

Interview

Contemporary Phenomenology at Its Best

Interview With Professor Dan Zahavi

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Abstract

This time around, we have the chance of getting to know Prof. Dan Zahavi of the University of Copenhagen, one of phenomenology's top researchers, whose thought expresses a particular voice in the philosophy of mind and interdisciplinary cognitive research. Today, we shall explore topics regarding phenomenology in our present scientific context, Edmund Husserl's takes on phenomenology, the influence of the history of philosophy on shaping contemporary cognitive research and the links and possibilities between phenomenology and psychology, in both method and practice.

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Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Prof. Zahavi, firstly I want to ask you about the current projects and/or events that the Center for Subjectivity Research has set in motion or is ready to do so within the next couple of years. Can you tell us about the next project that you are working on? What will it be about? Is it an individual or a collaborative endeavor?

Dan Zahavi: I have just completed a new book entitled *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*. It will soon be out with Oxford University Press. By engaging with debates and findings in classical phenomenology, in philosophy of mind and in various empirical disciplines, I discuss whether you can be a self on your own or only together with others. Is selfhood a built-in feature of experience or rather socially constructed? How do we at all come to understand others? Does empathy amount to and allow for a distinct experiential acquaintance with others, and if so, what does that tell us about the nature of selfhood and social cognition? Does a strong emphasis on the first-personal character of consciousness prohibit a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity or is the former rather a necessary requirement for the latter? More specifically, I argue that any theory of consciousness that wishes to take the subjective dimension of our experiential life serious must endorse a minimalist notion of self. At the same time, however, I also contend that an adequate account of the self has to recognize its multifaceted character, and that various complementary accounts must be integrated, if we are to do justice to its complexity. Thus, while arguing that the most fundamental level of selfhood is not socially constructed and not constitutively dependent upon others, I acknowledge that there are dimensions of the self and types of self-

experience that are other-mediated. The final part of the book exemplifies this claim through a close analysis of shame.

I have been working on the book for five years, so it is good to finally being done with it. Currently, I have two new projects on the table. The first is a book on Husserl entitled *Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Transcendental Philosophy: Husserlian Variations*. Rather than delving into a detailed exploration of some of Husserl's many concrete investigations of intentionality, temporality, embodiment, empathy etc., the aim of the new book will be to assess and clarify the very status of Husserlian phenomenology and phenomenological analysis. The book will consequently pursue a more methodological and metaphilosophical objective. Is Husserl's phenomenological analysis based on a refined form of introspection, and must it consequently be classified as a psychological contribution of some sort, or is it rather a distinct philosophical contribution, the outcome of a careful conceptual or transcendental analysis? Is the kind of phenomenological analysis found in Husserl primarily descriptive in character, is it supposed to capture how things seem to us, or is it also supposed to capture how things are? In short, what kind of metaphysical import, if any, does a phenomenological analysis carry?

Whereas this Husserl project is one that I will be working on alone, the other new project is of a more collaborative nature. I recently received generous funding from the University of Copenhagen's Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research for a research project that deals with the nature of collective intentionality, shared emotions and we-identity. As part of this project, I will not only investigate how the we-perspective relate to individual first-order intentionality and to what extent and in which way it presupposes self-consciousness, second-person perspective taking and empathy, but also investigate whether, to what extent and how, in the case of schizophrenia spectrum, instabilities of the first-person perspective ("self-disorders") and disorders of empathy, lead to a disturbed and diminished capacity for entering and maintaining a we-perspective. I will be collaborating with colleagues from the Center for Subjectivity Research on this project.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Within *Ideas III*, Husserl writes about the phenomenological-constitutive/kinetic method while he tries to clear out the fundamental difference between phenomenology and ontology. Meanwhile, Heideggerian inspired approaches of phenomenology (Ricoeur, Derrida, Levinas, Marion) always seem to mark a return to the classical ontological mode of consideration, rather than taking phenomenology forward by researching the emerging, constitutive nature of human experience.



Dan Zahavi is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen. He obtained his Ph.D. from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 1994 and his Dr.phil. (Habilitation) from University of Copenhagen in 1999. He has served as president of the Nordic Society for Phenomenology in the years 2001-2007, and is currently co-editor in chief of the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. In his systematic work, Zahavi has mainly been investigating the nature of selfhood, self-consciousness and intersubjectivity. His most important publications include *Husserl und die transzendente Intersubjektivität* (Kluwer 1996), *Self-awareness and Alterity* (Northwestern University Press 1999), *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford University Press 2003), *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (MIT Press 2005), and together with Shaun Gallagher *The Phenomenological Mind* (Routledge 2008).

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What are your thoughts on this? In what aspects do you think that Heideggerian modeled phenomenology would be relevant to consciousness studies and how would you conceive a bridge between these two?

Dan Zahavi: The relation between ontology and phenomenology is complicated, and I don't accept the standard reading of Heidegger as one who in contrast to Husserl realized that phenomenology had ontological implications. Marion has claimed that Husserl's fundamental mistake was that he never understood that the true and innermost destination of phenomenology is to provide ontology with a proper method. I think it is Marion who is mistaken here. Not only does Husserl repeatedly speak of the ontological dimension of phenomenology in works such as *Cartesianische Meditationen*, *Ideen III*, *Erste Philosophie II*, and *Formale und transzendente Logik*, but more importantly, one has to consider what Heidegger means by fundamental ontology, and on my interpretation, Heidegger's concern is fundamentally the same as Husserl's: Both are doing transcendental philosophy. Whereas Marion is definitely more of a Heideggerian than a Husserlian, I don't think the same can be said about Ricoeur, Derrida and Levinas. Just consider, as an example, how Levinas in *Totalité et infini* criticizes Heideggerian phenomenology for remaining too subservient to ontology.

In any case, if you are asking whether a Heideggerian approach to phenomenology can be of relevance to consciousness studies, I would certainly say yes. In *The Phenomenological Mind*, Shaun Gallagher and I didn't draw as much on Heidegger as on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, but we could certainly also have incorporated insights from Heidegger. Other people who have done so in the context of consciousness studies and philosophy of mind include Sean Kelly, Steven Crowell, John Haugeland and Michael Wheeler.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Husserl's somatology was conceived as the discipline that ought to study the dynamical aspects of the emergence of experience within the embodied consciousness – by following the ongoing generative constitution of rational acts from within the prerational transcendental realm of experience, and by stressing out the fundamental importance of that prerational net of possibilities of the lived body. Do you think that 21st century scientific communities will be able to see the importance of the lived character of experience? Do you think that all areas of science will eventually manage to integrate Husserlian phenomenology into their research?

Dan Zahavi: I think the scientific community is already far more receptive to the idea that the lived character of experience must be accounted for than it was just 30 years ago. This is all part of the well-known boom in consciousness research that happened in the early nineties. Just consider how the study of phenomenal and subjective consciousness went from being a topic few dared touch because of its perceived "un-scientific" character to being a hot topic in cognitive and affective neuroscience. This, however, is certainly not to say that all is well. Although mainstream science might currently be more attentive to the importance of subjective consciousness, the latter is still primarily considered a mere object of study rather than something with an essential impact on the very possibility of cognition. In short, transcendental considerations are still very far from being incorporated into the scientific outlook. Hard to say whether this will ever change, but unless it does, I don't think it is very likely that all areas of science will ever go Husserlian.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait is a PhD student at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest, currently working on his thesis which aims to understand the role of imagination in both Plato and Husserl, using genetic phenomenology as a method. Besides his academic activity, Andrei is fond of artistic experience, dedication which received promising feedback when his 2013 short film *diafan/lightly* had its international premiere at the 66th Festival de Cannes, as part of the Court Metrage / Short Film Corner section.

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Andrei Simionescu-Panait: The last decades have seen a revival of Husserl's phenomenology within select scientific areas of study. Thinkers such as Varela, Thompson, Edelman, Barbieri, T. Deacon, Sheets-Johnstone have adapted phenomenology to biology, anthropology, neurology, linguistics and have generated new domains of research, such as biosemantics and neurophenomenology. What is your vision regarding the importance of interdisciplinary approaches on consciousness studies? Also, what pheno-based recently emerged area (or areas) of research do you consider to be "the next big thing" in science?

Dan Zahavi: I am firmly committed to the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration when it comes to the study of consciousness. Consciousness is far too complex and complicated to be left to one discipline only. I consequently think it will be of paramount importance to integrate a variety of different empirical and theoretical perspectives if we are to make any serious progress. It is hard to predict what the next new area will be, but emotion research seems to be up and coming. But incidentally, some important areas are actually forgotten from your list. Consider that psychiatry and psychopathology has a very long history for engaging with phenomenology. Just think of the work of Karl Jaspers. And what about physics? Consider the work of Hermann Weyl.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Currently, the *autopoietic* character of life still is something to be discussed and propelled towards further research. For us, the way a living cell is experienced by itself is still a mystery and phenomenology would like to be able to give a full account of this, either on its own or with the help of some fore mentioned ways of applied inquiry. How do you conceive the relationship between ongoing studies related to the constitution of the experience of matter and those aimed at intersubjectivity?

Dan Zahavi: Here I have to refer to the work of Evan Thompson. It is not a topic that I have worked on myself. The only point I would like to make is that intersubjectivity is a relation between subjects, it is a subject-subject relation. But for me to relate to another as subject is for me to relate to somebody with a first-person perspective of his or her own. We encounter others as such when we encounter them as experiencing subjects, and this means as subjects that have a perspective not just upon the world of objects, but upon us too. Insofar as this is the case, I would be suspicious of any investigation that highlighted the similarities rather than the differences between animate and inanimate matter.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Let's have a look back at the history of western philosophy. Some thinkers more or less follow in the Heraclitean tradition by stressing out the notion of change, which is directly linked to the concept of stream – Aristotle's studies of the body in the *Physics* and the *De anima*, sparse perspectives concerning lifeworld acts from Diogenes the Cynic, Hume's discussion of the perception of space in the *Treatise* (which announces sections §36 to §41 from *Ideas II*), Kant's transcendental aesthetics, some more transcendental in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and finally – Nietzsche's own life, lived by the way of his custom made *epoché*. Husserl came and gave life and rigorous contour to this fragmentary underlying tradition of thought by inventing phenomenology. Given the fact that all those thinkers had intuitions regarding concepts like bracketing, emergence, the prerational (or prereflective) horizon of experience, etc. - without having the technical means to study, let's say, the saccadic eye movement (as a prerational act), I want to ask you if phenomenology can always be reconfigured as a method, given the recurring invention of new tools of investigation. What is your perspective on this?

Dan Zahavi: Hmm. Here is perhaps what might qualify as an answer: For Husserl, phenomenology is not just one type of philosophy among many. Phenomenology, and the phenomenological attitude, is the philosophical stance par excellence. This is in all likelihood also why Husserl would claim that a philosopher who embraced naturalism would have ceased being a philosopher. If we just for a second assume that Husserl is right and that

the reflective stance of phenomenology is really the stance of philosophy, then we also ought to recognize that Husserl was not the first phenomenologist, but that others figures up through history have entertained similar ideas. Likewise, whereas it is hard to predict whether there will self-avowed phenomenologists 100 years from now, I am quite confident that the basic insights found in phenomenology will continue to flourish though perhaps in new forms and guises. In fact, if we think there is some truth to phenomenology, then I also think we need to be confident that it will be able to renew itself.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Let's take a brief detour to psychology. Empathy was intensively studied by psychologists and philosophers since the 19th Edward Titchener ported "Einfühlung" into English, after which Theodor Lipps defined the nature of aesthetic empathy as the "experience of another human" (which may broadly be linked to Husserl's aesthetic synthesis in §9 of *Ideas II*). It is known that Husserl distinguishes between transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological psychology, and with that the whole meaning of empathy changes, along with the phenomenological context in which it is conceived. What is your advice for psychology students everywhere regarding the way empathy can be manifoldly conceived, given the fact that phenomenology theoretically enriches the psychological tradition?

Dan Zahavi: This question very much speaks to topics I have been working on for the last 4-5 years. So quickly to get some of the historical facts right: The notion of empathy doesn't have a long history. The German term *Einfühlung* was first used in 1873 in the domain of aesthetics by the philosopher Robert Vischer, but was then taken over by Theodor Lipps, who introduced it into the field of social cognition and used it to designate our basic capacity for understanding others as minded creatures. It was Lipps' notion that Edward Titchener, the American psychologist, had in mind when he in 1909 translated 'Einfühlung' as 'empathy'. Now, whereas Lipps' comprehensive criticism of the argument from analogy found approval among later phenomenologists, they were by and large quite critical of his own positive account. In fact, they all rejected his main claims, namely that empathy relies on a process of inner imitation and involves a component of projection. Still, Lipps' ideas have remained influential and have a number of modern heirs, be it in philosophy, psychology or neuroscience. The phenomenological proposal, as articulated by Husserl, Stein and Scheler, among others, constitute an important alternative. In my new book, I spend time articulating what is distinctive about this proposal. Let me here just remark, that it differs in important ways from many of the contemporary accounts of empathy, especially in recognizing our basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others and by highlighting the extent to which we can be directly acquainted with the other's experiences. To that extent, it ought to be of interest to psychology students who are concerned with the nature of social cognition.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Jaspers once said that philosophy is an indispensable tool for psychopathology. It seems that 21st century psychiatry, regardless of extended clinical research on developing new drugs to alleviate symptoms of mental disorders like schizophrenia, has its shortcomings in explaining the phenomena of altered experience and oddly perceived lifeworld in his case. From this example, I want to ask you about your perspective on the communication between phenomenology and psychiatry. How can psychiatry receive the phenomenological framework and what are your thoughts regarding the practical success of such a marriage (finding causes and treatment)?

Dan Zahavi: Jaspers even wrote that "the psychiatrist's competence is commensurate with how far his education and knowledge would qualify him to belong to the philosophy faculty", but of course, he also had both qualifications himself. Why did he write as he did? Because he realized that psychiatry rather than simply facing a number of

factual and empirical problems, also had to engage with conceptual and epistemological issues. In order to classify something as a delusion, a hallucination, an obsession, or self-disorder, the psychiatrist cannot avoid making assumptions about the nature of 'reality', 'rationality', 'personal identity' etc. That is, he must constantly reference philosophical issues, and since this is inevitably the case, why not benefit from the analyses that philosophy can provide. Philosophy can offer a sophisticated conceptual framework and thereby enable the psychiatrist to address concrete psychopathological questions with a deeper understanding of the overarching issues such as time, space, mind, self, etc.

I have been collaborating with the psychiatrist Josef Parnas for more than 15 years. We have long been advocating the idea that psychiatry can profit not only from engaging with philosophy, but also, and in particular, with phenomenology. Why might phenomenology be particularly well suited to act as the philosophical 'Gesprächspartner' of psychiatry? A crucial first step in dealing with a psychiatric disorder is to recreate its experiential dimension: If we wish to understand what depersonalization, perplexity or compulsion is, we first have to take the first-person perspective seriously. Without a proper description of the central features of the disorder, any subsequent attempt at explaining it, will be doomed to failure. Given a misdescription, the explanation will be either worthless or misleading. Moreover, when looking at some of the central experiential categories that are afflicted in different psychopathological conditions, such as the structure of time and space, the experience of one's own body, the question of unity and identity of self, the nature of intersubjectivity, the relevance of phenomenological resources only becomes even more obvious, since phenomenology has devoted extensive analyses to an understanding of precisely such issues.

As for the issue of treatment, let me just mention that the psychometric tool EASE (Examination of anomalous self-experience) which has been developed by phenomenologically inclined psychiatrists to allow for the examination of various forms of self-disorders can also help identify first-admitted patients who have a significant risk for later developing schizophrenia. Given that early treatment might improve the prognosis, this is a piece of phenomenological work with a quite significant, practical, relevance.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Finally, I would like to ask you: what is your all-time favorite phenomenology topic?

Dan Zahavi: Ever since my dissertation in 1994 and my habilitation in 1999, I have been working on self and other and on how they are intertwined. As you can gather from the title of my recently finished book, this is still a topic that stands near to my heart.

Andrei Simionescu-Panait: Thank you Professor Dan Zahavi for the interview and the chance to discuss such important issues in contemporary phenomenology and correlated fields of research.

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