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# Phenomenality and Intentionality: A Phenomenological Problem

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## Phenomenality and Intentionality: a Phenomenological Problem

### Abstract

The contemporary debate on *phenomenal intentionality*, in philosophy of mind, is focused on the discussion of the relationship between phenomenal consciousness and intentionality. The aim of this work is to show that this theme is a crucial issue also in Husserl's phenomenology. After making a survey of some theoretical options that are at play within the so-called "phenomenal intentionality research program" (Kriegel), I will show how these issues take form within the phenomenological perspective. I will do that, in particular, thematizing the fundamental distinction between *static* and *genetic* level of the phenomenological inquiry. Furthermore, I will claim the need to maintain a clear distinction between *phenomenal content* and *phenomenal character* of experience. In conclusion, I will claim the importance of Husserl's analysis of the temporal self-manifestation of subjectivity, in order to clarify the relationship between phenomenality and intentionality.

#### 1. *The phenomenal intentionality research program*

First of all, I will make a brief survey of the recent debate on phenomenal intentionality. The starting point of this debate is the critique to the so-called *separatism*: the thesis, prevalent in philosophy of mind, of the sharp distinction between phenomenal consciousness and intentionality<sup>1</sup>. The *separatist approach*, then, claims that these two aspects of mentality are clearly distinguished, and that they must be analyzed individually before raising the issue of their mutual relationship<sup>2</sup>.

The theorists of phenomenal intentionality, instead, call into question the separation between phenomenality and intentionality, and they do that in light of the notion of *phenomenal intentionality*: «a kind of intentionality, pervasive in human mental life, that is constitutively determined by phenomenology alone» (Horgan and Tienson 2002, p. 2). An important consequence of the "inseparatism", theorized by these authors, is that the clear distinction between hard and easy problems fades away, because the hard problem ends up to involve also intentionality.

This recent approach has given rise to what Kriegel calls the "phenomenal intentionality research program". In view of the comparison with Husserl's phenomenology, I will highlight, in particular, two theses of it: *phenomenal grounding of intentionality* and *basicness of phenomenal intentionality*. According to these theses, then, phenomenal intentionality is the *fundamental* kind of intentionality that «is injected into the world with the appearance of a certain kind of phenomenal character», and this phenomenality has to be considered «the *source* of all intentionality» (Kriegel forthcoming, p. 7). This thesis – phenomenal

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis is linked to the distinction between a *cognitive-functional* dimension of the mind and a *phenomenal* dimension, that leads to the consequent distinction between the "easy problems" and the "hard problem".

<sup>2</sup> This approach, then, leads to what Kriegel calls the "naturalist-externalist research program", that tries to naturalize the mind providing, firstly, a naturalistic account of intentionality and then, possibly, a naturalistic account of phenomenal consciousness.

consciousness is the source of intentionality –, however, has to be further articulated and clarified in some of its problematic aspects.

After saying that intentionality is grounded on phenomenality, and that necessarily presupposes it, in fact, we have to ask if the kind of *founding relation* that exists between them is *symmetric* – and so they are in fact *coextensive* – or *anti-symmetric* – the ground can exist without the grounded<sup>3</sup>.

This issue can be illustrated through the discussion of two theses defended by Horgan and Tienson (2002): the *intentionality of phenomenology* and the *phenomenology of intentionality*.

The thesis of the *phenomenology of intentionality* claims that «mental states of the sort commonly cited as paradigmatically intentional (e.g., cognitive states such as beliefs, and conative states such as desires), when conscious, have phenomenal character that is inseparable from their intentional content» (*ibidem*) For now, I just briefly point out that this thesis needs to be further clarified thematizing the distinction between phenomenal *content* and phenomenal *character* of experience. I'll be back to this point shortly<sup>4</sup>.

The other thesis discussed by Horgan and Tienson is the *intentionality of phenomenology*: «mental states of the sort commonly cited as paradigmatically phenomenal (e.g., sensory-experiential states such as color-experiences, itches, and smells) have intentional content that is inseparable from their phenomenal character» (*ivi*, p. 1).

Here, the question that has to be raised is: are *all* phenomenal states intentional states (endowed with a phenomenal-representational content)? Or, on the contrary, are there phenomenal states devoid of intentionality?<sup>5</sup> In particular, this issue has to be faced thematizing the already mentioned distinction between *phenomenal character* of the experiences (their “what-it’s-likeness”) and *phenomenal content* (or *phenomenal representational content*). Then, the question becomes: do all intentional states have a phenomenal-intuitive content? Now, the prevalent answer that we can find in these authors is that all phenomenal states are, at the same time, intentional and representational states, and so “all phenomenality is intentional”. And this answer is strictly linked to their adhesion to a representationalist and strongly intentionalist conception of the mind. Therefore, it is linked to the adhesion to the so-called “Brentano’s thesis”: intentionality is the *defining* character of mentality and the *essential property* of *all* mental states<sup>6</sup>. However, as noticed by Kriegel (*ivi*, p. 25), «it may be that not all phenomenality is intentional»<sup>7</sup>.

The results of this survey of the contemporary debate on phenomenal intentionality, then, is that there are some open questions within it, that require a further investigation of the relationship between the phenomenal and intentional dimensions of subjectivity. To face these issues, now I will turn to Husserl’s phenomenology.

## 2. *The phenomenological analysis*

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Kriegel (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, later I will show how a more sophisticated version of this thesis can be defended within Husserl’s phenomenology, through the analysis of the *phenomenal self-manifestation of subjectivity* in all of its modalities.

<sup>5</sup> More precisely, as I will show later, the kind of intentionality we are referring to within this level of inquiry is an “object-intentionality”, and it has to be distinguished from the different forms of intentionality that we can call “temporal intentionalities” (retention and protention, those that Michel Henry calls “archi-intentionalities”)

<sup>6</sup> This point is highlighted by Seron (2010, p. 171-173): the theory of phenomenal intentionality is a kind of “internalist representationalism”, and it takes up the representationalist identification between phenomenal *character* of experience and phenomenal *content* of experience.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, as we will show, an alternative answer may consist on arguing that there are intentional states devoid of a phenomenal-representational content but, nevertheless, endowed with an essential phenomenal *character*.

At this point, I have to introduce the distinction between two different levels of the phenomenological analysis of subjectivity: *static* and *genetic*.

Husserl explicitly thematizes the difference between them since the '20s, but it is present in his reflection since before<sup>8</sup>: when the static phenomenological inquiry analyzes the constitution of the experiences considered as “unitary temporal processes”, the genetic analysis goes more deeply, investigating their inner temporal structure (*inner time-consciousness*).

The problem we are dealing with – the relationship between phenomenality and intentionality – so, has to be faced taking into account these two different levels of inquiry.

### 2.1 Static phenomenology

Static phenomenology investigates the correlation between the experiences (noetic analysis) and their objects (noematic analysis). And doing so the noetic analysis leads to identify two different components of the mental processes: intentional morphè and sensible hyle.

*Intentionality*, defined at this static level of investigation, then, is an *object-intentionality*: the direction of the experience towards an object (perceived, remembered, judged, etc.).

In relation to the current debate on phenomenal intentionality, I already highlighted how it is characterized by the prevalent adhesion to the so-called *Brentano's thesis*, that considers intentionality as the essential property of *all* mental states. Brentano's *strong intentionalism*, however, is challenged by Husserl, when he comes to consider the possibility of *phenomenal states that lack any intentionality*. At the same time, this possibility appears as problematic, and has to be further investigated through the distinction between the two types of *phenomenality* that I've already focused my attention on: phenomenal *content* and phenomenal *character*.

Phenomenal content is, precisely, the hyletic content of an intentional state (eg. the perception of a red book), that gives an “intuitive filling” to it, and in this way makes possible the object-manifestation.

Phenomenal character, instead, is the “what-it's-likeness” of a conscious state, and has to be distinguished from the phenomenal content of an intentional state<sup>9</sup>.

Now, we can try to face from the static point of view the issues at play in the current debate on phenomenal intentionality. In particular, against the representationalist views, we have to admit two different possibilities that these theories seem to deny.

The first possibility is that of *phenomenal-qualitative states that lack any intrinsic object-intentionality*: it is the case of those states of subjectivity that do have a “what it's like” aspect (it feels something for someone to be in those states) but are not intentionally directed towards an object, and in particular is the case of *moods* (joy, anguish, etc.)<sup>10</sup>.

The second possibility is that of *intentional states that lack any phenomenal content*, but that are however endowed with a fundamental phenomenal character: this is the case, clearly admitted by Husserl's phenomenology, of the pure conceptual-signifying thought, without – and before – any intuitive filling. Indeed, the thesis that has to be argued for through the

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<sup>8</sup> In particular, in *Ideas I* Husserl claims that at the level of inquiry within this text is placed the experiences (*Erlebnisse*) are considered «as unitary temporal processes in reflection on what is immanent» (*Ideas I*, p. 213) but, also, that this analysis lays aside the investigation of the «ultimate consciousness which constitutes all [...] temporality as belongs to mental processes» (*ibidem*).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, as we will see through the genetic analysis, the phenomenal character of experience is a more global characteristic, that pertains to consciousness in all of its modalities (and that can be analyzed as the fundamental temporal self-manifestation of subjectivity).

<sup>10</sup> Maybe, it is also the case of not localized sensations (e.g. dizziness).

genetic analysis of the self-manifestation of subjectivity, is that these states are *experiences* precisely because they are *experienced* by a subject<sup>11</sup>.

## 2.2 Genetic phenomenology

Husserl's investigation of the deep temporal structure of the mental processes – *inner time-consciousness* – can be found primarily in his lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917).

Regarding this fundamental text, I will follow Dan Zahavi's interpretation (2007, 2010) that underlines the close connection between Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness and his analysis of the pre-reflective self-manifestation of subjectivity<sup>12</sup>.

As we have seen, from the static perspective, the correlative analysis shows that the relation between subjectivity and its objects is the *intentional* relation (the object-intentionality that makes possible the object-manifestation). Now, as pointed out by Zahavi (2007) through the reference to Michel Henry's work, every object-manifestation has a dyadic structure: it's the manifestation of something to someone, and therefore it has its *genitive* and its *dative* (p. 1).

At this point, a fundamental phenomenological issue that arises is: what about the condition of possibility of the object manifestation, i.e. subjectivity? Does it manifest itself? And, if the answer is affirmative, does this appearance have a dyadic structure too?

Pointing out this issue, I want to underline that it implies, precisely, the analysis of the fundamental "what-it's-likeness" of subjectivity, considered as an essential feature of the stream of consciousness. For Husserl, in fact, «to be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself»<sup>13</sup> and, as we stated before, also the pure conceptual state (that lacks any phenomenal content) is endowed with a fundamental phenomenal character: precisely *because it is phenomenally self-manifest*.

Then, the problem we started with – the relationship between phenomenality and intentionality – can be declined from the genetic point of view through the analysis of the temporal self-manifestation of subjectivity. And, more precisely, it becomes the analysis of the relationship between the most fundamental constituents of the stream of consciousness: primal impression, retention and protention<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> So, also if these experiences don't have a phenomenal content, they have an intrinsic phenomenal character. Then, according to the analysis outlined above, if we limited ourselves at the static level of inquiry we could give a provisional answer to the problem of the *founding relation* (Kriegel) between phenomenality and intentionality, arguing for the *unilateral* (or *anti-symmetric*) *founding relation of intentionality on phenomenality*. This conclusion would follow from the fact that every intentional state is a phenomenal state (having an essential phenomenal character), when the reverse is not true: there are phenomenal states that are phenomenal but not intentional (eg. moods). However, as I've already said, the static level of inquiry is provisional and has to be deepened through the genetic analysis. An analysis according to which «the transcendently "absolute" which we have brought about by the reductions is, in truth, not what is ultimate; it is something which constitutes itself in a certain profound and completely peculiar sense of its own and which has its primal source in what is ultimately and truly absolute» (*Ideas I*, p. 163).

<sup>12</sup> «Husserl's investigation of the structure of inner time-consciousness (protention-primal impression-retention) must be seen as an investigation of the (micro)structure of inner consciousness» and this investigation must be appreciated «as a profound contribution to an understanding of the pre-reflective self-manifestation of our experiences» (Zahavi 2010, p. 334-335).

<sup>13</sup> *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität II* (1929-1935a), Husserliana XIV, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag; cit. in Zahavi (2010, p. 325).

<sup>14</sup> In particular, here the central problem concerns the role of the retentive modification in the self-manifestation, and so the enigmatic relationship between *presence* and *not presence*, *now* and *not now*.

Now, I will just briefly synthesize a complex analysis of this issue that has been developed by Zahavi (2007), through the confrontation between Husserl and Henry, from one side, and Derrida, from the other.

The point is that Henry and Derrida, starting from Husserl's analysis, develop two opposite aspects of it. Derrida's account of the self-manifestation of subjectivity insists on the essential role of the *retention* that, as stated by Husserl, is a specific kind of intentionality.

The opposite direction, instead, is taken by Henry, who claims that Husserl's acknowledgement of an essential role to the retention on the self-manifestation leads to a "nihilation" of subjectivity. Strongly criticizing Husserl on this point, the conclusion of Henry's analysis, instead, is the thesis of the priority of the primal impression over retention and protention<sup>15</sup>.

According to Zahavi, however, the opposite views of Derrida and Henry are both too radical, and both less satisfying than Husserl's conception itself (if rightly understood). In particular, the fundamental criticism is that they both analyze the being of the stream of consciousness conceiving primal impression, retention and protention as *separate* elements<sup>16</sup>.

For this reason, then, Zahavi valorizes Husserl's conception of the fundamental *width* of the *field of living presence*, against the conception of the stream as a succession of *discrete* states<sup>17</sup>. In particular, Husserl doesn't consider primal presentation and retention as two different and separate elements, and for him consciousness is a «unity of presencing (primal presentation) and absencing (retention-protention)» (Zahavi 2007, p. 12 n. 2).

Then, I conclude reconnecting this brief survey of Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness<sup>18</sup> with the debate on the relationship between phenomenality and intentionality. Here, when Henry's analysis of the self-manifestation of subjectivity gives a primacy to the primal impression over the intentionality of retention, Zahavi's reading of Husserl's theory leads to recognize a close link between these *moments* of the flow. Applying the eidetic and mereologic analysis, in fact, we can claim that these are *non-independent parts* of the *whole*<sup>19</sup>: the field of living presence that constitutes the phenomenal self-manifestation of subjectivity.

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<sup>15</sup> The non-ekstatic self-affection of subjectivity, according to Henry, is the presence of a phenomenality that is given prior and independently from the "archi-intentionalities" (retention and protention). Translating Henry's analysis into the terms of the current debate on phenomenal intentionality, it leads to claim that the relationship between phenomenality and (archi)intentionality is anti-symmetric (unilateral founding relation of intentionality on phenomenality).

<sup>16</sup> Moreover, according to Zahavi Henry's conception of the non-ekstatic nature of self-manifestation isn't able to account for «the relation and interdependency between the self-presence and the self-transcendence of subjectivity» (Zahavi 2007, p. 16-17).

<sup>17</sup> «For Husserl, consciousness is the generation of a field of lived presence. The concrete and full structure of this field of presence is protention-primal presentation-retention. There is no possible consciousness which does not entail retentional and protentional horizons (Husserl 1966b, 317, 337-338, 378)» (Zahavi 2007, p. 12 n. 2). Here I'm simplifying the survey of Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness highlighting onfly a specific outcome of it that is valorized by Zahavi. However, Husserl's long reflection on this theme is very complex and not linear (for example, in the Bernau Manuscripts Husserl explores a theory that goes in a different way from the one we're talking about). On this point see Zahavi (2010).

<sup>18</sup> With its "enigmas" and its "exceptional difficulties", as stated by Husserl.

<sup>19</sup> Their relation, then, is symmetric/bilateral, and not anti-symmetric/unilateral.

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