

Phenomenology: An Introduction

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In writing *Phenomenology: An Introduction*, Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero have set themselves the task of introducing the phenomenological tradition to the uninitiated reader through a review of the major ideas of some of its key figures and a survey of its more recent developments in the fields of cognitive science and ecological psychology. The book thus looms large and covers a body of work stretching over three centuries of philosophical thought, from Edmund Husserl's foundation of a new methodological approach to philosophy to contemporary work in embodied cognitive science or artificial intelligence research programs.

As the narrative of this book demonstrates, the phenomenological framework and methodological shift intended by Husserl and further developed by such authors as Martin Heidegger (Chapter 3), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Chapter 5) and Jean-Paul Sartre (Chapter 6), have proven relevant for broader fields of study and influenced psychology and cognitive science (Chapters 4, 7, 8, and 9), as well as other areas of philosophy. More than ever before, a broad range of cognitive scientists hinge on philosophical insight developed by phenomenologists and endeavour essential collaborations between abstract thinking and empirical testing, "investigating affordances, or the role of our bodies in perception and cognition, or action as a condition for maintaining a sense of the self." (3) Moreover, the authors argue that contemporary work by some leading figures in cognitive science (e.g., Michael Wheeler, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Andy Clark, Eleanor Rosch, Alva Noe, and Shaun Gallagher) is a clear continuation of phenomenological inquiries into the basic structures of human existence, asserting phenomenology's strong relevance for contemporary scientific research. While the first part of the book provides a concise and accessible overview of key figures of the phenomenological tradition, its second half addresses phenomenology-inspired work in cognitive science, most notably Chapter 8 on Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of rationalism in cognitive science and discussion of artificial intelligence.

Before delving into the phenomenological tradition itself, Chapter 1 takes a step back and offers a quick overview of 18th and 19th century philosophy relevant to phenomenology, proposing an original vantage point for the narrative of the book. Although Kant's critical philosophy is most often recognized for having laid the groundwork for the German idealist and neo-Kantian traditions that proceeded from its conclusions, Käufer and Chemero shed light on Kant's important legacy for phenomenology. As the authors argue, Kant's cognitivist approach to the elementary structures of experience will, however, be strongly rejected by both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, both of whom insist on a pre-reflexive framework for describing everyday experiences. A second early input for phenomenology also discussed in this chapter is the rise of psychology as a scientific discourse in the late 19th century, to which Wilhelm Wundt contributed greatly with his pioneering approach to the analysis of human experience. However critical of Wundt's reductionism they would prove to be, Gestalt psychologists (Chapter 4) engaged in a critical reassessment of his work when elaborating their methods of psychological

inquiry. Against Wundt's atomistic model, focused on sensations and feelings, they attempted to develop an account of the ways in which our experiences of the world are organized around shapes and forms, rather than 'bundles of sensations,' thus shifting the focus on cognitive abilities towards an interest in the role of perception in problem-solving and understanding for animals and humans. The work of these psychologists had a considerable influence on Merleau-Ponty and ecological psychologist J.J. Gibson (Chapter 7), both of whom were interested in the scope and resourcefulness of our perceptual abilities, often misconstrued to be cognitive skills.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to Husserl's leading work in the field of phenomenology. Husserl himself described his early work as a 'descriptive phenomenology,' and he remains intellectually indebted to the early developments of psychology and the work of psychologist Franz Brentano; but his importance for the philosophical field greatly surpasses this self-assigned status. Much like his student Heidegger, whose original vocabulary unveils the primordial meanings often obscured by our familiar usage of language, Husserl introduces a range of philosophical vocabulary intended to better describe the essential contents of conscious experience and provide a careful and systematic description of their intentional structure. Käufer and Chemero discuss Husserl's analysis of the intentional structure of time consciousness, but choose to engage less significantly with Husserl's transcendental turn, with his work on the role of the body and the experience of space, as well as with his later interest in the concept of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).

However, the importance of bodily experience for phenomenological inquiry is taken up in Chapter 5's introduction to Merleau-Ponty's work. Drawing on both Husserl's rich vocabulary to describe the structures that make an objective and meaningful world possible and Heidegger's sustained interest in the textures of everyday experience through an account of our practical and pre-reflexive involvement in the world, Merleau-Ponty's work in *The Phenomenology of Perception* attends to the essential role of embodiment for perception, action, thinking, and understanding. Phenomenology's sustained interest in the ontological and epistemological consequences of embodiment also raises the question of the biases implied in systematically discussing the lived body through an implicit account of male embodiment. A brief acknowledgement, in Chapter 6, of the groundbreaking work accomplished by Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, and Linda Martin Alcoff in feminist phenomenology and phenomenology of racial embodiment provides an interesting addition to this book and reminds readers of some of the epistemic blind spots in the history of philosophy.

Käufer and Chemero have written an insightful and accessible introduction to phenomenology, free of complex philosophical jargon and replete with useful examples illustrating important ideas. Complete with a glossary of key concepts and a list of suggestions for further reading, this book proves particularly useful as an introductory tool for readers interested in engaging for the first time with this major philosophical tradition.

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