressing transcendental questions or making transcendental arguments.
- (2) As holding that anyone who practices phenomenology is committed to a substantive thesis of transcendental idealism or other substantive conclusions at odds with central assumptions of analytic philosophy of mind.

Zahavi seems to have both in mind, as he characterizes the “transcendental nature” of phenomenology in different ways:

1. (Methodological) As seeking “to reflect on the conditions of possibility of experience and cognition, and on the question of what conditions something must satisfy in order to count as ‘real’” (Zahavi, 77). It “is interested in the phenomena and in their conditions of possibility”—so that the questions it seeks to answer are essentially transcendental.

2. (Substantive) It is committed to a Kantian framework that requires recognizing “that subjectivity constitutes the framework within which or in correlation to which reality must be understood” (Zahavi, 78). This in turn is supposed to have “wide-ranging methodological, epistemological, and metaphysical implications” (79) that often conflict with assumptions of the contemporary analytic approach.<sup>1</sup> Those implications are supposed to include:
  - a. The rejection of metaphysical realism
  - b. The rejection of scientism
  - c. The idea that a view from nowhere is either unattainable or a nonsensical idea
  - d. That subjectivity is requisite for objectivity
  - e. That skepticism must be overcome

I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming) that we should understand phenomenology primarily *methodologically*, and that so understood it can provide an approach that is complementary to the metaphysical questions addressed with the mind-body problem, as well as to the approaches to the mind characteristic of cognitive science, empirical psychology, and neuroscience. The methodological understanding I will suggest enables us to account for the methodological “transcendental” side of phenomenology while also demystifying this and demonstrating its similarity to some approaches within the “analytic” tradition. But, I will argue, it is by no means obvious that adopting this method commits us to a substantive thesis of transcendental idealism or other substantive conclusions that would conflict with some of the assumptions common in analytic philosophy of mind.

### **1. A Methodological Conception of Phenomenology**

One of Husserl’s central goals, which he pursued again and again in most of his major works, was to provide a method for doing phenomenology, and the centerpiece of his method involved “bracketing” or “phenomenological reduction.” The goals of this method were to provide a way to turn our attention from naïve absorption in the world perceived to enable us to study intentionality, our ways of representing the world in our conscious mental states, considered as “ideal types” of possible ways in which the world may be meaningfully presented to us.

Of course, the method is complicated and Husserl’s expositions of it vary from work to work, but still a too-brief overview may help. There are at least two steps involved in bracketing:

First, we put to one side the question of whether the world (as we seem to perceive it) really is as we represent it to be—indeed of whether or not there really is a “real world” beyond experience at all. This enables us to turn our attention instead to the ways in which a world *appears* or *is presented* to us—to the phenomena. We then also bracket the question of whether any of our (or others’) psychological states “really” occur as genuine empirical events in the world, considering only what it *would take* for there to be experiences of these kinds (not whether there actually are any). In this way, we can hope to come to knowledge of the ideal types of possible experience via which a world may be presented to us, and of their essential presuppositions and interrelations.

So in what sense, then, can the methods of phenomenology be understood as “transcendental”? Phenomenology is *transcendental* in the sense it is concerned with uncovering the *conditions of the possibility* of having certain types of conscious experience or representation—this is just a matter of uncovering “what it would take” for there to be experiences of these kinds (that intend the world in various ways). So the methods of phenomenology may be understood as designed to answer these “transcendental” questions.

I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming) that a good portion of what phenomenology is doing can be understood as of a piece with the conceptual analysis practiced in classical (pre-Quinean) analytic philosophy. Phenomenology ultimately involves us, for example, in asking such questions as: What would it take for something to show up to me as a real physical object, another person, a cultural object like a church, etc.; or for something to count as an *experience of seeing* (versus hallucinating, hearing, or thinking)? This is a matter of uncovering relations among concepts (e.g., to show up as real is to show up as exceeding any possible observations of it, as observable from a variety of perspectives and through a variety of senses, etc.), and their conditions of applicability—where this is done not by attempting to state definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions but, rather, by considering various imaginatively varied cases and judging whether or not they would be situations in which something of the kind would be presented to us.

The preconditions uncovered may be of various forms: in some cases we may discover essential interrelations among meaningful experiences of various types, for example, that to present something as a flag requires that it be presented as a physical object, and that to present something as a physical object requires that it be presented as experientiable in certain other prescribed ways, etc. In other cases, we may uncover essential connections between experiences of a given type and other entities or activities other than experiences, for example, if we find that the concept of an experience presupposes that of

a subject experiencing, or that perception presupposes a process of synthesis.

The methodology in all of these cases is in a sense distinctly *a priori*, for we are interested in what it *would take* for there to be experiences of various kinds, but any truths we can reach about that will be independent of claims that there are really any such experiences, or any mind-external objects of the relevant (or any) types to be experienced. Husserl's method of bracketing makes vivid how we can gain knowledge independent of empirical claims of all these kinds.

Zahavi notes that the conception "classical analytical philosophy" gave "of language as a framework of intelligibility could easily be given a transcendental philosophical twist." While I approve of the noting the parallels, I prefer to say that much of classical phenomenology may be given a conceptual analysis twist. (This difference, of course, might be largely a matter of who we each take ourselves to be speaking to.) Certainly ordinary language philosophers like Ryle and Austin noticed the parallels and spoke of their own work as engaged in a kind of phenomenology (Thomasson 2002 and forthcoming).

In any case, so understood, we can easily see how phenomenology may be compatible with, and even a necessary precursor to, evaluating the prospects for various projects of "naturalizing the mind," for, as Zahavi himself writes, "any appraisal of whether a naturalization of consciousness is possible requires an understanding and detailed description of the main features of consciousness" (69)—or, as we might now say, it requires understanding what conscious acts of various types essentially are, or what it would mean to say that there were conscious perceptions, thoughts, and other kinds of experience.

## 2. Substantive Conceptions of Phenomenology

But does adopting this methodology, and this "transcendental" approach, entail a form of transcendental idealism or otherwise entail "wide-ranging methodological, epistemological, and metaphysical implications" (Zahavi, 79) that would estrange it from much contemporary analytic work?

Historically, it's worth noting that although (at least in his work from the *Ideas* onwards) Husserl took something like a Kantian turn, many classical phenomenologists (e.g., Roman Ingarden, Adolf Reinach) would not consider themselves transcendental philosophers and rejected transcendental idealism in no uncertain terms. But the more important question is whether we are philosophically committed to adopting transcendental idealism, or to any of the substantive positions mentioned previously in (a)–(e), if we adopt the methods of phenomenology.

I don't think that we are. As I understand it and have sketched it above, the phenomenological method provides a way of analyzing the types of meanings that enable us to be presented (in various ways) with a world with various features. Since phenomenology (and its cousin, conceptual analysis), properly understood, enables us to uncover the preconditions for and interrelations among meanings of various types, it should enable us to better understand the questions involved in addressing substantive issues about reality, truth, objectivity, etc.

So the sense in which adopting the phenomenological method entails that the only way to understand objectivity is via subjectivity is just the harmless sense that we can only understand what it would *mean* for knowledge to be objective (like we can only understand what it would *mean* for there to be a rock under my foot) by way of the forms of conceptual/meaning analysis phenomenology undertakes. Similarly, employing the phenomenological method does not in itself seem to entail that there is no view from nowhere—though it should enable us to say something about what it would take for there to be objectivity of the sort defenders of the “view from nowhere” have in mind, and what it would take for there to be truth or meaning that counts as “objective.”

Similarly, the direct relevance of phenomenological methods for questions of realism and skepticism is to clarify the questions at hand: What would it mean (or what would it take?) for there to be a “real” world independent of experience? What would it mean for us to have knowledge of the world, or for our experience to be radically false? The phenomenological approach does not and cannot involve us in the denial that there is a mind-independent world, or the assertion that skepticism is false—for the methodology (as described above) essentially involves bracketing all questions (and claims) about the real existence and nature of the world represented. Phenomenology, properly understood, is (to borrow a phrase of Ryle's) “constitutionally speechless” about such matters and so cannot conflict with any substantive views about them.

In a footnote newly added for the printed version of his paper, Zahavi rejects this understanding of phenomenology as “flawed” and based on a misinterpretation of Husserl's method of epoché, writing “the epoché entails a change of attitude toward reality, and not an exclusion of reality” (Zahavi, 82n3). Indeed it does involve a change of attitude toward reality; the question is, what is the nature of that change? As I have described it above and argued at greater length elsewhere (2005, 123–28), the change of attitude is precisely from the natural attitude focused on the existence and nature of reality (or parts thereof), to make a move akin to semantic ascent, moving from a focus on (what is taken to be) reality to the very meaning of “reality.” And indeed Husserl often marks the

“radical modification of meaning” achieved by epoché by using of inverted commas, as we move from discussing *reality* to discussing “reality,” and so on (Husserl 1913/1962, 240). Even in the “Phenomenology and Anthropology,” which Zahavi cites in favor of his interpretation, Husserl makes it clear that it is the natural assumption about the *existence* of the world that must be suspended to do phenomenology, as we move instead to discuss “a bracketed ‘world’”—rather than the *world* assumed to be real in the natural attitude (1941/1981, 319; cf. 1913/2000, 255–56). Thus, if we take metaphysics generally to be attempting to answer questions about what really exists, and metaphysical realism more particularly to be concerned with whether a mind-independent world really exists, it is clear that phenomenology so understood brackets these questions as it instead pursues meaning analysis.

It might be argued that some of the particular meaning analyses yielded by applying the phenomenological method entail that we must reject certain conceptions of “objectivity,” “realism,” “truth,” etc., and so reject various substantive views that rely on these. But these particular arguments would have to be laid out and examined on a case-by-case basis, so that we can see what the case is for the relevant phenomenological analysis, and what the argument is for thinking that it conflicts with some essential assumption of the contemporary analytic tradition.

The crucial point here is that these would be claims based on the putative results of particular *applications* of the phenomenological method, combined with substantive arguments about ways these results of the method conflict with the assumptions of other philosophers. But different phenomenologists, using the same phenomenological methods, might legitimately come up with different analyses of the meanings involved, just as different scientists pursuing the same method may come up with differing conclusions.

In my view, we should not identify the discipline of phenomenology with any purported results that come out of it but, rather, with the distinctive methods involved in pursuing its distinctive questions. Understood simply as a method, it seems that phenomenology does not in itself conflict with assumptions common in analytic approaches to the mind but, rather (as I argued above), is parallel to some (those involved directly in conceptual analysis) and complementary to others (those involved in the addressing mind-body problem and issues in cognitive science). And if that is correct, then even if we take Zahavi’s first warning to heart, we need not approach the renewed interest in dialogue between the phenomenological and analytic interests in the first-person perspective with so many reservations after all.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Of course, we also must be careful not to assume that work done in analytic philosophy of mind is all of a piece. Certainly each of the positions mentioned in (a–e) has its adherents among analytic philosophers as well as among phenomenologists. I will leave this issue to one side, in order to focus on the question of whether phenomenology in fact has these substantive implications.

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