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The subject matter of phenomenological research:

Existentials, modes, and prejudices

Abstract: In this essay I address the question, “What is the subject matter of phenomenological research?” I argue that in spite of the increasing popularity of phenomenology, the answers to this question have been brief and cursory. As a result, contemporary phenomenologists lack a clear framework within which to articulate the aims and results of their research, and cannot easily engage each other in constructive and critical discourse. Examining the literature on phenomenology’s identity, I show how the question of phenomenology’s subject matter has been systematically neglected. It has been overshadowed by an unending concern with phenomenology’s methodological identity. However, an examination of recent contributions to this literature reveals that a concern with articulating phenomenology’s subject matter has gradually increased, although such articulations remain preliminary. In light of this, I delineate, define, and illustrate three layers of phenomenological research, which I term “existentials,” “modes,” and “prejudices.” While the delineation of these layers is drawn primarily from classical phenomenological texts, they are defined and illustrated through the use of more contemporary literature. Following the articulation of this subject matter, I briefly consider some of the debates—both foundational and applied—that can be facilitated by the adoption of this framework.

1 Introduction

What do phenomenologists study? Put another way, what is the subject matter of phenomenological research? Surprisingly, such a question is hardly asked in the contemporary literature. This does not mean that the nature of phenomenology's subject matter is never addressed. My point is—to put it phenomenologically—that subject matter is rarely thematized; it is rarely made the primary object of investigation. It is typically treated as a secondary issue deserving of only cursory treatment, overshadowed by more important issues at the heart of phenomenology.

Before addressing what these other issues are, and why they are seen as more deserving of our consideration, I should clarify what I have in mind when I speak of subject matter, as this term is open to a variety of interpretations. I am not concerned with outlining the distinct subject matter of various phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl's transcendental ego, Martin Heidegger's being-in-the-world, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied subjectivity. I am also not interested in offering examples of phenomenological subject matter, whether this is interpreted along the lines of the transcendental structures—such as intentionality, intersubjectivity, or temporality—or along the lines of particular aspects of human existence—such as race, gender, or psychopathology.

In addition, I do not aim to repeat the often vague and overgeneralized claims in many introductory texts. In such texts we are typically told that phenomenologists study consciousness, subjectivity, experience, meaning, sense, and so on. While all of these claims are correct, they are not particularly useful to the phenomenological researcher, or aspiring researcher. As I see it, telling an aspiring phenomenologist that her subject matter is experience, meaning, or (the tautological) phenomena, is equivalent to telling an aspiring physicist that her subject matter is

nature, motion, or the physical universe. None of these answers is incorrect. Yet they fail to instill the researcher with a clear picture of what, exactly, she will be researching.

In contrast with these approaches, I delineate, define, and illustrate three distinct layers of phenomenological research, which I refer to as “existentials,” “modes,” and “prejudices.”¹ While my account is descriptive of much of the phenomenological literature, my primary aim is prescriptive. Insofar as phenomenologists are concerned with continuing productive discourse and debate, they ought to rely on a shared account of subject matter. What I provide is a framework and set of terminology that, if followed, will allow phenomenologists working across diverse areas to articulate the matter of their studies in a clear and consistent manner. These diverse areas might include the study of race (Alcoff 2006; Lee 2014), gender (Oksala 2016; Young 2005), sexual orientation (Ahmed 2006), somatic illness (Aho and Aho 2009; Carel 2014), disability (Wieseler 2012), psychopathology (Ratcliffe 2015; Stanghellini and Rosfort 2014), religious experience (Henry 2002; Marion 2012; Steinbock 2007), and even the human relationship with the natural world (Brown and Toadvine 2003; James 2009).

This account offers a clear picture of phenomenology’s subject matter that can be presented to researchers in other disciplines—both philosophical and scientific—who are interested in collaborative or critical engagements with phenomenologists. Perhaps even more importantly, this framework should facilitate and encourage internal debate within phenomenology itself—both foundational and applied. While increasing internal debate may seem counterproductive, a close examination of the contemporary literature reveals that most of

¹ These terms are translated from the German: “existential” [*Existenzial*], “existentials” [*Existenzialien*], “mode” [*Modus*], “modes” [*Modi*], “prejudice” [*Vorurteil*], and “prejudices” [*Vorurteile*].

² In one text, Zahavi says that the future prospects of phenomenology will depend upon the phenomenologist’s “ability to articulate and strengthen what is common to the phenomenological

the constructive discourse in phenomenology—both critical and complementary—occurs between phenomenologists and their predecessors or between phenomenologists and figures from other contemporary disciplines.² There is comparatively little engagement among contemporary phenomenologists themselves, with most references to contemporaries amounting to little more than a nod of recognition in the course of advancing one’s own project.

While I cannot establish a definitive cause for this state of affairs, it seems to be more straightforward and more rewarding to engage with one’s phenomenological predecessors or with researchers in other disciplines than with one’s contemporaries. The former because one engages with the very texts from which one’s own framework and vocabulary have been taken up. The latter because the frameworks and vocabularies of other disciplines are often more structured and clearly articulated than those of contemporary phenomenology. The reason that contemporary phenomenologists are not engaging in the constructive dialogue necessary to drive a research program forward (rather than off in a variety of self-insulating directions) is that there is no shared subject matter—or, more accurately, no shared articulation of subject matter—within which such dialogue can take place. Often, too much risks being lost in translation for the engagement to be worthwhile.

While readers may find this claim suspect, I ask only that they reserve judgment until they have considered the account that I offer below. If it illuminates the subject matter of

² In one text, Zahavi says that the future prospects of phenomenology will depend upon the phenomenologist’s “ability to articulate and strengthen what is common to the phenomenological enterprise instead of getting involved in the sectarian trench warfare that has regrettably plagued the history of phenomenology” (Zahavi 2008, p. 684). I want to stress that when I speak of facilitating and increasing debate within phenomenology, I do not have in mind the kind of “trench warfare” that Zahavi remarks on here—insofar as this analogy brings to mind a debate in which everyone’s positions have been staked out in advance. Rather, my primary concern in this essay is to offer a shared framework that supports constructive debate, driving the discipline forward as a whole.

phenomenological research to an extent that has not been achieved in previous work, then perhaps my diagnosis of the field is accurate, and this further clarification of subject matter will support an already burgeoning (if disjointed and often sectarian) field of research.

I develop this project in three parts. First, I address the neglect of subject matter in contemporary phenomenological literature, focusing on the overriding concern with phenomenology's methodological identity. Second, I delineate, define, and illustrate the three layers of phenomenological research, which I refer to as "existentials," "modes," and "prejudices." While I distinguish these layers by drawing on classical phenomenological texts, I further define and illustrate them by drawing on more contemporary literature. Third, I briefly sketch some of the phenomenological debates—both foundational and applied—that will be facilitated and supported by the account of subject matter I offer here, focusing especially on how this account offers a neutral standpoint from which to engage in these debates.

2 Phenomenology's methodological identity

Why is the subject matter of phenomenology neglected? And what are the issues that are considered more deserving of philosophical treatment and clarification? In order to answer these questions, we need to look to the literature in which we would expect the nature of phenomenology's subject matter to be addressed. There is one question that should be impossible to answer adequately without a careful and systematic account of subject matter: "What is phenomenology?" However, the question of phenomenology's subject matter has been systematically neglected in the literature on phenomenology's identity.

This systematic neglect is by no means new, being exemplified in works as early as Herbert Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement* (Spiegelberg 1981; first edition published in 1960). However, while subject matter maintains its secondary status even today, the

tides seem to be shifting. Concern with explicating subject matter has made its way into the literature on phenomenology's identity, even if this concern has not been made explicit.

Considering a number of texts that have made substantial contributions to the understanding of phenomenology's identity, I here illustrate the systematic neglect of, and gradual increase in concern for, phenomenology's subject matter.

Spiegelberg, in *The Phenomenological Movement* (the book that perhaps did more than any other to introduce the English-speaking world to phenomenology), twice confronts the question, "What is phenomenology?" In the first instance he answers negatively, saying, "The question is more than legitimate. But it cannot be answered, since, for better or worse, the underlying assumption of a unified philosophy subscribed to by all so-called phenomenologists is an illusion" (Spiegelberg 1981, p. xxvii). However, in contrast to this opening stance in the preface, Spiegelberg himself offers a unified vision of phenomenology at the end of his book. Following his nearly 700-page history of the phenomenological movement, he closes with a detailed but succinct section entitled "The Essentials of the Phenomenological Method." Here he returns to the question dismissed in the preface: "What is phenomenology?" After reminding his reader of phenomenology's diverse manifestations, he says,

...this situation offers no excuse for dodging the persistent question of the more systematically-minded reader: What, after all, is phenomenology? While our long story contains plenty of reasons why a meaningful answer cannot be given in one brief sentence, it calls all the more for a determined effort to satisfy a legitimate and even welcome demand for enlightenment and clarification. Even if there were as many phenomenologies as phenomenologists, there should be at least a common core in all of them to justify the use of the common label. (Spiegelberg 1981, p. 677)

Considering (and dismissing) the possibility of finding this "common core" in the results of phenomenological studies, Spiegelberg turns to the phenomenologist's method. He argues that if a common core is to be found anywhere, it will be in the essentials of the method that run like a

thread through the history of the movement.

This stance—that phenomenology either lacks an identity or has a primarily methodological identity—has been repeated through decades of scholarship. When questions of subject matter are asked in the literature on phenomenology’s identity, they are almost always given a secondary role. An example of this continued approach is found in Steven Crowell’s article, “Is there a phenomenological research program?” (Crowell 2002). While Crowell’s primary goal is to show that phenomenology meets the criteria for standing as a legitimate philosophical research program, a large part of his discussion is aimed at establishing the identity of phenomenology—or, rather, establishing the claim that phenomenology does, in fact, have a distinct identity. Drawing on Robert D’Amico’s book, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (D’Amico 1999), Crowell sets out three criteria that must be met for phenomenology to count as a philosophical research program (or what D’Amico refers to as a philosophical tradition). These criteria are as follows: (1) The program requires constraints whereby others can arrive at the same conclusions “from either defended or broadly uncontroversial assumptions”; (2) the program “requires an open horizon of issues, problems, and possible clarifications. It cannot consist of only the ‘founding’ texts”; and (3) it “must also be clear how to go on and do what the ‘founding’ texts did” (D’Amico 1999, p. 252; quoted in Crowell 2002, p. 423).

Of these three criteria, the first and the third are clearly methodological. The second, while perhaps not clearly methodological, is also not directly aimed at the issue of subject matter. A set of problems needs to be situated within a basic framework of subject matter, but the problems themselves do not make up a research program’s subject matter. While Crowell disagrees with D’Amico’s conclusion that phenomenology does not (and perhaps cannot) meet these criteria, he seems content to take up primarily methodological criteria as those that must be

met for phenomenology to count as a legitimate philosophical research program. This commitment is born out in Crowell's treatment of two introductory texts on phenomenology—by Dermot Moran (2000) and Robert Sokolowski (2000)—in which he focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on their ability to establish certain methodological commitments across a range of phenomenological works.

Sifting through these works, Crowell carefully extracts the authors' criteria for an investigation to count as phenomenological. From Moran's text, he extracts three distinct criteria, all of which are methodological in nature. However, one criterion, referring to phenomenology's orientation toward "essences," grants us the beginnings of an answer to the question of phenomenology's subject matter. From Sokolowski's text, he extracts six criteria, all of them, again, methodological in nature. However, in this case, three of the criteria also address subject matter, at least to some degree. Along with a repetition of the reference to "essences," Sokolowski points to phenomenology's orientation toward human experience and its thematizing of appearances.

In addition to extracting criteria for establishing phenomenology's identity (as well as its status as a research program) from these two texts, Crowell briefly articulates his own criteria, where he sheds a bit more light on phenomenology's subject matter. Speaking of phenomenology and analytic philosophy, he claims that both "are distinguished from transcendental philosophy by a focus on meaning" (Crowell 2002, p. 438). The point at which phenomenology is distinguished from analytic philosophy, then, will be found in the differences between their conceptions of meaning. Drawing on the work of Michael Dummett (1978), Crowell argues that while Frege limited meaning to linguistic meaning, Husserl broadened this notion to all intentional experience (Crowell 2002, p. 438). As he explains, it is this broader

concept of meaning—what Husserl called the noema—that stands as the subject matter of phenomenology. As he says, it is “the structure of noematic meaning that constitutes the reflective topic of the phenomenological research program” (Crowell 2002, p. 440). While this reference to the “structure of noematic meaning” brings us closer to an answer, it remains decidedly preliminary—especially when contrasted with the relatively robust references to various features of phenomenological method. In light of this, we can examine more recent approaches to subject matter in the phenomenological literature.

In their edited volume, *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard echo Spiegelberg’s pessimism when they say, “Phenomenology is not, and never was, a philosophical school, if one understands by that a group of philosophers committed to identical, or very similar, sets of doctrines” (Luft and Overgaard 2011, p. 1). However, they immediately follow this up by echoing Spiegelberg’s optimism, saying, “Yet the importance phenomenology assumes today would be inconceivable if phenomenologists did not share certain methodological commitments as well as closely related ideas about the proper domain of phenomenological research” (Luft and Overgaard 2011, p. 1). While still giving precedence to method, they also point toward a “domain of phenomenological research.”

But what is this domain? Luft and Overgaard claim that there are three “basic ideas or fundamental paradigms” that are shared by the majority of phenomenologists—(1) the first-person perspective, (2) description, and (3) intentionality (Luft and Overgaard 2011, p. 9). They characterize the first two as methodological and the third as doctrinal. However, doctrine or not, intentionality can certainly be addressed as a kind of subject matter. As they characterize it, to say that the structure of intentionality is a fundamental paradigm or basic idea of phenomenology is to say that what phenomenologists study is “consciousness-of,” broadly construed. However,

they also admit that the focus on intentionality faded in the work of later phenomenologists.

Offering a somewhat broader portrayal of phenomenology's subject matter, they say,

Indeed, it may be argued that phenomenology has discovered a novel subject domain with its own structure and governing principles: the realm of consciousness or subjectivity and its world of experience, famously dubbed the lifeworld by Husserl. Despite their many departures from, and criticisms of, Husserlian phenomenology, it is also in the investigation of this domain, broadly construed, that one must locate the efforts of all later phenomenologists. (Luft and Overgaard 2011, p. 2)

Here we make some headway, obtaining a more robust answer to the question of phenomenology's subject matter. Phenomenologists study subjectivity and the lifeworld, focusing especially on the structure of intentionality, or consciousness-of.

Continuing in this vein, we can consider Dan Zahavi's brief introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*. He opens his introduction by saying, "In contrast to such volumes as, say, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* or *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Economics* [...] the contributions in the present handbook are not unified in terms of their subject matter, but in terms of their methodological approach, which is indebted to and affiliated with a specific philosophical tradition" (Zahavi 2012, p. 1). Once again, Spiegelberg's firm commitment to a methodological identity for phenomenology is echoed. However, in spite of Zahavi's explicit reference to methodological continuity and identity, much of his discussion of phenomenology's constitutive elements actually focuses on subject matter. For example, he says, "Phenomenology shares the conviction that the critical stance proper to philosophy necessitates a move away from a straightforward metaphysical or empirical investigation of objects to an investigation of the very framework of meaning and intelligibility that makes any such straightforward investigation possible in the first place" (Zahavi 2012, p. 2). In short, phenomenology should be understood "as the philosophical analysis of the different types of world-disclosure," as well as "a reflective investigation of those

structures of experience and understanding that permit different types of beings to show themselves as what they are” (Zahavi 2012, p. 2).

Here we find not only that phenomenologists study subjectivity, the lifeworld, and the structure of their intentional correlation, but “world-disclosure” in general, including the “structures of experience and understanding” (Zahavi 2012). This is at least the kind of answer one should hope for when asking after the subject matter of phenomenological research, even if the answer remains brief and preliminary. The aim of the following section is precisely to offer a more complete version of this kind of answer. However, before proceeding, we should briefly address one of the few texts that does take phenomenology’s subject matter as its primary theme.

In his chapter, “Making Meaning Thematic,” (Crowell 2013) Crowell picks up on his preliminary account of subject matter discussed above, offering a more complete picture of the primary theme of phenomenological research. Clarifying the aims of his essay, he says,

I shall argue that phenomenology – all phenomenology – is transcendental insofar as it makes meaning thematic as philosophy’s primary field of investigation. Taking as its theme not things but the meaning or intelligibility of things, phenomenology transforms transcendental philosophy by expanding its scope to embrace all experience, not just the cognitive, axiological, and practical “validity spheres” addressed in Kant’s three Critiques. Thus phenomenology accomplishes a universal generalization of the transcendental turn: inquiry into the (normative) conditions for the possibility of knowledge becomes an inquiry into intentionality or “mental content” as such: our experience of something as something. (Crowell 2013, p. 10)

This statement, unpacked and articulated throughout his essay, stands as one of the most direct accounts of phenomenology’s subject matter available today. In light of this, it will be helpful to briefly contrast my own aims with Crowell’s, developing a clearer picture of what I aim to offer the contemporary phenomenologist.

My project should not be seen as contradicting Crowell’s account (or any of the other more preliminary accounts, for that matter). Rather, my project should be seen as complementing

Crowell's approach. Where Crowell focuses on the sense of meaning in phenomenology as compared to other philosophical approaches, I focus on what we mean when we speak of the structure of meaning. In this sense, my account can be characterized as an elaboration and further clarification of Zahavi's references to "different types of world disclosure" and "structures of experience and understanding." As will become clear in the following section, what phenomenologists mean when they speak of "structures of experience" or the "structure of the lived world" is often ambiguous, or not adequately qualified. As a result, such references can be interpreted in various ways, especially when discussing differences or changes in these structures. As I show, much of this ambiguity can be overcome by properly distinguishing three distinct layers of phenomenological research, all of which play a role in the "structure" of meaning and the lived world (at least insofar as we use "structure" in a fairly loose sense).

3 The layers of phenomenological research

I here delineate three layers of phenomenological research, which I refer to as "existentials," "modes," and "prejudices." Each layer plays a role in establishing the structure of meaning, or in disclosing the lived world. However, each does so in a different way and to a different degree. In this sense, each layer consists of a different kind of ordering element or structuring principle that cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of the other layers.

Each of these layers belongs to what I refer to broadly as "human existence." I do not employ this term in opposition to any of the other terms used to refer to the subject matter of phenomenological research, including the "transcendental ego," "embodied subjectivity," or "being-in-the-world." Rather, insofar as my aim is to supply a framework that applies equally to phenomenologists of all persuasions, one of my primary concerns is to use a set of terms that can be employed in a largely neutral manner with respect to certain phenomenological debates. Some

of these debates, as well as how my terminology is meant to avoid or circumvent them, are discussed in the concluding section.

I must also briefly note an absence in my account of the subject matter of phenomenological research. Insofar as I address the phenomenological study of the structure of meaning rather than the meanings or meaningful objects themselves, there are certain aspects that are left out of my account. There is a long tradition in phenomenology of studying not just how the world is disclosed to us, but also the kinds of things that show up to us in this disclosure. Heidegger exemplifies such studies in his famous distinction between the present-at-hand and ready-to-hand (Heidegger 1962, pp. 95–102), as well as in his later studies of the work of art (Heidegger 2008, pp. 139–212). Such studies still hold a place in phenomenological research today—perhaps most clearly in the work of eco-phenomenologists (e.g. Toadvine 2014). However, my account is confined to delineating the layers of phenomenological research as they pertain to the structure of meaning or experience, rather than to the meaningful or experienced objects themselves. While these two kinds of studies are necessarily linked, I consider the articulation of the former to be a more foundational starting point in the project of articulating the subject matter of phenomenological research.³

3.1 Existentials

Existentials make up the first layer of phenomenological research and are understood as the subject matter of phenomenological ontology. While the term “existentials” is a Heideggerian coinage, it is roughly analogous to what other phenomenologists refer to as transcendental, essential, or ontological structures. They are understood as comprising the basic

³ I do not mean this as a methodological priority. There are many examples in the phenomenological canon where the study of particular meaningful objects or events sheds light on the structure whereby such meaningful objects are disclosed.

and constitutive features of human existence. Some of the existentials discussed most often in the classical and contemporary literature include intentionality, intersubjectivity, and temporality.

There are two reasons I employ the term “existentials.” First, it does not include the word “structure,” thereby avoiding potentially problematic terminological confusions stemming from the broad and heterogeneous use of the word in contemporary literature. Second, terms such as “transcendental” and “essential” stake out positions in debates that I here intend to remain neutral on. For example, the question of just how essential to human existence some of these features are remains debatable. My aim is to facilitate such debate rather than engage in it myself.

While there are a variety of ways that we might clarify what existentials are, one of the most straightforward is by making clear what existentials are not. Heidegger says that existentials “are to be sharply distinguished from what we call ‘categories’—characteristics of Being for entities whose character is not that of Dasein. Here we are taking the expression ‘category’ in its primary ontological signification, and abiding by it” (Heidegger 1962, p. 70). Heidegger goes on to discuss the meaning of *κατηγορεῖσθαι* (categories) in ancient philosophy, focusing on the understanding of ontology as the study of the basic categories that determine a thing’s possibilities for being, or what it can be understood as. However, after initially claiming that existentials are not categories and going on to define what is meant by the traditional sense of ontological categories, Heidegger draws an analogy between the two. He says, “existentials and categories are the two basic possibilities for characters of Being. The entities which correspond to them require different kinds of primary interrogation respectively: any entity is either a ‘who’ (existence) or a ‘what’ (presence-at-hand in the broadest sense)” (Heidegger 1962,

p. 71).⁴

What this amounts to is that existentials are categories, although in a special sense that refers specifically to those characteristics that pertain to human existence. In fact, the term “existentials” saw little use in Heidegger’s lectures leading up to the publication of *Being and Time*, where he often used the term “categorical” [*kategorial*] when referring to the kinds of characteristics that he would later rebrand as existentials. In short, existentials should be understood as categorical characteristics of human existence.

In order to transition from a general discussion of what existentials are to a more concrete illustration of existentials in phenomenological research, we can turn our attention to the study of a particular existential. I focus here on the existential of situatedness [*Befindlichkeit*].⁵ My reason for this starting point has nothing to do with the existential of situatedness itself. Rather, my reason stems from the way that situatedness is articulated in the context of *Being and Time*. This existential, more than any other, is discussed in its relation to modes, which stand as the topic of the following subsection and the next layer of phenomenological research.

Heidegger opens his discussion of situatedness with the following lines:

What we indicate ontologically by the term “situatedness” is ontically the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood, our Being-attuned. Prior to all psychology of moods, a field which in any case still lies fallow, it is necessary to see the phenomenon as a fundamental existential, and to outline its structure. (Heidegger 1962, pp. 172–173)

In these opening lines we find reference to a number of issues discussed, in brief, above. First,

⁴ I follow Stambaugh in translating *Existenzial* and *Existenzialien* as “existential” and “existentials,” respectively (rather than the more awkward “existentiale” and “existentialia” employed in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation).

⁵ In the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time*, *Befindlichkeit* is translated as “state-of-mind.” This translation is widely accepted as inaccurate and misleading. In light of this, it is common to use alternative translations, including “affectedness” (Crowell 2013), “sofindingness” (Haugeland 2013), and “situatedness” (Guignon 2003). Throughout this essay I use the latter term, modifying quotations from Heidegger’s work where appropriate.

situatedness, like all existentials, is understood as ontological. Again, this refers to ontology in the sense of the philosophical study of the basic categories of reality. However, in the case of phenomenology, the primary interest is in the basic categories that pertain to human existence. Second, we find reference to “structure” [*Struktur*], exemplifying how the overuse of this term can easily confuse an otherwise straightforward discussion. Heidegger refers to the project of outlining the structure of situatedness, rather than referring to situatedness itself as a structure (e.g. a “transcendental structure”). While the existential referred to as situatedness is a constitutive feature of human existence, the existential itself has a structure, or set of constitutive features, that must be adequately articulated in order to properly understand the phenomena included within this categorial characteristic of human existence.

The work of delineating these constitutive features is perhaps the most difficult and intensive part of any phenomenological investigation. This accounts for what is often referred to as “phenomenological description”—which must be differentiated from the “phenomenological descriptions” found in qualitative studies in the human and social sciences, as well as in the philosophy of mind, typically understood as systematic descriptions of the way things seem or appear. Much of the contemporary phenomenological literature is aimed at fleshing out the constitutive features of a particular existential, enriching (and sometimes correcting) the preliminary accounts offered by the classical phenomenologists. Much of Zahavi’s work, for example, is conducted in this vein, fleshing out the nuances and intricacies of the existential of intersubjectivity, expanding upon the concept as it is employed and developed in the work of figures such as Husserl, Scheler, and Stein (Zahavi 2015).

As for the structure of situatedness, Heidegger finds that this is best articulated through the use of an example. His initial example in *Being and Time* is the mood of fear, which he uses

not for the purpose of articulating the features of fear in its particularity, but for the purpose of articulating the constitutive features that hold for any mood whatsoever—each mood being understood as a more or less distinct way of being situated in the world. For example, he argues that fear has three essential components. These are “(1) that in the face of which we fear, (2) fearing, and (3) that about which we fear” (Heidegger 1962, p. 179). After outlining these features, he says, “These possible ways of looking at fear are not accidental; they belong together. With them the general structure of situatedness [*Befindlichkeit*] comes to the fore” (Heidegger 1962, p. 179). These structural features of situatedness are developed in more detail throughout *Being and Time*, such as when Heidegger offers a phenomenological study of anxiety, as well as in other texts, such as his lengthy discussion of boredom in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Heidegger 2001).

3.2 Modes

Heidegger’s discussion of the phenomenological study of fear, with its aim of outlining the basic structure of the existential of situatedness, offers a clear point of transition into the phenomenological study of modes. Fear, like all moods, is a mode of situatedness. Each existential is a categorial characteristic of human existence that encompasses or includes a diverse set of modes. In this sense, one can speak of modes of intentionality, intersubjectivity, temporality, and so on. It should also be noted that this way of understanding modes is by no means confined to Heidegger. Husserl, for example, employs a similar distinction in one of his discussions of intentionality in *Ideas I*. He says that while we are capable of a variety of intentional relations—such as those with perceived, imagined, or remembered objects—these should be understood as mere modifications of intentionality. As he says, “the universal essential property of consciousness remains preserved in the modification” (Husserl 2014, p. 63).

In addition, in some (rare) cases modes are discussed not as pertaining to a specific existential, but to human existence as a whole. One example of such a discussion is found in Heidegger's account of "falling" in *Being and Time*. He speaks of falling as an "existential mode," which is an admittedly awkward phrasing in light of the fact that the adjectival use of "existential" typically refers to the quality of being an ontological (i.e. categorial) feature of human existence, while a "mode" is understood as ontic, being a concrete phenomenon rather than an ontological category (Heidegger 1962, p. 221). However what Heidegger has in mind by an "existential mode" is, in this instance, a mode that pertains not to any particular existential, but to human existence as a whole—a holistic, all-encompassing manner of comporting oneself, for instance.^{6,7}

As shown above, phenomenological analyses of modes are capable of shedding light on the general structure of the existential to which the mode belongs. In this sense, phenomenological studies of modes often play a similar role to the phenomena used in Husserl's free phantasy variations. The phenomena taken up in such variations are dealt with as instances of a general type or category. If we do this with an entity within the world—a coffee mug, for

⁶ In another case, Heidegger speaks of three modes that, taken together, make up the "existential mode" that he refers to as falling. These are idle talk (a mode of the existential of discourse), curiosity (a mode of the existential of situatedness), and ambiguity (a mode of the existential of understanding). In light of this, it seems that even when the term "mode" is used to refer to a modality of human existence as a whole, it can still be more finely delineated into the modal changes within individual existentials.

⁷ This distinction—between existentials and modes—is often missed, in many cases leading to incoherent interpretations of phenomenological texts. One example of this kind is found in an article by Rudi Visker (1994). He argues that, according to Heidegger, certain existentials (specifically, falling and the "they") can disappear—which seems to be a strange or counterintuitive notion. The trouble with this interpretation, and one that Visker fails to notice, is that falling and the "they" are simply not existentials—they are modes. As such, they are just some of the ways a world can be made available to us, and there is nothing especially intriguing about their absence.

example—we are taking it as representative of a category. If we do this with a feature of human existence—a mode of intentionality, for example—we are taking it as representative of an existential.

However, this is not the only reason modes are investigated in the course of phenomenological research. In many cases, modes are studied for their own sake—that is to say, for the sake of understanding the particular mode itself, rather than the general categorial characteristic to which the mode belongs. While such investigations generally took a back seat to the study of existentials in classical phenomenological research, they are often the prime focus of more contemporary studies. Phenomenological investigations of race and gender, for example, are typically concerned with illuminating certain modes of human existence that are either completely neglected in the classical texts, or downplayed and not given their due.

One of the most famous examples of such an investigation is found in Iris Marion Young's essay, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." Outlining the aim of her study, she says, "If there are indeed typically 'feminine' styles of body comportment and movement, this should generate for the existential phenomenologist a concern to specify such a differentiation of the modalities of the lived body" (Young 2005, p. 28; my emphasis). In this work, Young is careful to situate her project within the larger context of phenomenological research. As she says, "I assume that at the most basic descriptive level, Merleau-Ponty's account of the relation of the lived body to its world, as developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, applies to any human existence in a general way" (Young 2005, p. 31). Her own project, then, is not to challenge or even to amend Merleau-Ponty's account of the basic, constitutive features of any human existence whatsoever. She is not claiming a radical, ontological (or existential) distinction between masculine and feminine

embodiment and subjectivity.

Articulating the aims of her project in a positive manner, she says, “At a more specific level [...] there is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular modalities of the structures and conditions of the body’s existence in the world” (Young 2005, p. 31; emphasis in original). These “structures” and “conditions” are precisely what I here refer to as “existentials,” and their distinction from and relation to “modes” or “modalities” is made clear in the course of Young’s work. The existentials always manifest in some mode or other, and these modal changes—at least as explored by Young—are not meant as a challenge to the phenomenological accounts of the existentials.

Young’s goal, and the goal that we find throughout much of contemporary phenomenological research, is to bring to the fore subtle and oft-neglected features of particular modes of human existence. We find this not only in the phenomenology of race and gender, but also in the phenomenology of sexual orientation, disability, and psychopathology, among other domains. However, to say that these contemporary phenomenologists are engaged in the study of modes, or modal features of human existence, is not to say that they merely investigate modes—leaving the classical frameworks unrevised and uncriticized. As mentioned above, it is precisely through the study of modes that phenomenologists are able to come to more general insights regarding the structure of the existential to which the mode belongs.

While some contemporary phenomenologists do study particular modes for their own sake, many are also concerned with how the study of diverse modes sheds light on the general, shared features of human existence in ways that might be overlooked by those with a more narrow focus, such as the classical phenomenologists. In this sense, the field of classical phenomenology understood as a phenomenological ontology is far from a dead enterprise. Many

of those engaging in “applied” phenomenologies can hardly be understood as merely applying phenomenological concepts and insights to new topics.

Nevertheless, this is not a universally shared conception among contemporary phenomenologists. Many, if not most, contemporary phenomenological works are in fact characterized as the application of phenomenological concepts and insights to new domains, without the reciprocal feedback of these applications to a refined understanding of our basic set of existentials. In some cases this refinement of our conception of the existentials does occur, in spite of the author’s characterization of his or her own project. One contemporary phenomenologist who does seem to characterize her work along these lines is Johanna Oksala. In some of her work, especially her phenomenological studies of gender, she stresses that the phenomenological study of new phenomena (or phenomena ignored in the classical literature) can sometimes point the way toward foundational revisions in phenomenology. While Oksala herself seems to emphasize the potential to catalyze methodological changes, she also discusses how such studies require a rethinking of subject matter (Oksala 2006).

If phenomenologists accurately articulated the implications and subject matter of their own research, more attention might be paid to renewing the phenomenological focus on existentials. This essay will, I hope, stand as a resource for those concerned with articulating the aims of their work in this way. In particular, the use of a shared and widely applicable vocabulary should do much to overcome the often tiresome effort involved in translating the insights and conclusions of contemporary investigations expressed in a particular phenomenologist’s jargon, just for the sake of seeing if they apply to, conflict with, or complement another contemporary phenomenologist’s work.

3.3 Prejudices

The third layer of phenomenological research is “prejudices.” Hans-Georg Gadamer offers the clearest account of prejudices in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, defining them as the “biases of our openness to the world,” and saying that “Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience” (Gadamer 2008, p. 9). In short, prejudices “are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer 2008, p. 9). This characterization highlights the fact that we can never be free of prejudices and that we can at best make our prejudices explicit and apparent.

However, this position on prejudices—shared by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in addition to Gadamer—was not always the standard position. One of the primary aims of Husserl’s epoché, for example, was to bracket out or suspend metaphysical and scientific prejudices that might set a phenomenological analysis on the wrong track. It is important to point out that the way the epoché was meant to work made reflection on one’s own metaphysical and scientific prejudices irrelevant, or unnecessary. Because the epoché was understood as achieving its purpose through a kind of attitudinal shift, it did not seem to require that the phenomenologist be aware of the particular prejudices he happened to hold in the first place.

This does not mean that Husserl never concerned himself with explicating and unearthing his own prejudices, as well as the prejudices of the philosophers and scientists of whom he was so critical. In a sense, the natural attitude can itself be understood as a kind of prejudice, or perhaps a mode that opens us up to a set of prejudices. In order to motivate the need for suspending this attitude, Husserl had to make clear the kinds of prejudices that were included within it, and why these prejudices made it impossible to properly engage in phenomenological

research. However, Husserl's own position toward prejudices changed with the advent of genetic and generative phenomenology. In his later works he studied how personal and social histories alter our understanding and experience of the lived world. This background of intelligibility (i.e. our set of prejudices taken as a whole) through which we engage in the lived world is often discussed under the labels of "tradition," the "sedimentation of meaning," or even "ontic structures" (Husserl 1970, p. 145).

This turn in Husserl's concern with prejudices—from methodological pitfalls to be avoided to a phenomenological subject matter in their own right—is echoed throughout the phenomenological tradition. A further explication of these two ways of approaching prejudices will be helpful in articulating what prejudices are and the role they continue to play in phenomenological research.

First, as should be apparent from the mention of the epoché, prejudices are often addressed for methodological reasons. Specifically, they are attended to when preparing for a phenomenological investigation into modes or existentials. As hermeneutic phenomenologists are wont to remind us, there is no experience without interpretation. Every time we take something as something in particular—which is to say, whenever we confront any meaningful entity at all—we do so through an (often tacit) act of interpretation. This applies not only to our perception of objects and people within our world, but even to how phenomenologists (or any researchers for that matter) approach the phenomena of human existence.

This is why attention to prejudices makes up a fundamental part of the preparatory stage of phenomenological investigation. All of the classical phenomenologists have been concerned with prejudices in this way, and for these reasons, but not all of them have dealt with the problem of prejudice in the same manner. Heidegger, for instance, claimed not to employ the epoché, and

that to do so was actually alien to phenomenology (understood, at least in his early work, as a hermeneutics of facticity, or an interpretive investigation of our concrete being-in-the-world). Merleau-Ponty was also concerned with making his own metaphysical and scientific prejudices explicit, rather than assuming he could suspend them by employing a kind of attitudinal shift. This is illustrated throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which Merleau-Ponty often begins an investigation of a new phenomenon by attending to the accounts that have already been given and attempting to unearth the presuppositions or prejudices built into each of these accounts.⁸ A similar stance is found in Sartre's book, *The Imaginary*, where he discusses how the term "imagination" [*imagination*] might prejudice or problematically predetermine our approach to this aspect of human existence (e.g. deciding in advance that what we "imagine" must be image-like).

The second way of approaching prejudices has much in common with the standard ways of approaching existentials and modes. They are studied for the sake of gaining an understanding of the background of intelligibility through which we make sense of and interpret our world. This is exemplified in Husserl's phenomenological studies in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, especially in his historical and genealogical study of the development of our capacity to understand and perceive the world as objective—a development that Husserl attributes in large part to the work of Galileo (Husserl 1970, pp. 23–59). However, while Husserl may have been the first to thematize prejudice as a distinct subject matter for phenomenological research, he was certainly not the last. One of the most straightforward examples of a phenomenological study of prejudice is found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*

⁸ Examples of this kind of preparatory work are found in Sect. 1 of his introduction, where he offers a careful analysis of the concept of "sensation" in philosophy and the sciences (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 3–12), as well as the introductory remarks in the final chapter on freedom (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 458–483).

of Perception, where he considers the case of a young child who touches a candle flame. He says, “The light of a candle changes appearance for the child when, after having burned him, it ceases to attract the child’s hand and becomes literally repulsive” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 52). Here we not only have a straightforward case of the development of a new prejudice—one in which the candle flame now means something different to the child than it did before he touched it—but we also have a case of a prejudice that we might classify as pre-cognitive, or at least non-intellectual. In the above discussion regarding the preparatory loosening and making explicit of prejudices, it is all too easy to think of prejudices in a purely conceptual sense. We can understand such preparatory work as the phenomenologist confronting her inadequate or incorrect concepts and attempting to avoid or suspend them in the course of her investigation. What we find in Merleau-Ponty’s example, by contrast, is a case where the prejudices inhabit, or at least manifest in, the child’s behavior as well as his perceived world. We might say that the child now has a different understanding of the candle flame from the one he had a moment ago, but this risks neglecting the fact that, in a very real sense, the flame is now perceived differently—it is a different kind of meaningful object in the child’s world.

In spite of the simplicity of this example, I do not mean to imply that all bodily or perceptual prejudices are as straightforward or crude as the one just described. There are a number of examples that can illustrate a higher degree of complexity in the workings of such prejudices, but for the sake of simplicity I will return to the work of Young. In her essay, Young not only clarifies some of the modal distinctions between masculine and feminine bodily comportment, but also asks why these comportments differ in the ways that they do. Her particular interest in this question stems from Erwin Straus’s failure to offer an adequate answer in his own brief foray into the phenomenological study of feminine embodiment. His answer—

which can hardly be called an answer—is that there must be some feminine essence that differentiates the male from the female in their bodily comportment and behavior (Straus 1966; Young 2005, pp. 27–28).

Young, seeking an alternative account, first considers that differences between masculine and feminine bodily comportment might stem from a difference in the amount of practice males and females have in performing certain kinds of actions (e.g. girls are often not encouraged as much as boys to play sports or engage in other physical activities). However, she considers this issue secondary to one that is much more systemic and culturally ingrained. As she says, “The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her” (Young 2005, p. 43). Such events, while not as brute and direct as the burning of one’s finger, largely serve the same purpose of instilling one with a set of prejudices about oneself and one’s world that shape one’s self-interpretation and behavior. As Young goes on to say,

Thus she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile. Studies have found that young children of both sexes categorically assert that girls are more likely to get hurt than boys are, and that girls ought to remain close to home, while boys can roam and explore. The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition. (Young 2005, p. 44)

What we find in Young’s work—even if she does not refer to it by this exact term—is the study of how prejudices are passed down, how prejudices shape our self-interpretations, and even how prejudices determine which modes we develop and employ in our engagements in the world. Many of the modes of feminine body comportment, for example, can be understood as stemming from a self-interpretation of one’s own body as weak or fragile.

Such a study differs in important respects from the ones employed in the preparatory service of phenomenological investigations into existentials and modes. In much the same way

that we can distinguish the two ways of approaching modes—one being to discover features that hold for all modes of that type (or for the existential they belong to), and the other being for the sake of understanding the particular mode itself—we can distinguish between the two approaches to prejudices. One approach is in the service of a phenomenological ontology concerned with clarifying our basic existential structure, and serves to make sure that we do not allow our tacit biases and presuppositions to skew our understanding of the constitutive features of human existence. The other approach, while perhaps not in the service of understanding prejudices for their own sake, is at least in the service of understanding how prejudices predetermine the kinds of meaning that manifest in our lived world.

4 Conclusion: the future of phenomenological discourse

Taken together, these three layers of phenomenological research—existentials, modes, and prejudices—offer a framework for articulating what we can refer to broadly as the structure of meaning or the structure of world-disclosure. Studies of the first layer, existentials, articulate the structure of human existence in general, or the framework through which any meaning whatsoever is disclosed to us. Existentials are themselves understood as categorial characteristics of human existence. Studies of the second layer, modes, focus on the ways our world can be disclosed. Typically we speak of modes of existentials (i.e. the phenomena that belong to a categorial characteristic of human existence), but in some cases we can speak of modes of human existence as a whole. The third layer, prejudices, consists of the various biases and presuppositions at play whenever we experience a meaningful object or event. These three layers, taken together, stand as an answer to the question, “What do phenomenologists study?”

My aim in this essay has been to develop a preliminary articulation of the subject matter of phenomenology for contemporary researchers. As mentioned above, this has required me to

take on a standpoint of neutrality with respect to a number of important debates in phenomenology. In light of this, I think it only fair to sketch some of the debates and issues upon which I remain neutral.

These debates can be divided into two broad categories—foundational and applied. Foundational debates are concerned with the aims, methods, and subject matter of phenomenology. Applied debates are typically concerned with articulating the nature of particular features or aspects of human existence. In some cases this involves articulating the existentials, modes, or prejudices that already stand as core interests of phenomenological research, such as the existential of intersubjectivity (Zahavi 2015) or the mode of anxiety [Angst] (Withy 2015). In other cases these studies are concerned with broader features of human existence that have been ignored or downplayed in the phenomenological canon, such as gender (Oksala 2016; Young 2005), sexual orientation (Ahmed 2006), or race (Alcoff 2006; Lee 2014). Most phenomenological research today (excepting historical scholarship on phenomenology) falls into the category of applied phenomenology. However, this does not mean that foundational issues and concerns never enter into these discussions. As pointed out above, the study of aspects of human existence that have been ignored in the canonical texts can complicate and bring to light foundational issues of aims, methods, and subject matter that were passed over in previous works (Oksala 2006).

As for foundational aspects of phenomenology, there are countless issues that might be addressed. I here sketch just a few issues related to the development of phenomenological methods and to phenomenology's compatibility with various metaphysical stances. First, while there is considerable scholarship on phenomenological methods in general, these works do not typically take account of the distinctions among the layers of phenomenological research. There

is no reason to think that the same methods apply equally to the study of all three layers. For example, the study of prejudices seems to require distinct historical, genealogical, and hermeneutic methods that may not apply to the study of existentials. In addition, phenomenological methods and tools that help us zero in on and better articulate essences (e.g. Husserl's free phantasy variation) may apply to existentials—at least insofar as we conceive them as essential categories—but may not apply to the study of modes and prejudices. The distinctions I offer can help tailor phenomenological methods to the kinds of phenomena they are meant to approach and articulate.

Second, while phenomenology's compatibility with various metaphysical stances is often discussed in historical scholarship, these issues have also entered into more contemporary debates. Much of the applied phenomenological literature (e.g. in the cognitive sciences and psychopathology) is concerned with phenomenology's compatibility with diverse forms of naturalism (Fernandez 2015; Petitot et al. 1999; Stanghellini and Rosfort 2014; Zahavi 2013). In addition, the question of phenomenology's status as a transcendental philosophy has become more pressing. Phenomenology's capacity to do justice to the accidental, contingent, and particular—in addition to the essential, necessary, and universal—is a condition for recent phenomenological work on infancy, (non-human) animality, and illness (see Fernandez 2014; Heinämaa et al. 2014). Much of this debate hinges on to what, or to whom, the structural layers belong—is it a transcendental ego (Husserl 2014), an embodied subject (Husserl 1989; Merleau-Ponty 2012), being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962), or even appearing as such (Patočka 1970)? While an embodied subject might allow for a high degree of contingency and variability in its structural features, a transcendental ego would not—and a reference to “appearing as such” might bypass some of these metaphysical questions altogether.

There is still a long way to go in sorting out these issues, not only for the sake of understanding the classical texts, but also for the purpose of securing contemporary phenomenology on a sound footing by clarifying the nature of its subject matter. Much like the debates over methods, these debates over subject matter can be facilitated by the application of the layers I have delineated in this essay. On the issue of necessity versus contingency, there is no reason that all three layers should be understood as either necessary or contingent. Existentials might be necessary, while modes and prejudices are historically variable. In addition, if modes and prejudices are typically understood as ontic, while existentials are ontological, this might entail that modes and prejudices are consistent with some forms of naturalism while existentials are not. These kinds of questions can be better addressed by engaging with each layer separately, articulating the nature of its status independent of the other layers.

In closing, my primary aim in this essay has been to facilitate and encourage constructive discourse in contemporary phenomenology. Whether foundational or applied, critical or complementary, this kind of discourse, dialogue, and debate is precisely what is required in order to drive phenomenology forward as a legitimate and productive philosophical research program. A clear articulation of subject matter, meant to encompass the current diversity of phenomenological research rather than constrain it, will hopefully act as a catalyst for this much needed debate.

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