Experience and Concepts: How Do They Relate?

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I would like to start my short commentary by expressing gratitude to Michael Schnegg for providing us with such an impressive *tour de force* of phenomenological thinking. Not only does he revisit the origins and original intentions of phenomenology, he also provides focused readings of some of its most important concepts, offers an original classification, and asks how exactly phenomenology might help answer some of the discipline's fundamental questions. He does so in the way most phenomenologists do, by taking small and apparently simple situations of everyday life – a cool breeze, clouds on the horizon – and rethinking them in phenomenological ways. By situating these small but telling events in an ethnographic setting he is very well acquainted with – northwestern Namibia – he aims to prove empirically that phenomenology makes a difference not only in how to approach such events theoretically and methodologically, but also in actually understanding them.

Phenomenology is not new to anthropology: Schnegg traces the history of this engagement himself, necessarily briefly, considering the vastness of the field, and with some originality: He makes no reference to Paul Stoller, for example, whom I consider an eminent figure in this respect; he also focuses on works in English and thus bypasses contributions from German-speaking anthropology, some of which are quite elaborate, like, for example, Till Förster's work (1998, 2001, 2011). Nonetheless, Schnegg insists on starting afresh from the original concepts, a task I wholeheartedly support for a number of reasons. First, this is always a good idea: theories that were once well-reflected and brilliantly argued tend to become shallow in the process of their reception, often being reduced to a minor set of claims and requests to be met in empirical settings. This is especially the case for phenomenological anthropology, where the claim to consider experiences is often made without taking the larger epistemological framework into account. Second, it allows us to confront new topics with established ways of thinking, and thus to approach them from relatively solid ground. Third, and maybe most importantly with respect to the topic at hand, going back to rigorous philosophical debates on the nature of knowledge allows us to reflect on how we conceptualize knowledge today and have been doing so for several decades: as an entity that is socially constructed, by and large through language. In insisting that knowledge

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relates to the world itself, even if mediated by experience, Schnegg convincingly argues that phenomenology provides a means of critically rethinking social constructivism's fundamental claim that language is prior to experience (p. 8). His reflections thus provide a perspective on the non-discursive dimensions of knowledge that contributes to ongoing explorations of concepts like affect, atmosphere, material agency, human-nonhuman relationality and similar attempts to consider how knowledge relates to the world. It is another strength of the paper that it in the end attempts to prove that this epistemological concern does not rule out critique.

There is, however, a certain ambiguity in Schnegg's argument that I am struggling with, an ambiguity I already stumbled across in other phenomenological works and on which I would like to take the opportunity to elaborate. This ambiguity derives from the fact that, even though 'experience' is crucial to phenomenology, the concept remains astoundingly vague both in respect to its nature and to how it relates to reflexive, conceptual, language-based forms of knowledge. Phenomenology is, of course, an enormous field that is hard to pin down; fortunately, the paper develops the problem well, so I can concentrate on it in trying to substantiate my discomfort, which I hope will provide material for further debate.

At its core, phenomenology is a theory of experience not of reality proper, but of reality as it appears (p. 7). In denying access to reality itself, phenomenology therefore shares much with social constructivism. But while the latter approaches knowledge as a social practice that is fundamentally shaped by language and discourse, phenomenology, in Schnegg's words, claims 'an irreducible mine-ness of experience (...) which is not precisely a construct of social practices, but feeds into them' (p.8). Phenomenology thus takes a different stance toward a similar problem, which is how knowledge in its conceptual form comes into being.

In order for this juxtaposition to be of epistemological value, there must be a substantial difference between the two positions: somehow, experiences must diverge from the words and concepts we use to approach the world reflexively. Yet, this difference remains blurred in Schnegg's text as in others, which results in an argumentative vagueness already exemplified in the formulation 'not precisely' in the above-mentioned quote. Knowledge does take its departure from experience, Schnegg argues and illustrates, but it seems to translate into language quite smoothly: not only do 'language, cognition and experience' merge into one another, as he puts it in a telling sequence quoting Duranti (p. 18); he also considers experiences, and finally even the world to which they relate, to be prefigured by already existing concepts: 'I would even go so far', Schnegg states four pages later, 'to say that (...) different ways of being-in-the-world can create the rain as different ontological entities' (p. 22). From this perspective, experiences are thus either not categorically different from language, in which case phenomenology loses its original claim to draw its knowledge from the world and begins to dissolve into social constructivism. Or experiences are categorically different, but easily submit to existing concepts and discourses, which render them peripheral in respect to the resulting knowledge. In either case, a weak understanding of experience results that ultimately fails to fulfil its original promise. Unlike social constructivism, phenomenology convincingly shows that cultural explanations are rooted in experience. The explanations themselves, however, being presented in pre-given concepts, resemble those that social constructivists would provide. I would argue that this is because experiences are not considered powerful enough to provide an actual alternative and resist their conceptual taming. In fact, the originality of Schnegg's ethnographic vignettes lies in his exposition of how experiences trigger epistemic processes, rather than in the actual explanations they put forward.

In my view, this somehow unclear relationship between experience and concepts is based on an indistinct understanding of experience. On the one hand, as their structural opposition to language and discourse implies, experiences are considered meaningful in themselves, as a kind of alternative, 'worlding' knowledge. On the other hand, they are presented as empty vessels of bodily sensation still to be filled with meaning, as indicated by concepts like 'feelings', 'emotions' and 'perceptions', which are used throughout the text to characterize experiences. Phenomenology, it seems, hesitates to take sides, unlike aesthetic theory, a related yet different body of theory on which I decided to draw for exactly this reason in my own struggle to understand experience. Here, experience is consistently understood as a form of knowledge that, because of its 'sensual' nature, cannot be translated into concepts; the result is a strong understanding of experience as a form of knowledge in its own right.[1] While 'sensual' knowledge does depend on critical conceptualization in order to rethink and elaborate on it, it will never be exhausted by concepts, language or discourse, thanks to its ontological difference. This results in an irresolvable tension that defines any attempt to grasp the epistemic content of an experience reflexively. In aesthetic theory, therefore, the act of conceptualizing experiences resembles attempts to understand art (as the term in fact already indicates): the experience of an artwork also needs to be reflected on, but will never really submit to any explanation. Seen from this perspective, therefore, experiences do not just trigger their explication into cultural concepts, but rather processes of exegesis which may soon come to a pragmatic end or result in further exploration, depending on the will – or the need – for engagement in given situations. This will, or need, for further exploration may become more significant in cases where experiences become more complex: the atmosphere at a meeting, for example, or the way in which a beautiful landscape or a tasty dish affects us. But even in those relatively minor everyday situations from which Schnegg, like most phenomenologists, takes his point of departure, approaching experience from an 'aesthetic' angle does make a difference. To come back to his basic example: imagining the experience of dark clouds and a sudden cool breeze in a hot and dry landscape like that of Namibia, loaded with meanings it derives, among other things, from a range of spiritual entities, complex colonial reminiscences, and deep concern for livestock and thus finally for survival, it does not seem far-fetched to argue that any explanation that might be offered will only explore this experience in part. So, even when experiences seem to easily slip into concepts, it is crucial, I would argue, to keep them separate in order not to prevent further investigation. What is at stake is ultimately the nature of knowledge itself – the degree, more precisely, to which it is bound to language, concepts and discourse. It is one of the great merits of Michael Schnegg's paper that it reintroduces the history and relevance of this fundamental question by insisting on the actuality of phenomenological thinking and by proving that, at its core, "experience" is still crucial to reflections upon the relationship of knowledge to both words and the world.

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[1] Aesthetics, understood as the study of sensual perception and sensual knowledge, goes back to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* from 1750/58 (Baumgarten 1983[1750/58]); in the field of music, which I study, Theodor W. Adorno can be seen as the last thinker to provide a major philosophical system in this tradition (Adorno 1997[1970]; for a more recent and more accessible exposition of the central problems, see Wellmer 2009. In anthropology, Steven Feld's concept of 'acoustemology', which he developed in critical engagement with structuralism's overemphasis on language, is driven by a similar attempt to understand experience – in his case the experience of sound – as a form of sonic knowledge (Feld 2015, 2017); for a related idea of aesthetics in the field of visual anthropology, see David MacDougall's introduction to his book on social aesthetics (MacDougall 2005).

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