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Husserl and the Mind–Body Problem

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to situate positively Husserl’s philosophy with respect to current discussions concerning the mind–body problem and, more specifically, the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness. It will be first argued that the view according to which phenomenology can contribute to the solution of the hard problem by being naturalized and incorporated into cognitive sciences is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and aim of Husserl’s philosophy. Subsequently, it will be shown that phenomenology deals with the issue of the relation between mind and body in the framework of the transcendental foundation of the ontology of animal nature, and provides thereby a non-reductionist solution to the hard problem. This discussion will at the same time stress the sharp differences existing between phenomenology and philosophy of mind, and highlight the relation between phenomenology and ontology.

Keywords: consciousness; mind; body; Edmund Husserl; ontology; foundationalism.

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Introduction

This article is about the relation between the mind and the body from the standpoint of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. The title evokes the current debate within analytic philosophy and its terminology, which will provide a term of comparison for this study. However, clarifying Husserl's position on the mind-body problem is a matter of interest not only in view of a confrontation with analytic philosophy, but also in order to situate the phenomenological account of human nature with respect to both ancient and modern metaphysical conceptions of it.

Husserl did not develop any lengthy and specific analysis under the heading of "mind-body problem," nor did he normally use that expression in his writings. This circumstance points to substantial difficulties in trying to compare his views with those endorsed by today's philosophers of mind. First, as we shall see, the ordinary categories of mind and body providing the conceptual material for most contemporary discussions on the subject do not find straightforward equivalents in Husserl's philosophy, which offers a more fine-grained characterization of the ontology of animal nature in general and of humans in particular. Second, and more importantly, the mind-body problem is normally formulated in a realistic vein: the belief in the existence of matter on the one hand and of mental phenomena on the other appears to lead unavoidably to a number of problems concerning their relations. In other words, the issue seems to stem precisely from the acceptance of a certain view concerning the basic types of entities inhabiting the world. It might thus seem surprising that this problem should even surface within a philosophy such as Husserl's, which is based on the suspension of all the beliefs concerning transcendent realities and, specifically, of the beliefs about their very existence. Indeed, the difficulty of framing Husserl's views on this subject is due to the intricacy of the relation between phenomenology and ontology. We shall see in what way phenomenology, which, indeed, by itself requires the bracketing of nature, ends up nevertheless being of fundamental importance for the understanding of its ontological structure.

In this article, I will proceed as follows. In §1, I will briefly recall how the mind-body problem is defined in contemporary philosophy of mind, and, more specifically, I will single out the so-called "hard problem" (or the problem of consciousness) in view of a confrontation with phenomenology. In §2, I will criticize some recent attempts to connect phenomenology and philosophy of mind, by arguing that they fail to grasp the specificity of Husserl's transcendental approach. In particular, I will argue against the view that solving the hard problem of consciousness requires the naturalization of phenomenology. In §3, I will reconstruct the main traits of Husserl's own views on the ontology of animal nature, and suggest in what way they answer to some of the questions discussed by today's philosophers of mind, and, in particular, to the hard problem. In the Conclusion I will sum up the results of the article and insist on the deep differences existing between phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

1 A Look at Contemporary Philosophy of Mind: The Mind–Body Problem as a Challenge for the Ontology of the Natural Sciences and for the Naturalistic Worldview Based on Them

The mind–body problem has long occupied the center of the analytic philosophy scene. To be sure, the chief concern of philosophy of mind is to be found in the relation between the mind and the body, to the point that the very formulation of this problem, and the methodology used in the various attempts to solve it, can reveal a great deal about the nature of this branch of philosophy. As is the case for many other much-debated philosophical questions, it is not easy to single out a formulation of the mind–body problem that would be accepted by all those who work on the subject. Nevertheless, especially in view of a confrontation with phenomenology, we can rest on the approaches of authors such as Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers, who have stressed the problematic character of *consciousness* or *conscious experience* within the general field of mental phenomena and who have expressed in vivid terms the challenge that its very existence poses for both reductionist and eliminativist accounts of the mind. Almost forty years ago, Nagel famously said, “the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism.”² He insisted that it is consciousness (thus conceived) that at the moment renders intractable the mind–body problem, which he identifies with the general issue of the relation between the mind and the brain. There is, according to Nagel, a sharp contrast between the subjective character of experience and the inherently objective character of any physical theory designed to explain the functioning of the brain. All the reductive explanatory models of mental phenomena put forward by neurology and cognitive sciences are logically compatible with the absence of conscious experience.³ For this reason, he argues, the mind cannot be reduced to the brain in the way in which water can be reduced to H₂O. Nagel remains very open and cautious about the future of scientific research, and, without suggesting a way out of the impasse, he limits himself to pointing out that there is no reductionist solution in sight, and that perhaps only a deep change in the basic ontological categories underlying scientific research will lead to a solution of the problem.⁴

More recently, Chalmers has further developed Nagel’s insight by describing a variety of ways in which the reductionist accounts of the mind fail to explain *why the material processes they describe are accompanied by conscious experience*:

Experience is the most central and manifest aspect of our mental lives, and indeed is perhaps the key explanandum in the science of the mind. Because

2. Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50, here 436.

3. Nagel, “What Is It Like?”, 436.

4. Nagel, “What Is It Like?”, 450n.: “It seems to me more likely, however, that mental–physical relations will eventually be expressed in a theory whose fundamental terms cannot be placed clearly in either category.”

of this status as an explanandum, experience cannot be discarded like the vital spirit when a new theory comes along. Rather it is the *central fact* that any theory of consciousness must explain.⁵

The explanation of *the fact of consciousness* is thus deemed the hardest part of the mind–body problem. This contrasts with the explanation of what he terms “psychological properties of the mind,”⁶ for which, according to Chalmers, the reductionist approach of cognitive sciences can in principle suffice: “The hardest part of the mind–body problem is the question: how could a physical system give rise to conscious experience?”⁷ As has been often noted, this question is but an up-to-date reformulation of a classical riddle about consciousness, which was already clearly stated by William James and taken up by British emergentists such as C. D. Broad, to name just some of the more recent authors.⁸

As a matter of fact, Chalmers does not propose a direct answer to the hard problem. He does not offer an explanation of *why* consciousness exists in an otherwise merely physical world, nor does he think that such an explanation will ever be possible.⁹ What Chalmers suggests instead is that conscious experience should be treated as fundamental and that the ontology of science should be enlarged in order to accommodate it. In this way, science would have the task of developing a non-reductive explanation of the phenomenon of experience based on psychophysical principles.¹⁰

These brief remarks can count for us as an illustration of the way in which contemporary philosophers of mind frame the problem of consciousness, conceived as the most difficult part of the study of the relation between the body and the mind. The problem is not regarded as altogether and unproblematically scientific but rather, I would argue, as a challenge for the ontological foundations of science. In short, consciousness does not seem to fit easily within our current overall scientific worldview, and most philosophers of mind interpret their task as an attempt to *reconceptualize* mental phenomena in general and consciousness in

5. David Chalmers, “The Hard Problem of Consciousness,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, ed. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 225–35, here 231 (my emphasis).

6. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11–22.

7. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 25.

8. William James, at the end of the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1950), 687, writes: “According to the assumptions of this book, thoughts accompany the brain’s workings, and those thoughts are cognitive of realities. The whole relation is one which we can only write down empirically, confessing that no glimmer of explanation of it is yet in sight. That brains should give rise to a knowing consciousness at all, this is the one mystery which returns, no matter of what sort the consciousness and of what sort the knowledge may be. Sensations, aware of mere qualities, involve the mystery as much as thoughts, aware of complex systems, involve it.”

9. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 93: “No explanation given wholly in physical terms can ever account for the emergence of conscious experience.”

10. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 213–18. In particular, Chalmers advocates a functionalist framework for the development of psychophysical researches on consciousness.

particular in such a way that they become analyzable in scientific terms.¹¹ Within the given horizon of nature, of the object of natural science, consciousness stands as an awkward presence that has to be dealt with in some way, a threat to a full-fledged naturalistic worldview.

2 Phenomenology is Neither Philosophy of Mind Nor a Science of the Mind, and Can in No Way Become Part of Cognitive Science

As is well known, the concept of phenomenal or conscious experience, or *qualia* as normally understood in philosophy of mind, is far narrower in scope than Husserl's notion of consciousness, to the point that many philosophers of mind underplay or even rule out the role of phenomenal experience in intentional mental states such as beliefs and desires. Moreover, the phenomenological account of consciousness is far richer and more analytic than those that can be found in today's literature on the mind. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that Husserl's notion of *Erlebnisse* (or lived experiences), in spite of the complexity of its relations, on the one hand, with intentional acts and, on the other, with their correlates, at least *covers* all the examples of "conscious experience" mentioned by authors such as Nagel or Chalmers.¹² The comparison between the two philosophical frameworks is not too awkward after all. By wondering how phenomenology can help us understand the relation between the subject's *Erlebnisse* and its body, one can indeed bring Husserl's thought to bear on the mind–body problem. One only has to pay attention to the way in which phenomenology *can* (and *must*) contribute to the clarification of this relation.

As a matter of fact, an interdisciplinary group of researchers has recently attempted to resort to Husserl's phenomenology as a means to help solve the hard problem of consciousness and the explanatory gap of cognitive science.¹³ The details of their project are far too complicated to be presented here. What matters is to stress that it is based on the belief that Nagel's classical formulation captures the essential elements of what is at stake in the discussion of the mind–body

11. See, e.g., Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 2: "Through the 1970s and 1980s and down to this day, the mind–body problem—our mind–body problem—has been of finding a place for the mind in a world that is fundamentally physical. The shared project of the majority of those who have worked on the mind–body problem over the past few decades, has been to find a way of accommodating the mental within a principled physicalistic scheme, while at the same time preserving it as something distinctive—that is, without losing what we value, or find special, in our nature as creatures with minds." Also John Searle interprets his task as one of inscribing the mind (along with language and society) in an overall naturalistic worldview. See, e.g., John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society* (London: Fenix, 2000), 89.

12. The ambiguity of the term "cover" is necessary at this stage on the analysis.

13. Jean Petitot, Francisco Varela, Bernard Pachoud and Jean-Michel Roy, eds, *Naturalizing Phenomenology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

problem, and that Husserl's eidetic descriptions can be used as a detailed account precisely of what Nagel characterized as subjective experience. These descriptions, combined with their reconceptualization in *mathematical* terms, would amount to a descriptive complement of cognitive science, which could thus avoid the pitfall of eliminative materialism. In other words, the idea is that Husserl's phenomenology could help solve the hard problem of the study of consciousness by being *naturalized*; that is, by being integrated into the cognitive sciences. In this way, it is argued, first-person experience would find its way back into cognitive psychology. This proposal has raised a vast debate, which is impossible to reconstruct here. In particular, the problems concerning the proposed mathematization of conscious experience lie outside the scope of this article.¹⁴ I will limit myself to pointing out that it is indeed worth reflecting on the impossibility in principle of naturalizing phenomenology, precisely in order to cast light on the differences between phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

Why cannot phenomenology be naturalized? The direct and easy answer is that the phenomenological method requires the bracketing of nature, and that, consequently, even the existence of nature cannot be a presupposition for phenomenological enquiry. Husserl's phenomenology is by definition transcendental, which means that it does not deal with any specific province of reality, but only with the pure phenomena pertaining to all actual and possible beings. The direct and easy answer is also, in principle, a sufficient one; yet it fails to spell out in detail the difference between transcendental phenomenology proper and any (perhaps fully legitimate) application of its results to the field of cognitive psychology. In order to do this, it is worth reconsidering the idea that the eidetic description of phenomenology should help us bridge the explanatory gap of cognitive science. As we have seen, the advocates of the naturalization of phenomenology believe that lived experiences (in the sense of the Husserlian *Erlebnisse*) can be characterized, following Nagel's fascinating formulation, as *what it is like to be a certain organism*. Now, this definition of phenomenality presupposes, from a Husserlian point of view, precisely the naturalizing apperception that refers the pure lived experiences to the body of an organism and that must be suspended while effecting the transcendental reduction. To think that Nagel's formulation captures what really is at stake¹⁵ means to be situated, *from the outset*, in the natural attitude. The lived experiences that are the object of phenomenology cannot be characterized as something *added* to the body and the brain, something whose relation with the body and the brain would stand in need of explanation. They are pure *Erlebnisse*, appearing in the reflective evidence of the *cogito*, and they belong to an Ego which is *not* the Ego of a man or of an organism to whom the world appears in a certain way and for whom *there is something it is like to be* precisely *that man* or *that organism*. In other

14. A more detailed appraisal of the project of naturalization of phenomenology can be found in my "Fenomenologia e scienze cognitive" in Matteo Giannasi and Francesca Masi, eds, *La mente e il corpo tra scienza e filosofia* (Milan: Mimesis, 2008), 421–44.

15. See the long introductory essay in Petitot et al., eds, *Naturalizing Phenomenology*.

words, the pure *Erlebnisse*, *qua* pure *Erlebnisse*, in no way wait to be related to the brain (except in so far as the brain must be constituted by them), because the mere position of the problem of the relation between them and the brain implies that consciousness has already been referred to the body and, therefore, naturalized.¹⁶ It follows that transcendental consciousness and the related eidetic science are not even taken into account by researches concerning the explanatory gap of cognitive sciences and the hard problem of philosophy of mind, and it follows that the idea that they can be naturalized by such researches is simply meaningless. This, of course, does not exclude that interesting scientific results could be achieved in this way, or that such investigation could turn out to pave the way to the development of new approaches in cognitive sciences.

In short, phenomenology is not a philosophy of mind, no matter how we interpret the word “mind” and its relation to consciousness (and no matter how we translate “mind” into German), for its object is not the ontological status of mental phenomena conceived as a part of the world; likewise, phenomenology is not a science of the mind, for, in that case, it would amount to a form of psychology. Transcendental consciousness, in a sense and within certain limits, can be naturalized (the expression is used by Husserl himself on different occasions) and its naturalization is nothing less than the fundamental step in the constitution by transcendental consciousness of empirical, embodied subjectivity. As is well known, the corresponding eidetic science becomes what Husserl called *eidetic psychology*, which is precisely the only discipline with which research in cognitive science can ever be concerned, and which is a discipline that is already, by definition, an eidetic science of (animal) nature. As it stands, the so-called naturali-

16. A similar naturalistic point of view seems to be at work also in David W. Smith’s interpretation of Husserl’s views on mind and body, which relies heavily on his reading of §33 of Husserl’s *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, ed. Karl Schumann, Husserliana III/1, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); English translation: *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), henceforth cited as *Hua* III/1 with German and English page references respectively. Smith—in “Mind and Body,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, ed. Barry Smith and David W. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 323–93, here 333—interprets that paragraph as stating that “each particular *I* or ego and each particular experience falls under two regions, the region Nature and the region Pure Consciousness. Accordingly, egos and experiences are known in different ways in empirical psychology, which studies them as natural objects (as neural activities or whatever), and in pure phenomenology, which studies them as conscious phenomena (as my-being-conscious-of-something).” He attributes to Husserl a form of token-identity between mental events and brain events (Smith, “Mind and Body,” 369), which he analyzes in comparison with the views put forward by Donald Davidson and Jerry Fodor. However, §33 of *Ideas I* does not deal with the relation between material nature and consciousness at all. In other words, the “natural reality” (*natürliche Wirklichkeit*) mentioned there is not the *res extensa* as opposed to the subject’s conscious life; rather, it is the whole of psychophysical reality, including consciousness, as opposed to transcendental subjectivity. In that paragraph, Husserl claims that the very same *Erlebnisse* that are normally apperceived as part of nature and thereby belong to the domain of psychology (and not to that of neurology) become, when transcendently purified, the object of transcendental phenomenology. This, so to speak, is Husserl’s identity theory.

zation of phenomenology amounts only to the attempt to develop mathematical models of descriptions belonging to eidetic psychology.

3 Phenomenology Allows the Clarification of the Relations between Body and Mind, for it Attempts to Provide a Transcendental Foundation of the Ontology of the Natural Sciences

Given what has been established in the previous paragraph, how can transcendental phenomenology contribute to the clarification of the relation between mental life and the body? One should of course immediately dismiss obvious misunderstandings, such as that according to which phenomenology, being a form of idealism, actually dissolves the issue. In this respect, it is worth recalling the famous §55 of *Ideas I*, in which it is stated that all real unities are “unities of sense,” and thus presuppose a sense-bestowing consciousness, and in which it is explicitly ruled out that phenomenology is a form of Berkeleyan, subjective idealism. This paragraph comes immediately after two sections sketching the constitution of psychological consciousness as the result of an apperception referring the “absolute” *Erlebnisse* to the organic body (or *Leib*). The level at which the relation between mental life and body is to be discussed is precisely this. It is the level of the constitution of that type of transcendent “unity of sense” which we call, in a broad sense, *animal life*.

Nature for Husserl is not only physical, it is also psychophysical. Animal nature or psychophysical nature must be constituted in this duality of an ontological layer of *res extensa* and a founded layer of consciousness apperceived as a part of nature (*Hua* III/1, 103/125). This specific type of apperception is analyzed in a much more detailed way in §§36–8 of the second volume of *Ideas*,¹⁷ in which it is characterized as a step-wise process of localization whereby the *per se* non-spatial *Erlebnisse* receive a kind of secondary and inherited transcendence with respect to pure consciousness. This process is step-wise because the localization of touch sensations, for instance, is more primordial and direct than the localization of visual or acoustic sensations. And those localizations are in turn different from the ones of kinesthetic data. Already at this simple level, Husserl’s constitutional analysis implies an important result concerning the nature of the relation between empirical consciousness or psychological *Erlebnisse* and the body. In §53 of *Ideas I* Husserl writes:

Let us make clear to ourselves how consciousness, so to speak, can enter into the real world, how that which in itself is absolute can relinquish its imma-

17. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, ed. Marly Biemel, Husserliana IV (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952); English translation: *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. R. Rojewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

nence and take on the characteristic of transcendence. We immediately see that it can do so only by a certain participation in transcendence in the first, the originary sense; and this is obviously the transcendence belonging to Nature. Only by virtue of its experienced relation to the organism does consciousness become real human or brute consciousness, and only thereby does it acquire a place in the space belonging to Nature and the time belonging to Nature—the time which is physically measured. (*Hua* III/1, 103/124–5)

The first phenomenological result is thus achieved, the *psyche* is founded on the *Leib*. Husserl’s “dualism” prescribes the founding character of matter on the one hand, and the lack of ontological autonomy of the *psyche* on the other.

This duality of ontological layers is, however, according to Husserl, insufficient to give an account of the complex structure of animal nature. There is indeed a difference, from this point of view, between the analyses announced in *Ideas I* and pursued to a certain extent in *Ideas II*, and the subsequent considerations that can be found in the third volume of *Ideas*.¹⁸ Whereas *Ideas I* and most of *Ideas II* seems to characterize animal nature in terms of a “dualistic” ontology of *res extensa* and *Erlebnisse*, *Ideas III* stresses the existence of three different ontological levels, and this, without trespassing the limits of the ontology of nature, that is, without taking into account the specifically personal and social life of man, whose thematization requires the adoption of a completely new attitude. It is precisely the discussion of the ontology of animal nature that contains more indications about Husserl’s “solution” to what we call, in a somewhat simplistic, “dualistic” way, the mind–body problem.

As I have announced in the title of this section, the correct way of framing the mind–body problem in phenomenological terms consists in viewing it as a problem for the ontological foundations of science. In this respect, and in relation with this specific problem, Husserl was doing something that is not completely different from what the philosophers of mind try to accomplish today. The attempt to achieve a comprehensive scientific worldview is shared; however—and this is a highly significant difference—today’s philosophers of mind (or at any rate the vast majority of them) take for granted the ontological privilege of material nature as it is described by physics and do not even look for the source of rationality of modern physics itself. In a word, they take up a naturalistic standpoint and try in some way to reconcile mental phenomena with a naturalistic ontology. Husserl instead follows a foundational strategy. If there are paradoxes, fundamental obscurities, apparently unsolvable problems in our scientific worldview, it must be because there is a lack of clarity about the foundations of science itself. This is a persistent

18. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Drittes Buch: Die Phänomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften*, ed. Marly Biemel, Husserliana V (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1952, repr. 1971); English translation: *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Third Book: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*, trans. T. Klein and W. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980). Henceforth cited as *Hua* V with German and English page references respectively.

and fundamental theme in Husserl's phenomenology, which runs at least from the critique of psychologism in the *Prolegomena* to the *Crisis of European Sciences*.

A science for Husserl always requires two things:

1. a domain of objects; and
2. a method of investigation of it.

The scientific method comprises a formal and general part common to all sciences and a part proper to a specific science. This second aspect has never been fully developed by him. However, it is clear that each science must rely on a series of intermediate foundations ultimately leading to a fundamental type of intuition in which the objects of the domain are given in an originary way. In this sense, it is clear that the method of scientific investigation of a science ultimately depends on the type of object corresponding to it. It appears, thus, that the phenomenological foundation of science must elucidate the way in which the domain of each science (whether formal, natural, or social) can fit into a comprehensive scientific worldview ultimately based on the constitutive role of transcendental consciousness. The aforementioned gaps or paradoxes in this worldview are to be imputed to a blurring of the borders among the domains of the sciences and to the neglect of the role played by the proper kind of giving intuition in each domain. For Husserl, most of the problems besetting modern epistemology are explainable in this way.¹⁹ In the field of the sciences of nature, the attempt to develop a reduction of mental life to physics is based on a mistake of this kind. Likewise, the idea that experimental psychology could become psychology altogether implies blindness with respect to the way in which the objects of psychology, the *Erlebnisse*, are originally given (that is, through reflection). Let us now follow the details of this regionalization of the ontology of science as it is presented in *Ideas III*.

There are, according to Husserl, three ontological regions of reality: material thing, *Leib*, and psyche. To each region there corresponds an originary presentive act. The region of material nature, or material thing, is given in what Husserl calls material perception, which involves the perception of something extended and endowed with causal properties. What is really specific to the region is that:

Since in the apprehension-complex of the constitution of realities the experience of materiality represents the lowest stage, which constitutes reality at all, the theoretically experiencing regard therefore strikes the material as something existent in itself, something not founded, something not presupposing

19. Psychologism is the result of blindness with respect to the essential distinction between ideal objects and real-empirical ones, and thereby to the related distinction between categorical acts and the different kinds of empirical experience (such as psychological experience). Naturalism in general amounts to failure to acknowledge the being of the region of pure consciousness and the possibility of transcendental reflection as the act allowing access to it, in such a way that consciousness is considered from the outset and without remainder as a part of nature. Historicism consists in the absolutization of the sphere of cultural life, and the neglect of the fact that ideal objects and rationality in general, in virtue of their mode of givenness, cannot be reduced to mere historical facticity.

something else in itself and having something else beneath itself. (*Hua V*, 3/2–3)

This apparently minor remark explains, from a transcendental point of view, why it is taken for granted that matter can exist in itself, and why the forgetfulness of the constitutional role of consciousness can lead to a materialistic worldview. The region “material thing” is the fundamental core of nature and is the domain of sciences such as physics and chemistry, which are of course, based on material experience.

As I anticipated earlier, *Ideas III* stresses that animal nature is split into two levels: *Leib* and psyche. The second ontological region consists in the region *Leib* (animate organism). The *Leib*, in contrast to the merely material body (*Körper*) consists already in a double reality resulting from the apprehension that localizes the sensations, from the tactile ones to the sensations of physical pleasure and pain.²⁰ Husserl calls the type of intuition corresponding to this region “somatic perception”; it is the kind of act that “every empirical investigator can effect only on his own body” (*Hua V*, 8/7). It is the act by which we focus on, say, tactile sensations as localized in the *Leib*. However, in this case, there is another type of presentive act (albeit not originally presenting), called “somatic interpretation” (*Eindeutung*), which is the kind of empathy allowing the apprehension of a *Leib* other than ours (*Hua V*, 8/7). To this region there corresponds a science called somatology, which includes, on the one hand, a material side, a material physiology dealing only with the material side of the *Leib*, and, on the other, a level dealing with sensations. The unity of the science is given by the study of all causal correlations between the physiology of the body (e.g., nerves, brain) and sensations. The third level is the psyche proper, which is founded on the previous two levels and is given in psychological experience, which amounts to ordinary psychological reflection, and in empathy. This is the level of consciousness proper and of intentional acts resulting from the apprehension by the *noeses* of the material provided by sensations. It is, of course, also the level of the *Ego* living through those acts. The science corresponding to this region is psychology. The sensations now become parts of the psyche, but under a different apprehension according to which they become moments of an intentional act.²¹

In §7 of *Ideas III*, Husserl stresses the privileged status of regional concepts (such as “material thing”) with respect to ordinary empirical generic concepts (such

20. The *Leib* is an ontological category intermediate between the objective and the subjective—a *subjective object*, as Husserl says on occasions, which is likely to be overlooked from the objectivistic standpoint of philosophy of mind. Indeed, due to the localized character of sensations, the *Leib* can in no way be understood as a merely material body “accompanied” by mental *qualia*.

21. If an ontological region consists in a highest material genus of *concrete* (i.e. self-sufficient) empirical objectivities (*Hua III/1*, 19/18), the decision to grant somatology the status of ontological region seems quite problematic, for it would imply that a *Leib* (of course, not a normal human one) could in principle exist as a concrete empirical object endowed with a layer of sensations, but lacking a properly psychological life as well as an *Ego*. Perhaps this suggests a way to characterize the ontological structure of very simple life forms.

as “heavenly body” or “mineral”). The basic difference is that a regional concept is literally an *a priori concept* with respect to the corresponding science, while all the other concepts and types used by the relevant researchers are *a posteriori*, and therefore can be given up (like the concept of phlogiston), if the advancement of science requires it. The reason for this can be reconstructed in the following way: a regional concept encompasses all possible objective correlates of a given type of presentive intuition and, therefore, in contrast with all empirical concepts, can never be abandoned on the basis of the evidence gathered with that type of intuition. For example, no perceptual experience, no act of material perception could possibly compel us to drop the concept of “material thing,” for they all necessarily presuppose it. The same holds for the other regional concepts. Furthermore, no empirical result stemming from the type of intuition pertaining to a given ontological region can ever compel us to abandon the regional concept stemming from another type of intuition (for instance, there is no conceivable *physical* experiment whose result could indicate that the regional concept “psyche” does not refer to anything real).

We are now able to draw some conclusions concerning Husserl’s views on the relation between the mind and the body. Any analysis of this relation must take into account the sharp distinction holding among the following three types of investigations:

1. empirical (i.e., belonging to a given group of sciences);
2. ontological (i.e., concerning the essence of the objective domain of a given group of sciences); and
3. transcendental/constitutive (i.e., concerning the way in which any such objective domain is given to transcendental subjectivity).

From a phenomenological standpoint, many alleged riddles besetting contemporary philosophy of mind result from a failure to grasp this distinction. As to the relations between the first and the second type of investigation, we have seen that there is a three-fold ontology of animal nature, which sets the agenda of the corresponding empirical investigations.²² Any attempt to overcome the boundaries of this tripartite structure by eliminating somatology or psychology, or by reducing them to the science of matter is bound to fail. Furthermore, the essence of each

22. It is noteworthy that Husserl does not see a fundamental discontinuity between living and non-living beings. The case of vegetative life is interesting in this respect. Plants are living beings, but Husserl does not include them in the field of somatology, for they seem to lack a layer of sensations. If this layer is really missing, Husserl adds, or if we are incapable of recognizing its existence, “the treatment of botany as a material natural science suffices ... or rather, no other treatment then is possible” (*Hua* III/1, 10/8). Therefore, life, in the biological sense, does not carry along with it any radical rupture within material nature as does, instead, the presence of *Erlebnisse*. In this sense, Husserl reworks ontological categories that are post-Cartesian. Aristotle, on the contrary, had placed a major ontological discontinuity precisely between living and non-living bodies. The former are “ensouled,” while the latter are not. See *On the Soul* 412a 10–20.

region sets limits to its dependence from the lower one.²³ As far as the existence of the different regions is concerned, *it is vain to seek a scientific explanation of it*. By resorting to the terminology introduced in §1 and borrowed from the discussions about the so-called hard problem of philosophy of mind, we can say that, according to Husserl, there is no scientific reason why *it happens that* certain types of material systems give rise to something more, to something that is not material but mental, to something *it is like to be that organism*. Empirical investigations can only describe the precise empirical conditions under which consciousness appears as a layer founded on material nature and the psychophysical correlations between these layers, but no scientific theory of material nature can imply the very emergence of experience and consciousness. Even ontological analyses cannot go that far, for, as Husserl has clearly pointed out, “The essence of the *cogitatio* and the essence of the *extensio* have, in principle, i.e., as essences, nothing to do with one another.”²⁴ There is, though, the third level of analysis: the transcendental/constitutive one. Only at this level does it become possible, in a sense, to understand *why* consciousness appears in the world, as a founded reality intertwined with material nature, insofar as there appears the possibility to describe what kind of apprehensions are necessary for the constitution of animal nature. However, the “*why*,” in this case, is not an empirical–explanatory one at all; rather it consists in an elucidation of *how* a certain region of reality is constituted, *how* the a priori defining the domain of a science is given to us. The empirical–explanatory sciences of the natural attitude must simply accept the a priori of their scientific field, for they are governed by the apprehensions constituting their objective domains.²⁵ Somatological and psychological phenomena are by no means ontological oddities that are found like strangers in the land of material nature; they are different types of sense-units stemming from corresponding types of sense-bestowing intuitions.²⁶

4 Conclusion

Transcendental phenomenology is not occupied with the pursuit of regional ontology *per se*; yet, as the different ontological regions stem from corresponding

23. In this vein we must read Husserl’s criticism to psychophysical parallelism in §63 of *Ideas II*.

24. Edmund Husserl, *Aus den Vorlesungen, Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Wintersemester 1910/1911* in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Ester Teil: 1905–1920*, ed. Iso Kern, Husserliana XIII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), 143; English translation: *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. I. Farin and J. G. Hart (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 33. As the translators of this text suggest on p. xvi of their preface, Husserl “not only offers arguments against any kind of reductionism or eliminativism, but also shows the constructive, speculative, and non-eidetic status of any theory of panpsychism.”

25. Interestingly, Husserl often says that the domain of a science consists in its *dogma*. But precisely that which is a dogma for a specific science of the natural attitude, and cannot be explained by it, becomes the object of the constitutive analyses of phenomenology.

26. In this way, we can appreciate once more the far-reaching consequences of Husserl’s refusal to consider ordinary perception as the only original presentive act.

fundamental types of intuition, the eidetic science of transcendental consciousness also opens up the study of the fundamental ontological distinctions within worldly reality.²⁷ Further, constitutive analyses give an account of the constitution of the ontological regions *qua* objective domains of the different groups of sciences. By articulating the relation between sciences of material nature and sciences of animal nature, Husserl also addresses the issues that philosophers of mind study under the title of the mind–body problem. The regionalization of reality issuing from the original right of the different types of intuition implies the rejection of both reductionism and eliminativism about consciousness. Moreover, it implies that, contrary to what many thinkers (such as William James) have claimed, no mystery lies behind the fact that consciousness accompanies purely material processes. There is no secret explanation to be unraveled, hidden from the eye of the scientist and lying beyond the empirical correlations that hold between physical and psychic phenomena. Husserl’s regionalization of ontology is also opposed to a position such as Nagel’s, according to which the basic ontological categories underlying scientific investigations could be overturned or transformed in unimaginable ways by future research. The consequences of the adoption of a radical foundational attitude toward knowledge become, in this way, extremely clear: the distinctions between regions of reality cannot be given up in the face of empirical evidence for they correspond to *a priori* distinctions between the different types of empirical evidence.

According to Husserl, *natural science* must accept consciousness as a fundamental fact within reality. *In this respect*, his position does not essentially differ from that of contemporary philosophers such as Chalmers. However, the latter know only the standpoint of natural science and of its ontology, and therefore do not go beyond the recognition of the existence of consciousness within the world as an object demanding scientific investigation. As I have already indicated, philosophy of mind is a conceptual analysis of the ontological and methodological problems pertaining to mental phenomena, carried out from a naturalistic standpoint. Phenomenology, instead, is the eidetic science of transcendental consciousness. The domain of “mental phenomena,” (in keeping with a loose terminology) is but one of the articulations of transcendent reality, whose constitution in transcendental consciousness must be described. That which in the eye of the natural scientist is and must necessarily be but a fact (i.e., the existence of consciousness in the real nexus of worldly phenomena) becomes the theme of constitutive analyses, which describe in what way the different ontological layers of animal nature are referred to one another, founded on one another in virtue of different forms of apprehensions. The ontology of animal nature can thus be elucidated in the framework of a transcendental foundation of the natural sciences.

27. See *Hua* V, chap. 3 and Supplement I, §6.

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Phenomenological Kaleidoscope: Remarks on the Husserlian Method of Eidetic Variation

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Abstract: The main goal of this article is to examine Edmund Husserl's method of "eidetic variation"—that is, to examine the way this method is supposed to work in connection with the notion of "similarity" (*Ähnlichkeit*). Unlike most interpretations, it will be suggested that similarity represents the leading methodological principle of eidetic variation. We will argue, therefore, that, on the one hand, this method is rooted in the sphere of association and passivity while, on the other hand, it is constituted by the transposition of a passive synthesis into an active operation. After having introduced and discussed a twofold notion of phantasy (as "localized phantasy" and as "pure phantasy") as well as a twofold concept of *eidos* (as "*hen epi pollon*" and as "pure *eidos*"), the extent to which for Husserl there cannot be any eidetic variation without a monadology will be shown.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl; eidetic variation; monadology; phenomenological method.

The "kaleidoscope" is the image introduced by Edmund Husserl in his Freiburg lectures *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1922/23) to account for the possibility of

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phantasy-variation. In the relevant passages Husserl describes a “centaur” that can be phantasized as being “blond,” having a “long beard,” or still otherwise. Each new formation passes over into another one, “yet not in the way of a changing, but rather as a dissonant modification”: “It looks like a kaleidoscope: always new formations having nothing to do with each other.”²

The primary concern of the present paper is to follow the suggestion of this Husserlian kaleidoscopic paradigm to provide a better understanding of the “eidetic variation.” More precisely, by following such a *kaleidoskopeo* (“observer of beautiful forms”) we will try to show to what extent “similarity” (*Ähnlichkeit*) represents the leading principle of one of the most notorious phenomenological methods. It will appear that, on the one hand, such method is rooted in the sphere of association and passivity, while, on the other hand—precisely as a method—it is constituted by the transposition of a passive synthesis into an active operation.

The whole argument of the paper can be divided in three parts. (a) In the first part (§§I–V) we will deal with the role played by similarity within the methodological framework of eidetic variation. We will also try to more intuitively illustrate such a crucial role schematically. (b) After having fleshed out this “sensible rootedness,” we will try to show (§VI) that there cannot be any eidetic variation without monadology. As a result, the aforementioned sensible rootedness will reveal itself as a monadological rootedness of eidetic variation. (c) In the last part (Conclusion) we will finally venture into what we could provisionally define as an analysis of the monadic (that is individual) presuppositions lying at the very basis of the method of eidetic variation, and therefore of every eidetic investigation.

Before we begin our analysis, it should be pointed out that we will intentionally set aside the very ticklish problem of the origin of the method of eidetic variation. As a consequence we will not try to determine when such method appears for the first time, nor decide whether there are in Husserl manifold methods of variation.³

I

If we need to submit the key notion of “similarity” to close scrutiny it is because of the oblivion into which it has fallen, in all the traditional interpretations of eidetic

2. Edmund Husserl, *Einleitung in die Philosophie. Vorlesungen 1922/23*, ed. Berndt Goossens, Husserliana XXXV (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 174.

3. Nevertheless, we stress how Husserl, among all the published works, makes use of the expression “eidetic variation” just once in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*: “In the context of our expositions, it has already become apparent that this material ontology explicates the all-embracing Apriori of any purely possible world whatever, the Apriori of the eidos *world*—an eidos that must arise concretely by virtue of the method of eidetic variation, which starts with the world that is given to us in fact and takes it as the directive ‘example.’” Edmund Husserl, *Formale und Transzendente Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der Logischen Vernunft*, ed. Paul Janssen, Husserliana XVII (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1974), 296; English translation: *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1969), 291.

variation, the consideration itself of what concretely binds and methodologically leads the process.⁴ In spite of the differences, classical interpretations (like Roman Ingarden's remarks on the *Cartesian Meditations*, or Alfred Schutz's analysis of pure and empirical concepts) and recent readings (like Didier Frank's, Klaus Held's, and Rochus Sowa's) of Husserl's eidetic variation share the following two common features.

The first feature concerns the conceptual and terminological pair providing the criteria according to which the variation is supposed to work: it is either the distinction between what is "constant" and what is "variable" (Schutz, Ingarden⁵) or that between "non-accidental" and "accidental" predicates of an object (Helmuth Plessner⁶). According to this view the eidetic variation would act by holding the former (constant, non-accidental) and varying the latter (variable, accidental): "The variation rethinking done by holding an invariant identity as the method of grasping the essence," according to Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*.⁷ The second feature is about the role played by the *eidōs* itself in and all through the whole operation: "This invariant element prescribes their limits to all the possible

4. The one and only exception is represented by Dieter Lohmar, "Die phänomenologische Methode der Wesensschau und ihre Präzisierung als eidetische Variation," in *Phänomenologische Forschungen* (2005), 65–91. In his recent reading, David Kasmier acknowledges the role of similarity but does not deepen its crucial importance: "As long as the variants retain an exact similarity in the relevant respect there will remain the permanent possibility of recognizing the universal that grounds their similarity ... Husserl's demand is that each variant be 'concretely' and exactly similar both to the original and to every other variant." David Kasmier, "A Defense of Husserl's Method of Free Variation," in *Epistemology, Archaeology, Ethics. Current Investigations in Husserl's Corpus*, ed. Paul Vandavelde, Sebastian Luft (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 21–40, especially 24, 33.

5. Roman Ingarden, "Bemerkungen zu den *Méditations Cartésiennes*," in *Schriften zur Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*, ed. Włodzimierz Galewicz, Gesammelte Werke 5 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998), 89–90: "die Möglichkeit des Übergangs von einer empirisch gegebenen Einzelheit, z. B. einer ganz bestimmten Perzeption, *setzt bei der Methode der Variation voraus, was wir als 'konstant' und was 'variabel' nehmen sollen* [...]. [E]he man zu einer eidetischen Analyse mittels der Methode der Variation herantritt, muß man, um überhaupt die möglichen Untersuchungsrichtungen bestimmt zu haben, zunächst auf die erste der 'essentialen Fragen', d. h. auf die Frage: 'Was ist das?' eine bestimmte und richtige Antwort haben [emphasis added]."

6. "Wie wollen wir dazu berechtigt sein, *von unwesentlichen Merkmalen, von Akzidenzien zu sprechen, wenn uns das Wesentliche sich nicht schon offenbar hat!* Wie könnte es denn möglich sein, zu sagen, dieser Tisch diene zum Schreiben, jener zum Essen, jener Dritte zum Wachsen, wenn wir nicht von vornherein wissen, daß alle drei eben Tische, d. h. Sonderarten eines Allgemeinen sind[?] [emphasis added]." Helmuth Plessner, "Die wissenschaftliche Idee. Ein Entwurf über ihre Form (1913)," in *Frühe philosophische Schriften. Gesammelte Schriften 1* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 51.

7. Eugen Fink, *VI. Cartesianische Meditation. Teil 1. Die Idee einer transzendentalen Method-
enlehre, Texte aus dem Nachlass Eugen Finks (1932) mit Anmerkungen und Beilagen aus dem Nachlass Edmund Husserls (1933/34)*, ed. Hans Ebeling, Jann Holl, Guy Van Kerkhoven, Husserliana-Dokumente II/1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 92; English translation: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation. The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, trans. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 83.

variations of the same prototype” (Schutz).⁸ The *eidōs* is expected to be what determines all the variations and represents their limits: “Au travers de cette multiplicité apparaît un invariant, une essence générale, l'*eidōs*, qui prescrit ses limites à toute variation pour qu'elle conserve le sens de la variation *de* l'exemple factuel initial”;⁹ that is, strictly speaking: “l'*eidōs* possède un contenu normatif, il est indissociablement une *règle* qui prescrit à la libre variation sur des exemples ses limites de droit, lesquelles sont aussi et par là même les limites du concept correspondant.”¹⁰ It is that against which the operation of variation inevitably bumps and that cannot be overcome at all (Held)¹¹: “In the very performance of ‘free variation’, certain limitations become apparent which the operation in question is bound to respect. Eidetic laws a priori are formulations of such limitations” (Aron Gurwitsch).¹² Even when submitted to a global re-interpretation in terms of “falsification” (Sowa),¹³ the process of variation is still conceived in light of such an idea of “limit” that would, at the same time, lead it (as prescription) and mark up its accomplishment: “The direction and limit of the free variation of the starting-example are

8. Alfred Schutz, “Type and Eidos in Husserl’s Late Philosophy,” in *Collected Papers III. Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1966), notably 107–15.

9. Didier Franck, *Chair et corps. Sur la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Minuit, 1981), 66.

10. Claude Romano, *Au cœur de la raison, la phénoménologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 359–60. See also 335: “la possibilité de faire varier par l’imagination certaines propriétés de l’objet et les limites qui sont imposées à cette variation, limites en vertu desquelles se dévoilent, à travers le libre parcours des exemples, certains invariants essentielles, vont servir de base au procédé de la variation eidétique.”

11. Klaus Held, “Einleitung,” in Edmund Husserl, *Die phänomenologische Methode. Ausgewählte Texte I* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1985), 29: “Freilich bleibt bei dieser Theorie eine Frage offen: Die Grenzen, die das Bewusstsein beim Umfingieren entdeckt, sind ihm offenbar vorgegeben. Es erfindet diese Grenzen nicht; denn es stößt auf sie; sie sind die Schranken, die das Umfingieren nicht überschreiten darf. Von woher sind der Phantasie beim ihrem freien Spiel solche Schranken gesetzt, was bindet das variierende Bewusstsein dergestalt, daß die Reflexion darin Invarianten zum Vorschein bringen kann? Diese entscheidende Frage hat Husserl in seiner Theorie der eidetischen Variation nicht mehr beantwortet.”

12. Aron Gurwitsch, “Gelb–Goldstein’s Concept of ‘Concrete’ and ‘Categorical’ Attitude and the Phenomenology of Ideation,” in *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch. Volume II: Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 403–31, here 426.

13. Rochus Sowa, “Essences and Eidetic Laws in Edmund Husserl’s Descriptive Eidetics,” in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (2007), 77–108, notably 102–3: “the free or eidetic variation does not serve the discovery of eidetic laws or—as some of Husserl’s methodological texts even suggest—an alleged intuition of essences (*eide*) as invariants within a variational manifold of ‘coinciding’ (*sich deckender*) variants of a starting-example. Instead, it serves the examination of a presumed descriptive eidetic law in the attempt to falsify it, namely, by means of an attempt to construct a valid possibility that is nevertheless seemingly barred by an eidetic law.” See also, more recently, Rochus Sowa, “The Universal as ‘What is in Common’: Comments on the *Proton-Pseudos* in Husserl’s Doctrine of the Intuition of Essence,” in *Philosophy, Phenomenology, Sciences. Essays in Commemoration of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Carlo Ierna, Hanne Jacobs, Filip Mattens (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 525–57, which describes the eidetic variation as a method “to proceed from firm exemplars to firm *counterexamples* of the thematic universal and from there to *limit-cases* in which the application of the concept becomes dubitable. This is nothing else but *conceptual clarification* or *conceptual explication*” (547–8).

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