

Nordic perspectives on phenomenology: an introduction

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During the past few decades, research on and work in phenomenology has increased remarkably in the Nordic countries. One concrete manifestation of (and perhaps also a partial reason for) this development is the *Nordic Society for Phenomenology* (NoSP), which was established in 2001 in order to promote dialogue and cooperation between phenomenologists in the Nordic countries. This forum has been highly successful and has attracted a lot of attention. Membership statistics speak for themselves: in 2004, the *Society* had about 100 members, by 2008, the amount of members had tripled and, today, the Society already has more than 800 members. In light of these numbers, it hardly comes as a surprise that NoSP has also attracted a lot of attention outside the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). The number of submissions for the annual meetings of the Society indeed makes it evident that the Nordic countries constitute and comprise an important focal point in contemporary phenomenological research.

Does phenomenology from the Nordic countries amount to a distinct Nordic perspective on this branch of philosophy? Although the Nordic countries do share a set of ethnic, religious, and historical characteristics, and although there is something like a recognizable cultural unity in the Nordic region, there is no clearly identifiable Nordic approach to phenomenology. Nevertheless, when taking a bird's eye perspective on the way phenomenology has developed in the region, one noteworthy feature is the extent to which phenomenologists have engaged and cooperated with other traditions, schools of thought, and scientific disciplines. Ties have been made with analytic philosophy, critical theory, pragmatism, and

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Wittgenstenian thought. Researchers of Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern philosophy have been interested in the analyses of Husserl, Heidegger, Stein, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt, and collaboration with these scholars has likewise influenced the style and focus of phenomenological research. Many classical topics in phenomenology, such as our experience of others and the embodiment of subjectivity, have also been discussed and explored in light of feminist theory. Links have also been established with many empirical sciences, including cognitive science, social psychology, developmental psychology, nursing and psychiatry. The relationship is very much reciprocal, as phenomenology is also increasingly represented in the mentioned disciplines, and has found additional application in the fields of aesthetics, architecture, mathematics, theology, and political science.¹

The abundance of focal topics and approaches among phenomenologists in the Nordic countries is also reflected in the contents of the current special issue. The collection includes contributions from many academic levels: there are both articles from some of the most established scholars as well as contributions from some of the most prominent younger researchers in the Nordic countries. Together, the articles somewhat resemble the annual NoSP meetings, in the sense that they comprise something like an exemplary overview of phenomenological research done in the Nordic countries. And, even if in this sense the articles embody “Nordic perspectives on phenomenology,” it goes without saying that the collection is not meant to be exhaustive: many authors and alternative lines of phenomenological research could have been introduced in addition to the ones presented here. It should also be noted that the articles have been written as individual contributions, and should be assessed as such. A few words on each contribution are in order.

In his article, “The Phenomenology of Chronic Pain: Embodiment and Alienation,” Fredrik Svenaeus (Södertörn University, Sweden) develops an analysis according to which chronic pain is essentially a feeling in which we become alienated from the workings of our own bodies. This bodily-based, alienating mood penetrates the whole world of the chronic pain sufferer, making her entire life unhomelike and lonesome in various ways. The phenomenological analysis of chronic pain in the article proceeds from concepts and arguments found in Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Heidegger, and it also makes use of examples from the Swedish author Lars Gustafsson’s novel *The Death of a Beekeeper*.

Several commentators have argued that, with his concept of anonymity, Merleau-Ponty breaks away from classical Husserlian phenomenology that is methodologically tied to the first person perspective. In her article, “Anonymity and Personhood: Merleau-Ponty’s Account of the Subject of Perception,” Sara Heinämaa (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on anonymity remains Husserlian in two important senses: it analyses senses in terms of constituting selves and communities of such selves, and it accounts for the formation of experience by the temporal sedimentation of intentional activity. Heinämaa argues against the widespread notion that Merleau-Ponty’s anonymous subject is a collective one, and

¹ For a more extensive exploration of this, see Heinämaa, S., Ruin, H., Zahavi, D. (2003). “Phenomenology in the Nordic Countries: An Introduction.” In D. Zahavi, S. Heinämaa, H. Ruin (eds.): *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation: Phenomenology in the Nordic Countries* (ix–xiv). Springer: Dordrecht.

offers an alternative reading by demonstrating that Merleau-Ponty uses the term “anonymous” primarily to characterize the lived body of a personal subject. She clarifies that, for Merleau-Ponty, both the perceived thing and the perceiving body are traces in the sense that they refer to earlier constitutive acts of alien subjects, arguing that Husserl’s concept of sedimentation is crucial for understanding this idea. Finally, Heinämaa shows how Husserl’s theory of de-presentation informs Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on anonymity.

In recent years, the social dimensions of selfhood have been widely discussed. Can you be a self on your own or only together with others? Is selfhood a built-in feature of experience or rather socially constructed? 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? Dan Zahavi’s (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) contribution, “Self and Other: From Pure Ego to Co-constituted We,” explores these questions and presents some of the core ideas from his recent book, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford University Press 2014).

Joona Taipale’s (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) article, “Beyond Cartesianism: Body-perception and the Immediacy of Empathy,” illustrates how the phenomenological tradition takes a critical distance from the assumption that our awareness of other people is bound to be *mediated* by the perception of their body. Taipale challenges this so-called Cartesian prejudice, which sharply distinguishes between the experiential life of others and their perceivable body. He examines the Husserlian concept of expressivity, criticizes certain recent contributions to research on empathy and social cognition, and argues for the immediate nature of other-awareness. As such, the article continues Taipale’s investigations on embodiment, represented in his recent book, *Phenomenology and Embodiment. Husserl and the Constitution of Subjectivity* (Northwestern University Press 2014).

Søren Overgaard’s (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) contribution, “How to Do Things with Brackets: The Epoché Explained,” focuses on the important methodological notion of epoché. Many interpreters think the point of the epoché is to purify our ordinary experience of certain assumptions inherent in it. Overgaard calls such interpretations ‘purification interpretations’, and he argues that they entirely miss the point of the epoché. According to Overgaard, ordinary experience requires no correcting or purifying; indeed, to change ordinary experience in any way would seem contrary to the fundamentally descriptive thrust of phenomenology. Overgaard suggests that the key to a correct understanding of the epoché lies in the reflective nature of phenomenology. Doing phenomenology involves occupying two distinct roles, which come with different responsibilities. Overgaard argues that, while we must, in our capacity as reflecting phenomenologists, deactivate all our beliefs about the world, we only do so in order to be able to describe the experiences we have as experiencing subjects, including all those beliefs about the world that may be part and parcel of those experiences.

The topic of memory occupies an ambiguous position in hermeneutic and phenomenological thinking, as both central and marginalized. The upsurge of memory studies has highlighted the need to understand this situation better. Hans Ruin’s (Södertörn University, Sweden) article, “Anamnestic Subjectivity: New

Steps toward a Hermeneutics of Memory,” describes how and why the question of what memory is can provide unique access to the temporality and historicity of human existence, while also blocking precisely these most fundamental levels. It argues for a deeper mutual theoretical engagement between phenomenological-hermeneutical thinking and contemporary cultural memory studies on the basis of memory, understood as finite and ec-static temporality and as the enigma of anamnetic subjectivity.

In her paper, “Towards Fundamental Ontology—Heidegger’s Phenomenological Reading of Kant,” Camilla Serck-Hanssen (University of Oslo, Norway) defends Heidegger’s claim that the main aim of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV) is to answer the question of being. She argues that one of the virtues of Heidegger’s reading is that it firmly places the KrV where it belongs, namely at the level of meta-metaphysics. She also shows how Heidegger’s phenomenological understanding of Kant’s method in the KrV solves several persistent problems in Kant-scholarship, arguing that this proves that Heidegger’s reading ought to be taken more seriously than it commonly is.

Timo Miettinen’s (University of Helsinki, Finland) article, “Phenomenology and Political Idealism,” considers the possibility of articulating a renewed understanding of political idealism on the basis of Husserlian phenomenology. By taking its point of departure in the ordoliberal tradition of the so-called Freiburg School of Economics, the article raises the question of the normative implications of Husserl’s eidetic method. Against the “static” idealism of the ordoliberal tradition, the article proposes that the phenomenological concept of political idealism ought to be understood as a fundamentally dynamic principle. Against the classical understanding of political idealism as the implementation of a particular normative model—political utopianism—the phenomenological reformulation of this idea denotes a radically critical principle of self-reflection that calls for perpetual renewal.

In his contribution, “From Différance to Justice. Derrida and Heidegger’s ‘Anaximander’s Saying’,” Björn Thorsteinsson (University of Iceland) sets out to explore the relation of French post-structuralist thinker, Jacques Derrida, to Martin Heidegger’s thinking. More specifically, Thorsteinsson follows textual indications, left by Derrida himself, to trace the latter’s indebtedness to ideas developed in Heidegger’s essay on the pre-Socratic thinker, Anaximander, that revolve around a specific conception of being as the intertwining of presencing and absencing, or of coming forth (into unconcealment) and withdrawing (into concealment). This conception of being is then related, through notions derived from Anaximander by Heidegger, to Derrida’s key concepts of *différance* and justice, which, concurrently, are shown to be interrelated.