

A Critical Phenomenological-Hermeneutics of Us

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There are a lot of great introductions and reviews of phenomenological anthropology available for the interested reader (see, for example, Jackson 2005; Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Zigon and Throop 2021). Michael Schnegg has now provided us with what could become the defining text, as it offers an exceedingly clear and well-founded introduction to both philosophical phenomenology and the ways in which it has been taken up within anthropology. I know of no other text that so clearly articulates the foundational basics of phenomenology and that links them not simply to anthropological theorizing, but more importantly to ethnographic practice.

In particular, there are two parts of this essay that I find most helpful and that I think any other reader will as well: first, the section on methodological approaches; and second, that on six phenomenologies. The three methodological approaches that Schnegg discusses – *epoché*, *free imaginative variation*, and *Gelassenheit* – won't be new to anyone who already knows the phenomenological tradition and method. But they are vital for anyone who doesn't, and Schnegg articulates them here expertly and in a voice that is understandable to the most uninitiated of readers. He isn't the first anthropologist to discuss these (e.g., Throop 2012; Zigon and Throop 2021; Zigon 2019), but having them here in one essay is important.

Schnegg's typology of what he calls the six phenomenologies is, to the best of my knowledge, a novel way of making distinctions within the phenomenological tradition. Again, this is done in an extremely clear and helpful manner. Ultimately, I believe the lasting contribution of this essay will be precisely this classification, for it articulates very well to an anthropological readership that there is *no one thing* that can easily be identified as phenomenology. Rather, over the course of the last 125 years or so, several different phenomenologies have, in fact, developed.

This is important for anthropologists for at least two reasons. First, those of us who claim to be doing phenomenological anthropology too often write as though there is simply one phenomenology and that we are all doing it. Any close reading of our various texts should reveal that this is, in fact, not true. This is so, even if on occasion we self-identified phenomenological anthropologists may gloss over the differences. Perhaps one of the reasons this is done is to create a united front against those anthropologists who critique phenomenology, oftentimes while knowing almost nothing

about its internally differentiated tradition. Thus, the second reason this typology offered by Schnegg is important for anthropologists is its very clear demonstration that, while some of these critiques may be more or less appropriate to one typology, they are often not appropriate to the others.

One common critique of phenomenology by anthropologists is that it focuses only on individuals or subjectivity while ignoring larger structures such as history or power or the like. Schnegg's essay, and especially his six-part typology, shows that this is simply untrue. Thus, even the phenomenology that would most easily be mischaracterized as such – the Husserlian 'of-ness phenomenology' – does not simply focus on individuals or subjects, but rather on the relationality of intentionality. And here is where I would have challenged Schnegg if I were a reviewer of this essay. For, despite clearly acknowledging that phenomenology's focus is on relations, he takes up the very same language used by Husserlian phenomenologists and many phenomenological anthropologists in describing phenomenology as concerned above all with experience from a first-person perspective. I contend that it is precisely the continuous articulation of this description by most phenomenological anthropologists, along with the engrossing narrative writing of many of them, that has reinforced the subject-focused critique. This language is even more easily heard as such when there is such widespread phenomenological illiteracy within anthropology.

It is for this reason that I prefer to speak of phenomenology as concerned above all with relationality and the ways in which different entities – both human and non-human – emerge out of the differential flows and trajectories of relations. Thus, phenomenology is not about individual subjects because such entities do not exist other than as a temporary 'knotting' – to use a concept of Tim Ingold (2016) – of relations that then give way to other intertwinings. In this way, relationality is not about connecting two already existing dots, as Marilyn Strathern argues it is so often conceived within anthropology (2020). Rather, the image we might prefer to have in mind is something like several fireworks exploding in the dark sky and the ways in which their various rays of light cross one another temporarily. This crossing – this Merleau-Pontian chiasmic intertwining (1997) – is the temporary 'knotting' that give way to us beings-in-the-world.

Thus, if we were to add a seventh typology to Schnegg's list, it might be called 'dative phenomenology' or 'us phenomenology'. Indeed, some of the most influential phenomenology done today is making precisely this claim – that what makes us (whoever and whatever each one of us is) is nothing more than a momentary knotting together or gathering of relational forces. Though this has real similarities to the 'responsive phenomenology' Schnegg writes about, and some have written about an 'us' in the dative as a response (e.g., Mattingly 2018; Wentzer 2018; Dyring 2021), these responsive phenomenologists nevertheless remain focused on a first-person perspective. In contrast, the focus of 'dative phenomenology' is precisely the becoming of each of 'us' – noting that both human and non-humans count as 'us' – from the dative perspective and not a first-person perspective. Here I'm thinking of the work of, for

example, Jean-Luc Nancy (1997; 2000) and Jean-Luc Marion (2002) in philosophy, and my own in anthropology (Zigon 2019; 2021).

It is not difficult to see how this 'dative or us phenomenology' helps us do a critical phenomenology of the otherwise. For when the starting point of phenomenology is not the first-person perspective, but rather the relational forces that intertwine to make us, one clear focus can be a critical analysis of what those forces are, how they intertwine, and how they can be made otherwise. In this way, phenomenology can no longer be critiqued for not taking account of the larger forces, e.g., history, power, capitalism, etc., that make us. Rather, now critical phenomenology can ask those very critics: 1) just how is it that their non-relational or quasi-relational ontologies give way to an otherwise?; and 2) what assumptions do they have of the subject that allows an otherwise to come about? My critical phenomenological-hermeneutic guess is that their answers will be: 1) they don't; and 2) their subject is the very agentive and willful individual they so often critique. Be that as it may, I will simply end this brief commentary by saying that I believe it is critical phenomenology that will come to have the most significant impact on anthropology today, just as it has in contemporary phenomenological philosophy.

References

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