Intersubjectivity

Has phenomenology anything of interest to say on the topic of intersubjectivity? As one frequently stated criticism has it, due to its preoccupation with subjectivity, phenomenology has not only failed to realize the true significance of intersubjectivity, but has also been fundamentally incapable of addressing the issue in a satisfactory manner (cf. Habermas 1994). As a closer scrutiny of the writings of such figures as Scheler, Stein, Husserl, Heidegger, Gurwitsch, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is bound to reveal, however, this criticism is astonishingly misguided. The truth of the matter is that intersubjectivity, be it in the form of a concrete self-other relation, a socially structured life-world, or a transcendental principle of justification, is ascribed an absolutely central role by phenomenologists. It is no coincidence that the first philosopher ever to engage in a systematic and extensive use of the very term intersubjectivity (*Intersubjektivität*) was Husserl. Ultimately, it is difficult to point to a philosophical tradition that has been more concerned with doing justice to the different aspects of intersubjectivity than phenomenology.

In the following overview, it will be impossible to cover all facets of the rich, but also diverse and at times conflicting accounts of intersubjectivity found in phenomenology. But let me start with a point of common concern: the critical appraisal of the argument from analogy.

1. Empathy and the argument from analogy

On some readings, the problem of intersubjectivity is really another name for the *problem of other minds*. Why should there be a problem? Because the only mind I allegedly have direct access to is my own. My access to the mind of another is by contrast always mediated by his or her bodily behavior. But how could the perception of another person's body provide me with information about his mind? One of the classical

attempts to come to grips with this problem is known as the *argument from analogy*. In my own case, I can observe that I have experiences when my body is causally influenced and that these experiences frequently bring about certain actions. I observe that other bodies are influenced and act in similar manners and I therefore infer through analogy that the behavior of foreign bodies is associated with experiences similar to those I have myself. In my own case, being scalded by hot water is associated with the feeling of intense pain, this experience then gives rise to the quite distinct behavior of screaming. When I observe other bodies being scalded by hot water and screaming, I assume that it is likely that they are also feeling pain. Thus, the argument from analogy can be interpreted as an inference to the best explanation, one that brings us from observed public behavior to a hidden mental cause. Although this inference does not provide me with indubitable knowledge about others and although it does not allow me to actually experience other minds, at least it gives me more reason to believe in their existence than in denying it.

This way of accounting for our understanding of others has not exactly been met with much enthusiasm by phenomenologists. They have all criticized it. The criticism has been multifaceted, but in Max Scheler's work *The Nature of Sympathy* and in Merleau-Ponty's essay "The Child's Relations with Others", we find some of the core objections.

As Scheler and Merleau-Ponty both point out, by arguing that our understanding of others is inferential in nature, the argument from analogy opts for a cognitively far too demanding account. Infants (not to speak of non-human animals) are already from very early on sensitive and responsive to facial expressions. But to suggest that the child compares the visual presentation of, say, the other's smile with the facial movements it itself makes when happy and that the infant then projects its own felt happiness into the invisible interiority of the other's body is psychologically implausible.

Another concern that they also both raise is the following. In order for the argument from analogy to succeed it has to rely on a similarity between the way in which my own body is given to me, and the way in which the body of the other is given to me. However, my own body as it is intro- and proprioceptively felt by me does not correspond point by point to the other's body as it is visually presented to me. Indeed, if I am to detect a similarity between, say, my laughing or screaming and the laughing or screaming of somebody else, I need to adopt a more global perspective. I have to understand the bodily gestures as expressive

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phenomena, as manifestations of joy or pain, and not simply as physical movements. But if such an understanding is required for the argument of analogy to succeed, the argument obviously presupposes what it is supposed to establish. To put it differently, we only employ analogical lines of reasoning when we are already convinced that we are facing minded creatures but are simply unsure about precisely how we are to interpret the expressive phenomena in question (cf. Gurwitsch 1979).

After these initial considerations, Scheler and Merleau-Ponty dig deeper in their criticism. Scheler for his part questions two crucial presuppositions in the argument from analogy. First, the argument assumes that my starting point is my own consciousness. This is what is given to me in a quite direct and unmediated fashion, and it is this purely mental self-experience that is then taken to proceed and make possible the recognition of others. One is at home in oneself and one then projects onto the other, whom one does not know, what one already finds in oneself. Incidentally, this implies that one is only able to understand those psychological states in others that one has already experienced in oneself. Second, the argument assumes that we never have direct access to another person's mind. We can never *experience* her thoughts or feelings; we can only infer that they must exist based on what is actually presented to us, namely her bodily behavior. Although these two assumptions may seem perfectly obvious, Scheler rejects both. As he points out, as philosophers it is our duty to question the obvious. We should pay attention to what is actually given, rather than letting some theory dictate what can be given (Scheler 1954: 244). On Scheler's view, the argument from analogy overestimates the difficulties involved in the experience of others and underestimates the difficulties involved in self-experience (Scheler 1954: 250-252). We should not ignore what can be directly perceived about others, nor should we fail to acknowledge the embodied and embedded character of self-experience. Scheler consequently denies that our initial self-acquaintance is of a purely mental nature that antecedes our experience of our own expressive movements and actions. He also denies that our basic acquaintance with others is inferential in nature. As he argues, there is something highly problematic about claiming that intersubjective understanding is a two-stage process of which the first stage is the perception of meaningless behavior and the second an intellectually based attribution of psychological meaning. Such an account presents us with a distorted picture, not only of behavior but also of the mind. It is no coincidence that we use psychological terms to describe behavior and that we would be hard-pressed to describe the

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latter in terms of bare movements. In the majority of cases, it is quite difficult (and artificial) to divide a phenomenon neatly into a psychological and a behavioral aspect – think merely of a groan of pain, a handshake, an embrace. On the contrary, in a face-to-face encounter, we are not confronted with a mere body, or with a hidden psyche, but with a unified whole. It is in this context that Scheler uses the term "expressive unity" (*Ausdruckseinheit*). It is only subsequently, through a process of abstraction, that this unity can be divided and our interest can then proceed "inwards" or "outwards" (Scheler 1954: 261).

We find similar considerations in Merleau-Ponty, who not only argues that anger, shame, hate and love, rather than being psychic facts which are hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness, are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. Such emotions exist, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, in the face or in those gestures, and not hidden behind them (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 52-53). They are, in short, expressed in bodily gestures and actions and are thereby visible to others. Merleau-Ponty furthermore claims that the incapacity of classical psychology to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of how we relate to others is due to the fact that it bases its entire approach on certain unquestioned and unwarranted philosophical prejudices. First and foremost among these is the fundamental assumption that experiential life is directly accessible to one person only, namely the individual who owns it (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 114), and that the only access one has to the psyche of another is indirect and mediated by his or her bodily appearance (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 113, 114). But Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that my experiential life is a sequence of internal states that are inaccessible to anyone but me. Rather, on his view, our experiential life is above all a relation to the world, and it is in this comportment toward the world that I will also be able to discover the consciousness of the other. As he writes, "The perspective on the other is opened to me from the moment I define him and myself as conducts at work in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 117). Merleau-Ponty consequently argues that we need to redefine our notion of psyche if we are to make it comprehensible how we can relate to others.

Phenomenologists have in general tended to follow Scheler and Merleau-Ponty in taking an embodied perceptual approach to the questions of understanding others and the problem of intersubjectivity. We begin from the recognition that our perception of the other's bodily presence is unlike our perception of physical things. The other is given in his or her bodily presence as a lived body, a body that is actively

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engaged in the world. It is indeed, as Sartre also points out, a decisive mistake to think that my ordinary encounter with the body of another is an encounter with the kind of body described by physiology. The body of another is always given to me in a situation or meaningful context, which is co-determined by the action and expression of that very body (Sartre 2003: 369).

The criticism of the argument from analogy constitutes a focal point of agreement among various phenomenologists. Some of them suggest that our direct understanding of others as intentional beings involves a distinct *sui generis* mode of consciousness which they call *empathy* (cf. Stein 1989). In making this claim, the phenomenologists stand opposed to dominant positions within the so-called theory of mind debate, i.e., the theory-theory of mind and the simulation theory of mind. Both of the latter positions deny that it is possible to experience the minds of others. It is precisely because of the absence of an experiential access to other minds that we need to rely on and employ either theoretical inferences or internal simulations. By contrast, phenomenologists would precisely insist that we can experience the other directly as a minded being, as a being whose bodily gestures and actions are expressive of his or her experiences or states of mind.

But there is more to the phenomenological discussion of intersubjectivity. Let me in the following briefly list some of the ways in which the initial discussion of empathy was deepened as well as some of the problems to which this discussion gave rise

2. Visibility and invisibility

Scheler defends the view that we are empathically able to *experience* other minds (Scheler 1954, 9). It is no coincidence that he repeatedly speaks of the perception of others (*Fremdwahrnehmung*), and even entitles his own theory *a perceptual theory of other minds* (Scheler 1954: 220). But do we really enjoy as direct an access to the experiential life of others as we do to our own? Other phenomenologists have disputed this. Husserl, for instance, concedes that my experience of others has a quasi-perceptual character in the sense that it grasps the other him- or herself (Husserl 1973a: 24). But at the same time, Husserl also says that

although the body of the other is intuitively given to me *in propria persona*, this is not the case with the other's experiences. They can never be given to me in the same original fashion as my own experiences. In short, empathy is both like and unlike perception. It is like perception in being direct, unmediated, and non-inferential. It is unlike perception, however, in not offering us the fullest presence of the empathized experience – that presence is only available to the subject of the experience. Even Merleau-Ponty would agree with the latter point. As he writes, although I can perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his or her conduct, in his face or hands, and although I can understand the other without recourse to any 'inner' experience of suffering or anger, the grief and the anger of the other will never quite have the same significance for me as they have for him. For me these situations are displayed, for him they are lived through (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 415).

One way to reconcile the different views might be as follows: When claiming that we are able to *experience* others, and as a consequence do not exclusively have to rely on and employ inferences, imitations or projections, this is not meant to entail that we can experience the other in precisely the same way as she herself does, nor that the other's consciousness is accessible to us in precisely the same way as our own is. Second- (and third-) person access to psychological states *do* differ from first-person access. But we shouldn't make the mistake of restricting and equating experiential access with first-person access. It is possible to experience minds in more than one way. When I experience the facial expressions or meaningful actions of another, I am *experiencing* foreign subjectivity, and not merely imagining it, simulating it or theorizing about it. The fact that I can be mistaken and deceived is no argument against the experiential character of the access. Moreover, the fact that my experiential access to the minds of others differs from my experiential access to my own mind need not be an imperfection or shortcoming. On the contrary, it is a difference that is constitutional. It is precisely because of this difference, precisely because of this asymmetry, that we can claim that the minds we experience are *other* minds. As Husserl points out, had I had the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and would instead become a part of myself (Husserl 1999: 109). Indeed, a more precise way of capturing what is at stake might be by saying that we experience bodily and behavioral expressions as expressive of an experiential life that transcends the expression. Thus, the givenness of the other is of a most peculiar kind.

The otherness of the other is precisely *manifest* in his elusiveness and inaccessibility. As Levinas observed, the absence of the other is exactly his presence as other (Levinas 1987, 94). There is, so to speak, more to the mind of the other than what we are grasping, but this does not make our understanding non-experiential.

Our experience and understanding of others is fallible. This should not cause us to conclude that we cannot understand others and that empathy is to be distrusted. Other people can fake or conceal their experiences. There is, however, a decisive difference between our everyday uncertainty about exactly what others might be thinking about and the nightmare vision of the solipsist. Although we may be uncertain about the specific beliefs or intentions of others, this uncertainty does not make us question their very existence. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, our relation to others is deeper than any specific uncertainty we might have regarding them (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 421).

3. Transcendental complications

On various occasions, Husserl expressed reservations about Scheler's notion of empathy. On the one hand, Husserl argued that one shouldn't simply take our ability to experience others as a primitive and unanalyzable fact (Husserl 1973b: 335), but that one as philosophers should engage in a transcendental clarification of its condition of possibility. In pursuing this task, Husserl was especially interested in disclosing those temporal and bodily features of the constituting subject which allowed it to interact with and recognize other bodies as embodied foreign subjectivities. Eventually his analysis led him to the idea that bodily self-experience contains an interplay between ipseity and alterity, and that the confrontation with one's own exteriority is crucial for empathy (Husserl 1973a: 263, 1973b: 457, 1973c: 652). Husserl also spoke of the affinity between the de-presentation effectuated by original temporalization and the self-alienation taking place in empathy, and he seemed to regard the ecstatic-centered self-differentiation due to the process of temporalization to be a condition of possibility for empathy, for our basic openness towards otherness (Husserl 1970: 185).

However, Husserl also insisted that Scheler, by focusing on the concrete experience of others. had overlooked the truly transcendental dimension of the problem, namely the fact that intersubjectivity is

involved in the very constitution of objectivity (Husserl 1999: 92, 147). Husserl's considerations and extensive analyses of this problem ultimately led him to the view that the possibility of a transcendental elucidation of subjectivity and world is lost if one follows the Kantian tradition in interpreting transcendental subjectivity as an isolated ego and thereby ignores the topic of *transcendental intersubjectivity* (Husserl 1993, 120). It is no coincidence that Husserl at times described his own project as a *sociological* transcendental philosophy (Husserl 1962: 539) and in 1922 even wrote that the development of phenomenology necessarily implies the step from an "'egological' … phenomenology to a transcendental sociological phenomenology having reference to a manifest multiplicity of conscious subjects communicating with one another" (Husserl 1981: 68).

The link between the role of intersubjectivity and the status of transcendental philosophy is repeatedly confirmed by Husserl. He frequently writes that his phenomenological treatment of intersubjectivity has the goal of bringing his constitutive analyses to completion and that only his reflections on intersubjectivity have made the "full and proper sense" of transcendental phenomenology understandable for the first time (Husserl 1999: 150). This is why Husserl claims that a phenomenological discussion of subjectivity in the end turns out to be a discussion not simply of the I, but of the *we* (Husserl 1973c: 74-5, 1999: 30, 1970: 340, 1962: 245-46), and why he writes that all truth and all being have their intentional source in transcendental intersubjective sociality (cf. Husserl 1999: 156), and that the being of the transcendental subject is to exist as a part of transcendental intersubjectivity. Or as he eventually puts it in a famous quote from *Crisis* that Merleau-Ponty was later to discuss in detail: "subjectivity is what it is – an ego functioning constitutively – only within intersubjectivity" (Husserl 1970: 172).

Husserl is undoubtedly a transcendental philosopher. But the kind of transcendental philosophy he is advocating is one that is quite aware of the finitude of the transcendental subject. This is clear not only from Husserl's emphatic appeal to a plurality of transcendental subjects, but also from his accentuation of the ongoing and unfinished character of transcendental reflection. In the volume *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*, Husserl states that the constitution of absolute objectivity must be understood as the culmination of an ongoing intersubjective process of cultivating ever newer systems of norms at ever higher levels (Husserl 1973c: 421). Every new generation cooperates in transcendentally

building up the structures of validity pertaining to the objective world, which is precisely a world handed down in tradition (Husserl 1973c: 463).

Ultimately, and this is something that only recently has been properly appreciated, Husserl's later phenomenology can be seen as an explicit defense of what might be called an intersubjective transformation of transcendental philosophy (cf. Zahavi 1996, 2001).

4. The importance of the face-to-face encounter

Another phenomenologist who questioned a narrow focus on empathy was Heidegger. For Heidegger, the notion of empathy is introduced in order to explain how one (isolated) subject can encounter and understand another (isolated) subject (Heidegger 2001: 145). But he thinks this misconceives both the nature of the self and the nature of intersubjectivity. It takes the latter to be first and foremost a thematic encounter between individuals, where one is trying to grasp the emotions or experiences of the other (this connotation is particularly obvious in the German word for empathy: *Einfühlung*). But as Heidegger points out, the very attempt to grasp the experiences of others thematically is the exception rather than the rule. Ordinarily, we do not encounter others primarily as thematic objects of cognition. Rather we encounter them in the world in which our daily life occurs, or to be more precise, we encounter others in a worldly situation, and our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand (cf. Gurwitsch 1979: 35-36, 95, 106).

Heidegger's criticism highlights two important issues that have remained contested in phenomenological accounts of intersubjectivity. First of all, it raises the question of what is most fundamental, the concrete face-to-face encounter or the life in a shared world. Secondly, it pinpoints the question of whether the solution to the problem of other minds requires an emphasis on or rather an elimination of the difference between self and other.

As for the first question, Schutz presents us with a balanced view. Schutz considers the direct face-to-face encounter, what he also terms the we-relationship, as basic in the sense that all other forms of

interpersonal understanding derive their validity from this kind of encounter (Schutz 1967: 162). But as he keeps emphasizing, interpersonal understanding comes in many forms and shapes, and if we wish to do justice to this variety and complexity we have to go beyond what a narrow focus on empathy can deliver. Ordinarily, we always bring a whole stock of knowledge to the encounter with the other, both knowledge of a more general sort, but frequently also knowledge regarding the particular person in question, knowledge of his habits, interests etc. (Schutz 1967: 169). This knowledge comes to serve as an interpretive scheme even in the case of direct social interaction. For that reason, it is crucial to realize that our understanding of others never takes place in a vacuum; it doesn't have the format of a snapshot.

One can accept the critical point made by Heidegger and still consider the notion of empathy to be useful. One should simply acknowledge that our typical understanding of others is contextual and realize that empathy, properly understood, is not a question of feelingly projecting oneself into the other, but rather an ability to experience behavior as expressive of mind, i.e., an ability to access the life of the mind of others in their expressive behavior and meaningful action.

As for the second question, Sartre subsequently voiced the following criticism of Heidegger's approach. To downplay or ignore the face-to-face encounter and to emphasize the extent to which our everyday being-with-one-another is characterized by anonymity and substitutability – as Heidegger puts it, the others are those among whom one is, but from whom "one mostly does not distinguish oneself" (Heidegger 1996: 111) – is according to Sartre to lose sight of the real issue and nexus of intersubjectivity: the encounter and confrontation with a *radical otherness*. Sartre's highlighting of the alterity and transcendence of the other was subsequently radicalized by Levinas who argued that an authentic encounter with the other is an encounter with an ineffable exteriority. It is an encounter that is not conditioned by anything in my power, but which has the character of a visitation, an epiphany, or a revelation. In a characteristic move, Levinas argued that the authentic encounter with the other, rather than being perceptual or epistemic, is *ethical* in nature (Levinas 1969: 43).

For both Levinas and Sartre, an account of intersubjectivity will fail if it tries to eliminate the difference between self and other. To some extent, this is also a criticism that would affect Merleau-Ponty. After all, in "The Child's Relations with Others," Merleau-Ponty writes that the perception of others only

becomes comprehensible if one assumes that there is an initial state of undifferentiation, and that the beginning of psychogenesis is precisely a state where the child is unaware of itself and the other as different beings. In this first phase, there is, on Merleau-Ponty's view, consequently not one individual over against another, but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 119). In short, some have claimed that the only way to solve the problem of intersubjectivity and avoid a threatening solipsism is by conceiving of the difference between self and other as a founded and derived difference, a difference arising out of an undifferentiated anonymous life. However, for other phenomenologists (including Husserl, Sartre and Levinas) this solution doesn't solve the problem of intersubjectivity, it rather dissolves it. To speak of a fundamental anonymity prior to any distinction between self and other obscures that which has to be clarified, namely intersubjectivity understood as the relation between subjectivities. On the level of this fundamental anonymity there is neither individuation nor selfhood, but nor is there any differentiation, alterity, or transcendence, and there is consequently room for neither subjectivity nor intersubjectivity.

But Merleau-Ponty and others favoring a similar approach have an obvious rejoinder available. Too much emphasis on the irreducible difference between self and other simply makes their relation and connection incomprehensible. As this impasse indicates, one of the decisive challenges facing a phenomenological account of intersubjectivity is to find the proper balance between the similarity and difference of self and other.

5. Conclusion

As should be clear by now, far from ignoring the issues of intersubjectivity and sociality, the phenomenological tradition contains rich but quite diverse and even occasionally competing accounts. Despite their diversity, it is still possible to uncover certain significant and quite distinctive features that are more or less common to all of the different approaches. Let me conclude by briefly mentioning a few of them:

- Without ever denying the eminently intersubjective character of *language*, phenomenologists have often

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endeavored to unearth pre- or extra-linguistic forms of intersubjectivity, be it in simple perception or in tool-use, in emotions, drives, or body-awareness. This emphasis constitutes one of the decisive differences between the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity, and the approach that we find, for instance, in the writings of Habermas.

- Phenomenologists never conceive of intersubjectivity as an objectively existing structure in the world that can be comprehensively described and analyzed from a third-person perspective. On the contrary, intersubjectivity is a relation between subjects and its full analysis must include a reference to and an investigation of the first-person perspective. This also makes it clear that subjectivity and intersubjectivity, far from being competing alternatives, are, in fact, complementary and mutually interdependent notions.

- One of the quite crucial insights that we find in many phenomenologists is the idea that a treatment of intersubjectivity simultaneously requires an analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and world. That is, it is not satisfactory simply to insert intersubjectivity somewhere within an already established metaphysical framework; rather, the three dimensions "self", "others", and "world" belong together, they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be fully understood in their interconnection.

Much of what phenomenologists have had to say on the issue of intersubjectivity is of obvious relevance, not only for related discussions in analytical philosophy of mind, but also for empirical disciplines, such as developmental psychology, sociology, anthropology, social neuroscience and psychiatry. Recent attempts to demonstrate this is, for instance, to be found in the writings of Zahavi (2005, 2008, 2010), Gallagher (2005), Gallagher & Zahavi (2008) and Ratcliffe (2007).

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