

Between Weak and Strong Anthropological Phenomenologies

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Michael Schnegg's article makes an important, inspiring, and timely contribution to debates within phenomenological anthropology that have grown in recent years and are increasingly gaining attention within anthropology as a whole. Schnegg offers a substantial and solidly grounded overview of a set of key concepts in philosophical phenomenology – *intentionality* (Edmund Husserl), *being-in-the-world* (Martin Heidegger), *embodiment* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), *empathy* (Edith Stein), *responsivity* (Bernhard Waldenfels) and *atmosphere* (Hermann Schmitz) – which, he argues, are useful in making better sense of specific experiences during fieldwork. To substantiate this claim, he productively draws on his ethnographic encounter with a Damara pastoralist in Namibia dealing with the weather and compellingly demonstrates how the conceptual vocabularies developed within different varieties of philosophical phenomenology can be mobilized in order to perspectivize anthropological understandings of what 'rain' means locally and how it is experienced.

However, Schnegg's ambitions go beyond illustrating the usefulness of phenomenological concepts for ethnographic analysis. Instead, he wants to develop phenomenological anthropology further, arguing that '[w]hat things appear *as* in a situation is a combination of *how* they appear and the social context'. In other words, the universal concepts of philosophical phenomenology about the 'transcendental structures of experience' need to be contextualized historically, culturally, socially, politically and economically – and this is anthropology's contribution – in order to explain localized variations and also divergent experiences among differently situated beings that are capable of subjectivity and some first-person perspective.

Moreover, he also wants to use this phenomenological anthropology for the purpose of criticizing these socio-cultural contexts. Such a critical phenomenological anthropology may proceed, Schnegg argues, by analysing first-person experiences of suffering pointing towards structures of injustice and discrimination, as well as by using the emic concepts of our interlocutors to destabilize our own. It can also be put into practice by uncovering the 'quasi-transcendental structures' that misleadingly pre-structure and thereby unduly delimit, in empirically variable ways, what is locally mis-

perceived as what is possible or inevitable. Thus, using phenomenological anthropology as a means for an experience-based critique, Schnegg insists that it may also open up a space for hope, allowing us to imagine a possible otherwise.

This thorough engagement with phenomenological concepts for potential ethnographic usage is compelling and offers food for thought in many ways. At the same time, it also raises some questions. One pertains to the extent and depth of anthropology's engagement with, and commitment to, phenomenology that the text seems to be recommending: are we ultimately dealing with a weak or a strong anthropological phenomenology?

On the one hand, there are indicators that Schnegg seems to have a weak engagement in mind, in which 'the ethnographer' may eclectically decide which of the featured phenomenological 'concepts if any are productive for theorizing the particular experiences at stake'. Moreover, the recommended *epoché* is also 'ethnographic' rather than properly phenomenological in Husserl's transcendental sense. Yet, if we are to make a distinction between phenomenology as a transcendental philosophy and a form of empirical anthropology and stick exclusively to the latter, then many of the proposed 'philosophical concepts' may boil down to reformulations of what anthropology has been doing all along: *epoché* might turn out to be mere reflexivity; *intentionality* possibly highlights merely variable social constructions of the same reality; *being-in-the-world* might just refer to the importance of different socio-cultural contexts and interests at different scales and temporalities; *embodiment* could come down to the relevance of shared sense perceptions constitutive of any fieldwork conducted in physical co-presence; *responsivity* might boil down to the need, for research partners and anthropologists alike, to handle contingency and uncertainty through finding meaningful answers; *atmosphere* may function as a mere reminder to take intersubjective affects and emotions into account; and *with-ness phenomenology* could turn into an insistence on the importance of *empathy*, which has been defining anthropology ever since the discipline set out to 'grasp the native's point of view' through extended periods of fieldwork. Of course, there is nothing wrong with using phenomenological concepts as a terminological apparatus to capture these key elements that have been characterizing the anthropological project. Yet to the extent that the engagement with phenomenology remains weak and situational, the claim possibly loses some of its appeal that using philosophical concepts allows us to explore specific experiences in the field more thoroughly than has been the case before.

If, on the other hand, this is ultimately about a strong anthropological phenomenology that is simultaneously empirical and phenomenological in the philosophical sense, then the profound ethico-onto-epistemological differences between the assembled phenomenological varieties start to matter. After all, it does make a difference whether we see our task in epistemologically preparing for describing the true and objective essence of a phenomenon (Husserl) or ontologically interpreting the true being as it reveals itself (Heidegger); it makes a difference whether we believe the world to be already routinely understood and '*zuhanden*' (Heidegger) or to be alien and continuously in

demand of a response (Waldenfels); it makes a difference whether we see embodiment (Merleau-Ponty) or empathy (Stein) as being of prime importance; it makes a difference whether we see affects and emotions as unfolding within and between subjects or within atmospheres (Schmitz). Within such a strong phenomenological project, it would thus not really be up to the ethnographer to decide eclectically from situation to situation which concepts are productive – this would rather follow from foundational meta-decisions perspectivizing the entire anthropological project.

What is more: if we are indeed to take seriously some variety of phenomenology as a first philosophy of ‘experience’ – and there are passages in Schnegg’s text suggesting this, as when a refined phenomenological anthropology is seen as combining the universal phenomenological insights into the transcendental structures of experience with anthropological knowledge about contexts – then empirically focusing on ‘experiences’ in such a world might unduly delimit the field of vision. Such an approach might mistake the empirical ‘experience’-in-the-world for the transcendental world-as-experience-as-all-there-is. It would run the risk of confusing, in Niklas Luhmann’s rendering, the ‘re-entry’ for the world-constituting distinction ‘experience/non-experience’ itself, into which it is copied again. In other words, such a phenomenological meta-anthropology would not principally reveal itself through its incessant reference to ‘experience’, ‘intentionality’ et al., but through a language that is always constitutively (but not necessarily literally) perspectivized by such a transcendental understanding (irrespective of its concrete object of reference). If this is the case, however, then the added value of a ‘phenomenological anthropology’ would not lie primarily in ‘philosophical concepts for ethnographic use’; instead, its added value would rather consist in making explicit the criteria according to which better apprehending engagements and meaningful descriptions of human interactions as intersubjectively entangled first-person perspectives would be possible in the first place. In short, its relevant contribution would be meta-theoretical: as transcendental anthropology, not as empirical anthropology.

Schnegg’s subsequent arguments about a truly phenomenological anthropology on the one hand, and its further potential for critique on the other, seem to be entangled with this question as well. Schnegg recommends complementing a transcendental phenomenology of experiences with concrete contexts of socio-cultural structures. Yet what is the ontology of these contextual structures, and what are the epistemological conditions of their knowability? Presumably these contexts or structures are experiential, too. This seems to invoke the conundrums around mutual entanglements between singularities and systemic aggregates, between agency and structure, actor and system, the micro-macro link etc. that have engaged debates in social theory for a long time. It is no coincidence that Pierre Bourdieu’s proclaimed synthesis in his praxeology seeks explicitly to combine ‘phenomenological’ with ‘objectivist’ approaches, as he makes clear in the opening pages of his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). Against this backdrop, it would be helpful to clarify in more detail in what ways a renewed phenomenological anthropology may go beyond well-rehearsed ways of conjoining ‘subjectivist’ and ‘objectivist’ approaches within theories of structuration.

Last but not least, the project of a critical phenomenological anthropology does indeed sound highly promising. Yet in the current rendition, some important questions seem to deserve more attention. For instance, how are we to move from an analysis of what experience in socio-culturally variable contexts is to what, transcending quasi-transcendental structures, experience *could and should be*? On what basis are we to evaluate, and criticize, structures of injustice and discrimination? And more directly to the point of this text, how are these evaluative standards of criticism related to (some variety of) philosophical phenomenology? Do they constitute an intrinsic phenomenological ethic (an entire field of study of its own)? Or do they need to be conjoined with phenomenology from the outside, mobilizing, for instance, Marxist thinking as the text seems to suggest?

The fact that this text provides the focal point for asking questions such as these within a spirited forum of the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie | Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology* attests to its importance for contemporary debates in anthropology. Much recent theorizing in the discipline has been concerned with how to practice an anthropology that is theoretically, methodologically and ethically reflexive, empirically grounded as well as socio-politically engaged, addressing current issues and challenges and actively promoting exchange between academia and non-academic publics. It is one of the great achievements of Schnegg's intervention to highlight the potential that a more profound engagement with phenomenology might offer this endeavour.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre 1977: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.