



## NEW IDEAS

### Francisco Varela's view on phenomenology in his cognitive interpretation

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*The philosophy by Husserl has always been a very interesting topic for cognitive scientists. Indeed, there is a strong analogy between the method of phenomenological reduction and the theories of mind developed by cognitive science in the last fifty years. The method of reduction is based on the concept of reality as a product of mind. Cognitive science seems to agree with this view but it is still difficult to elaborate a cognitive interpretation of the Husserl phenomenology which is philosophically correct. The best attempt is that by Francisco Varela; thanks to the philosophic teaching of Humberto Maturana, he offers us a terribly reliable and audacious interpretation of Husserl even if complex for the role which plays between two necessities: the former is to construct neurophenomenology emphasizing the philosophy of Husserl like the only conceptual architecture able to study experience directly and the latter (which) is to found the enactive paradigm for cognitive science referring to Buddhist psychology.*

**Keywords:** philosophy of mind, cognitive neuroscience, phenomenology, consciousness, neurophenomenology.

*DIAL PHIL MENT NEURO SCI 2010; 3(2): 42-44*

#### INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will deal with the relationship between Husserl phenomenology and cognitive science in the thought of Francisco Varela. The Chilean biologist feels the necessity of comparing cognitive science with phenomenology in order to explain consciousness. His main task is to combine cognitive neuroscience and experimental neuroscience. This epistemological problem is known to the scientific literature as the *hard problem*. Varela points out that we cannot explain consciousness only referring to the *third person* account provided by cognitive neuroscience since consciousness is primary attemptable in the *first person* account. So we must relate these two aspects and consider them as two different phenomenal domains both susceptible of scientific analysis. In order to achieve this task we must develop some cognitive abilities about first person experiencing. Varela called this kind of epistemology *neurophenomenology*, driven by the specific necessity both to combine these two accounts and develop the enactive stream to cognitive science at the same time. It is about a constructivist vision of reality as for example that stating that reality cannot be considered a

data in the enactive stream: it depends by the percipient and by what his structure considers a significant world. (Varela, 1999).

#### VARELA'S IDEAS ON PHENOMENOLOGY

Varela makes an historic excursus on phenomenology in nineteenth century. He does not consider phenomenology as a continental philosophical movement. Even if phenomenology was born in Europe, phenomenological thinking took part in that global turning point which brought to the birth of *American pragmatism* by William James and the *School of Kyoto* in Japan. Indeed Varela states that while Husserl was at the top of his creative work, William James was following a transversal path in his pragmatic approach to cognitive life in the USA. Moreover, in order to complete this "synchronous" global turning point, the *School of Kyoto* made an extremely innovative lecture from a philosophic point of view in Japan (Varela, 1996).

From a conceptual point of view, European phenomenology is better than its American and Japanese counterparts because of its analysis on *conscious experience*: as declared inside the

Western tradition phenomenology was and is still the philosophy of the human experience, the only standing conceptual architecture that openly face such matters (Varela, 1996). The supremacy of phenomenology is due to its solid tradition (continental philosophy) which considers philosophy both as a method and a rational tool looking for truth. This is the distinctive character of the Husserl philosophy as he often underlined because of its methodological character of phenomenology defining it a form of *neocartesianism* in the twentieth century.

The heart of phenomenology stands in the concept of *intentionality* (which does not mean 'doing something on purpose' but it concerns with the presence of consciousness in each experience) that overcomes the method of *reduction*. This method consists in suspending one's own judgments on the empiric world turning to inner life: this is not an annihilation. Indeed the objects of the world does not disappear: they still remain but just as objects for consciousness. The distinction between a subject who gets to know and an object known does no more exist in this view. We are in a situation where experience is the product of the activity made by two poles: the first is the *ego percipient* and the second is *the object as I am perceiving it*. So the phenomenology by Husserl is a transcendental philosophy of mind consisting of a correlative idealism.

In Varela's opinion this approach is dissimilar from that of Wundt psychology because Husserl reduction is not an introspection, but rather a freedom of judgment about the external world which lets a new aspect of conscious life emerging or a new insight explaining (Varela et al., 1991). Furthermore the method of reduction is not an episodic raid in the background of conscious life but rather a practice probably developing through the systematic and continuous exercise of suspending of the objective conclusions. This is important because non-reductivist philosophers of mind and positivist cognitive scientists disagree on the question. In the opinion of Varela, cognitive scientists comparing introspection with the method of reduction came to wrong conclusions. This is true for Dreyfus who defines Husserl like a proto-computationalist, and for Dennett who comes to the conclusion

that phenomenology could not find one method on which we are all agree (Varela, 1999). In his article in 1996, Varela states that the method of reduction is recognizable from different details like the approach of suspension of judgments, the approach to experience through immediate evidences, the question of intersubjectivity and particular training granting stability and pragmatics that is the reliability of the method.

#### **BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY AND HUSSERL'S PHENOMENOLOGY**

The period between 1991 and 1996 is quite complex in the intellectual life of Francisco Varela. We certainly find an apology to the philosophy of Husserl in his introduction to *neurophenomenology* of 1996, but the Chilean scientist considered Western philosophy an incomplete thinking until that period. He strongly maintained that Western philosophy is too speculative to aid cognitive science. For this reason Varela organized together with Dalai Lama the *Mind & Life* starting in 1987. From this experience on, Varela experienced oriental philosophy and specifically Buddhist psychology witnessed by the publication of *The Embodied mind* in 1991. On that occasion he reproached Husserl to have created a vicious circle with the concept of *lebenswelt* and as a consequence he would accept only the first two points of the phenomenological method. Going on Varela said that the concept of reduction is a double-edged weapon as it is useful to suspend judgments in the beginning but later it will not be helpful to explain the role of intersubjectivity when in fact it is necessary to get back to the empiric reality. So phenomenology falls into an ironic paradox, an aporia, a blind point.

Moreover Varela moved another critic to western thinking: the lack of pragmatics useful to cognitive science. This is because of a complete ignorance about the concept of *corporeity* in Husserl. According to Varela, intersubjectivity should be a fundamental concept for phenomenology. He underlined that Merleau-Ponty is the one who adds the concept of corporeity to phenomenology in the history of this philosophic movement. Indeed, in Merleau-Ponty we can find a critic to the Cartesian dualism of mind

and body. We could affirm that Merleau-Ponty is the first Western philosopher who speaks of *embodied* cognition. But not even Merleau-Ponty freed himself from being too much speculative. Varela confirms that for a large part of western tradition, philosophy is the discipline looking for truth, even about mind, only through theories and speculative reasoning (Varela, 1999).

It is clear that Varela attacks Western philosophy after studying some meditative techniques named *techniques of presence and awareness* coming from the Mahayana tradition. These techniques allow to control oneself and one's mind as the term awareness suggests. The Buddhist term *presence* means that mind and body are coordinate. On the opposite, Mahayana tradition starts from the idea that mind and body generally are not coordinate and for this reason we need a specific technique to coordinate them. Varela let us know that this technique is not the product of reasoning but is made of practice. So he concludes that Western thinking is to be completed with oriental philosophy in order to develop the enactive account for cognitive science.

In his neurophenomenology there is a sym-

biosis between phenomenology and Buddhist psychology; this positive interpretation of the thought of Husserl constitutes de facto an expansion of the structure of phenomenology on the basis of this integration with the oriental traditions.

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