Response
Experience and Concepts

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First and foremost, I want to express my deep gratitude to the commentators for engaging so thoroughly with my text. In pointing out omissions and shortcomings in my argument, the commentators are developing phenomenological anthropology into the multi-layered paradigm it deserves to become.

All the comments establish good vibes (maybe 'relationality' in Zigon's terms) and create a positive atmosphere around phenomenological anthropology. At the same time, they challenge my argumentation – and sometimes the paradigm at large – and I am grateful for the opportunity to reply. To organize my text, I formulate several questions that demand a response, as Waldenfels would say. Unsurprisingly, this selection is biased and reflects my subjective experience of reading its rich feedback. It centres around experience and concepts and the relationship between the two, which I not only find in many of the comments but also anticipate being a salient and important challenge of future phenomenological anthropology.

The first question is, *what is experience, after all*? Robert Desjarlais makes the valuable intervention that my text, and maybe phenomenological anthropology more generally, does not engage thoroughly enough with the question it posits to be at the core. In so doing, he also reminds us of his seminal work in which he outlines the ambiguity of the concept and the difficulties in translating *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* into the English experience (Desjarlais 1994, 1997). Desjarlais showed some years ago in his ethnography of homeless people that, despite the many conceptions of experience in the philosophical literature, none describe how people feel living their lives. Furthermore, the literature's preoccupation with 'reflexive depth, temporal integration, and a cumulative transcendence' might – at least for some people – be much more a relic of the past than it is felt to be now (Desjarlais 1994:898). Instead Desjarlais proposed taking the concepts of our interlocutors seriously, for example, concepts such as 'struggling along'. He encouraged us to acknowledge the disrupted condition of experience, which he also highlights in his reply and in his more recent work, an experience that has become so commonplace three decades later that he suggests capturing it through a 'post-phenomenology' in his inspiring comment.

In the Namibian context where I work, the Khoekhoegowab word that comes closest to experience is *hō!â*. It is a compound of *hō*, to find, and *!â*, the front of the body. Literally it translates as 'finding something in front of one(self)'. Experiencing thus means encountering something or running into something. A phenomenon becomes something by *being-in-the-way*, to paraphrase Heidegger. This resonates well with what I have called responsive-ness phenomenology, the attempt to theorize meaning-making as something that starts elsewhere. My reference to the Namibian *hō!â* and Desjarlais' much more sophisticated analysis of 'struggling along' show how useful it is to analyse our interlocutors' understandings of what it means to them to be in the world.

Where can this lead? In my view, anthropology should oscillate between relativistic and comparative/universal poles (Schnegg 2014). Phenomenology has the potential to facilitate this more than any other paradigm. Comparing and contrasting, however, requires a conceptual language, which phenomenology can provide. For such a project and for a collaboration between anthropology and phenomenology as a philosophical discipline, I therefore propose that we begin exploring a question like *what it means to experience* with philosophically validated concepts (Schnegg 2022). The ethnographic cases and the understandings of experiences they provide – such as 'struggling along' or '*hō!â*' – would be used to broaden, destabilize, and develop them further (Bubandt and Wentzer 2022; Desjarlais 1997; Mattingly 2019). In addition to ethnographic observations, exploring similarities and differences between phenomenology and theories that emerged outside the Western philosophical context provides equally important possibilities to decentre theoretical development. Varela et al. (2016), for example, have shown that phenomenology and the Indian Buddhist Abhidharma school have many parallels and can be integrated (Varela et al. 2016). While they point to similarities, difference can be equally stimulating for developing a more comprehensive account (Aulino 2019).

Comparing and contrasting schools of thought in this way would further concepts to capture adequately the complexity and friction of experiences that characterize most moments in today's world, which Desjarlais works out convincingly in his reply, his theorizing and his ethnography. At the same time – and I will say more about this below – I read Desjarlais's comments as also supporting the notion that there is always an excess of experience over concepts requiring us to acknowledge that some things will and must remain unsaid.

In important ways, Olaf Zenker also engages with the question of what experience is, distinguishing between its empirical and transcendental dimensions. He differentiates between a 'weak phenomenology', as in the application of phenomenological concepts to ethnographic cases, and a 'strong' transcendental phenomenological anthropology, which is in search of a meta-theory for the relationship between the knower and the known and the possibilities of knowing. In his view, the weak rendering I propose does not add significantly to what is already in use. While I agree to some extent, his observation is true for some concepts more than for others, including, for example, describing emotions as atmospheres. But even for the concepts that have been

in use for a long time – embodiment is a prime example – some recent developments have not been explored and critically reflected upon anthropologically. These include, for example, 4E-cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive and extended cognition), which stresses that external objects and practices are sometimes not only *supportive* but *constitutive* of cognition and knowing (Colombetti 2014; Newen et al. 2018; Noë 2012; Rowlands 2010). 4E-cognition shows how some concepts continue to develop significantly outside anthropology (e.g., in psychology and philosophy). I therefore suggest that we keep up with these developments to avoid sticking to Schütz's reading of Husserl or Bourdieu's engagement with Heidegger and the way they entered social theory long ago.

Whereas I defend my project in this regard, I see the merits of developing a more philosophically sound phenomenological anthropology, eloquently proposed by Zenker. Such a transcendental theory would allow us to describe *how* and *what* we as anthropologists (along with all other human beings) can know and would be an enormously valuable contribution to many debates. It remains a challenge to work out in detail how this project would be carried out methodologically, whether and how it would include empirical evidence, and how its results might inform how we do and write ethnography.

These critical engagements with experience bring me to the challenging question Markus Verne asks: *How are concepts and experience related*? In my reading, this is one of the most interesting questions in terms of not only linguistic concepts but also values and norms – all representation if you will. Verne rightly remarks that my text is inconsistent in this regard. Given this messiness, which he finds not only with me, Verne proposes separating conceptual knowledge and experience more radically. To do so, he suggests aesthetic theories that treat experience in its own right as a theoretical guide (Schlitte et al. 2021; Verne 2015). I find this a very intriguing proposal and would like to take it up.

According to some aesthetic theorists, including prominently Theodor Adorno, experience and conceptual knowledge have different ontological statuses and are incommensurable, implying that one cannot be translated into the other.[1] In this view, experience can inform concepts but will never be completely absorbed in them. As I will argue, there is always an *excess of experience* over concepts. Adorno explains this by using the example of art experience when he writes,

> Artworks speak like elves in fairy tales: 'If you want the absolute, you shall have it, but you will not recognize it when you see it.' The truth of discursive knowledge is unshrouded, and thus discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art. (Adorno 1997:126)

1 I am grateful to Markus Verne for our communication on this topic and for pointing me to the relevance of Adorno and this part of his work.

With this, Adorno makes several important points. For one, there are two different ways of knowing, one being discursive (rational) and the other lying in our sensory experiences of artworks (and one can extend this to other experiences, like walking through a forest, being in pain, etc.). Adorno has a clear understanding that knowledge that is rooted in sensory experiences is superior and ultimately the only knowledge that ever comes close to 'reality,' a transcendental truth he calls 'unshrouded' (*das Unbedingte*). At the same time, this 'truth' is more than what even art can capture, which is why the two (truth and art) are 'incommensurable'. With this, Adorno establishes both a dichotomy and a hierarchy. In his philosophy of music, Adorno develops this thesis when he argues that Schoenberg's music was able to perceive political threats like the rise of German fascism as 'truth', while language could neither grasp nor adequately convey this (Adorno 1949).

At the same time, some phenomenologists, including Husserl and Ricœur, would add that the same is true the other way around (Husserl 1999; Ricoeur 1991). Concepts that are shared by a social group as abstractions or narrations of experiences contain an excess over experience. Consider being drunk. It is certainly true that the concept and narrations only partly capture how it feels. At the same time, even as a child or as someone who was never drunk, the concept allows one to imagine and 'experience' things one never felt bodily. Or consider the idea of 'God' and what many religious traditions associate with it. The concept also contains aspects that elude experience. Both examples indicate that *while there is an excess of experience over concepts, there is also an excess of concepts over experience*!

I see the elegance of an aesthetic approach that separates experience and discursive knowledge (e.g., concepts), thus radically allowing us to focus on experiences as knowledge of its own kind. Most likely, and this is also an empirical question, it depends on the kind of experience. Therefore music and art – the focus of Adorno's work – might be especially difficult to capture conceptually. Another advantage of reaching out to aesthetics is that it opens up the possibility of including aesthetic theories from other world regions, including, for example, *rasa theory* from India and the Chinese notion of *ganying* (Iskra 2023; Menon 2017).

While I find that the approach allows us to see the properties of experience clearly, in my view it should not distract us from studying how experience shapes concepts and vice versa (even if they are different ontologically). Today, some years after Adorno's stimulating and then radical claim, this is increasingly acknowledged in aesthetic theory (Hamburger 1979). To explore the relationship between concepts and experience, the work of Hubert Dreyfus might be a productive entry point (Dreyfus 2007). To visualize the relationship, Dreyfus introduces the metaphor of an edifice with more than one floor. Experience is on the ground, concepts (and language) on the upper floors. To build on this, Shaun Gallagher proposes applying the 4E-model of cognition to it, which I agree could be constructive material from which to build a stairway between the floors (Gallagher 2017:197). In my view, this image could become a productive framework, even though it does not yet solve the problem empirically and methodolog-

ically. While the floors constitute their own 'worlds', there is a stairway between them. But not everything will pass, neither up nor down the stairs. There is always an excess!

I take an initial step to explore the relationship between experience and concepts when trying to explain why Khoekhoegowab-speaking people distinguish eleven different types of rain. To do so, I mobilize Husserl's analysis of the subjective experience of time (i.e., his notions of protention and retention) and argue that past moments and future expectations fade in the experience of any particular 'now', leading to a myriad overlaps of experiences that constitute the experience of a particular kind of rain (Schnegg 2021). The analysis also shows that we still have much to learn to fully understand how concepts emerge from particular aspects of experience, practices and communication (especially socialization) and how they change if experiences and concepts do not match. Exploring the relationship between experience and concepts more thoroughly requires a sophisticated methodology, as both von Poser and Leitenberg argue convincingly when they pose the following question:

How can we study experience ethnographically? Furthermore, when might it be better to abstain from ethnographic inquiry? In her thoughtful comment, Anita von Poser points out that the study of experience needs more sensitivity than I have indicated in my text. Importantly, she notes that we should listen carefully when our interlocutors answer comparatively broadly, for example, when Mrs N replied to von Poser routinely, 'I am still alive'. Or, to quote a common response from Khoekhoegowab-speaking interlocutors, '*Hâs lguisa ta ĩ*' (I am just there). While the (impatient) phenomenologist in us might be inclined to explore in detail what experience this entails, von Poser points very carefully to the potential consequences of such questioning, which we cannot always foresee. We may, for example, re-traumatize our interlocutors, at least with some experiences. Sometimes we need to be silent, she says. Instead of probing in the interviews, she shows how going along with people and lives might allow us to understand the weight and meaning of an experience that is communicated when someone says routinely that she is still alive.

We should also take the answer at face value. Following what I said above, the answer is a concept that resides in the upper floor and is most likely grounded by some more durable and culturally shared experience of the group. That means it is not only a window to the personal experience of our interlocutors but also a reflection of a more general understanding of *being-in-the-world*. In the Namibian case I explore, it reflects an atmosphere of loneliness and boredom that characterizes rural livelihoods in postcolonial Namibia (Schnegg forthcoming) and that emerged in the context of migratory patterns: it is said by those who stay behind (and do not migrate). Maybe it is also a form of critique. 'I am just there' indicates a feeling of pointlessness, an accusation against those who disrupted the connection with a meaningful life in a world where most promises are eventually blocked.

Danaé Leitenberg reflects equally eloquently on the limits of the methodological approach when she describes how phenomenology reached its limits for her when she interviewed the elite in an Austrian village. She knew that many of these interlocutors

were more responsible for suffering than suffering themselves. Geertz asked famously, 'What happens to *verstehen* when *einfühlen* disappears?' (Geertz 1974:28). Of course, he was talking about Malinowski and had something different in mind. But the issues seem comparable. If as researchers we do not want to be empathetic and maybe even cannot be, how far can the phenomenological approach take us? To address this question and to further a critical phenomenology, Leitenberg suggests that we might need different methodological approaches. I find this suggestion to have an enormously important appeal, especially since discussions on methodologies are not very advanced, transparent, or common in phenomenological anthropology. There is, for example, not a single overview. One way to study elites phenomenologically might be to include an analysis of social media profiles. In addition to developing novel approaches to access the first-person perspective of elite interlocutors, we should also focus on their 'ways of seeing' and thus the concepts they coin. Even if we cannot access the first-person experiences of elites in the Alps or, even more unlikely, the global capitalist elite, we are all confronted with the structures and categories they make and maintain. This brings me to another point I read in Csordas' stimulating *réplique*.

What is the use of including a third-person perspective? In his profound and thoughtful response, Thomas Csordas challenges my proposal of entangling first- and third-person perspectives for developing a critical phenomenology. He proposes instead grounding a critical perspective in cultural phenomenology where the taken for granted is bracketed and becomes the focus of the analysis, allowing us to address it critically. While I agree that this is *one* productive approach, I do not see why it excludes other ways in which phenomenology can become critical. These other ways involve, among others, reflecting on our own investigations critically as Husserl has shown so eloquently, and critically following the positive and negative traces that experiences leave in our bodies and in our consciousness to reflect the processes that leave them.

In my text, I argue that material, social and economic structures (including coloniality and its remains) challenge, confront and objectify the first-person perspective contributing to these traces. Csordas makes a convincing argument when questioning this dichotomy between objectifying and objectified, arguing that these structures are also legacies of lived experiences. This is certainly true. The challenge becomes theorizing how the two are intertwined, and this involves the more general problem or decision of whether one conceptualizes structural factors as 'external' and thus as shaping the subjective experience (my attempt in the text), or as 'internal' and thus part of the experiences themselves.

Reflecting upon Csordas' reply, I find that my theorization of this relationship was oversimplified and that a more complex view is needed. This problem about the relationship between material, social and economic structures is comparable to the relationship between concepts and experience – as simultaneously structuring and structured, which I have referred to before. I would propose that, besides the six different phenomenologies, a 4E-approach to cognition that explicitly takes materialities and

social groups into account could be promising for capturing these entanglements adequately (Gallagher 2017).

Whereas the roles of these material, social and economic structures remain ambivalent, the attempt to understand experience from the first-person perspective needs, in my view, to acknowledge that those perspectives are confronted with value-laden objectifications by others who influence what we can become. Those perspectives and the categorizations they entail come from someone and are experienced as alien (*fremd*). They can restrict becoming, while also occasionally empowering it too.

This brings me to a question Jarrett Zigon poses so powerfully: *Do we need to overcome the first-person perspective*? Zigon argues convincingly that the focus on the first-person perspective might be too narrow. He calls for a shift to relationality and what he calls a 'dative phenomenology', a perspective on 'us'. With this, he formulates an eloquent reply to two common critiques of phenomenological anthropology, namely, that it focuses on idiosyncratic experiences, and that it is unpolitical. The approach Zigon advances overcomes the Husserlian subject as an active and intentional agent and places more emphasis on the affecting relations in which it is embedded and that shape what it can become. While Zigon acknowledges that this pathic relationality is to some extent realized in the responsive-ness phenomenology, he also finds that these authors still focus too much on the individual subject and the way she is affected, individually.

In his outline of a 'dative phenomenology', Zigon goes far beyond existing attempts when he focuses on the forces that intertwine many human and non-human 'Is', often in loose, ephemeral meshworks. With this focus on relations, he opens up a path for phenomenological anthropology to analyse power and the structures that shape these interconnecting forces. In the framework I often use in my text, this might imply asking what power relations make some gazes exclusionary and hurtful and how they can be overcome. The focus on relationalities brings phenomenology into closer communication with some of Spinoza's work, which is today rendered in affect theories. Spinoza argues in favour of a relational ontology in which entities affect each other and borrow power from one another, leading to situations in which some entities have more power than others. Importantly, affect for Spinoza also includes the ideas and concepts of affection (Curley and Spinoza 2020: 154).

I agree with Zigon's suggestion to focus the analysis on the relationships that link us. Experience starts somewhere else, Waldenfels says. However, I think that Zigon would largely agree that there are good reasons to keep an interest in human subjects and their becoming and to avoid slipping into a flat ontology (Latour) that treats all entities as similar or the same. Thus, while I fully support considering the myriad forces, networks and atmospheres that shape becoming, I find that the subject and its well-being, vitality, agency and so on are what we – as anthropologists – can most adequately describe ethnographically. These descriptions also open up ways to imagine a possibly otherwise in which these forces become less restricting, more empowering, and eventually lead to a better life for the subject. While it is ethically desirable to study non-human subjectivities in similar ways, there are some challenges in doing so

(Schnegg and Breyer 2022). These subjectivities tend to be even more opaque, making it much more difficult to tell, for example, whether my non-human companion experiences an act or an atmosphere as exclusionary, empowering, or entirely different.

Other relations between bodies, however, including labour, sex and gifts, create ties that are often more lasting. Patrick Neveling has such manifest ties in mind when he explores *how power shapes those relationships in a lasting way*. Arguing from a Marxist perspective, he shows a very promising way to integrate phenomenology and political economy. This must include the analysis of phenomenological thinking and thinkers, including how and why some of them were aligned with and supported fascist theories. However, it must also include ways of tracing power in experience itself. Drawing on Wolf, Neveling eloquently suggests that power operates on different scales, including the intersubjective, interpersonal, organizational and structural. Based on this, Neveling shows how an analysis of power might be entangled with a theory of experience that acknowledges its situationality. In this view, forces that operate on different scales shape the situation in which we find ourselves, and thus the experience.

Returning to the question of experience and concepts, we might now ask how categories change and how exclusionary categorizations are overcome. A combination of political economy and phenomenology might allow us to understand the conditions under which people turn their experiences into resistance and when they may be successful in doing so. In my view, Neveling's ideas open another promising track for understanding exactly this.

In brief, the eight comments confirmed to me how important it is to search for an '*experience-based* theory that can explain how such categories emerge (and change)' and to suggest that phenomenological anthropology is in a privileged position to contribute to this. However, they have also shown me that my attempt in this direction was too narrow and that I need to consider aspects I did not see or was unaware of. Thinking about the relationship between concepts and experience as two floors has been productive for me – floors between which a stairway exists. While not everything on the ground floor of experience can or will pass, concepts allow access to realms we do not experience or that elude experience. There is an excess of both experience over words and words over experience. To fully understand this remains a major challenge for the discipline. I do not see any approach more suitable for doing this than phenomenological anthropology.

It has been said that there are as many phenomenologies as phenomenologists. As I have tried to show, there might be fewer – but still more than six, as the comments have shown. The commentators named some of them, including 'imagine-ness phenomenology' (Desjarlais), 'dative phenomenology' (Zigon) and 'post-phenomenology' (Desjarlais). To stay with the metaphor I have borrowed, these are rooms on the upper floor, concepts that evolved from the experience of thinking, communicating and ethnography. For others, although proposed equally eloquently, we might still need names. I look forward to seeing them emerge from the experiences we have with each other, existing theoretical concepts, our interlocutors and their worlds.

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