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Intersubjectivity, Empathy and Community. A Dialogue with Dan Zahavi

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Introduction

Dan Zahavi, born in Copenhagen in 1967, is one of the major scholars of Edmund Husserl's philosophy and one of the most eminent thinkers of contemporary phenomenology. He studied Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen where he currently teaches. In 1994 he obtained his PhD at the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven with a thesis on Husserl's theory of transcendental intersubjectivity, under Rudolf Bernet's supervision. His speculative itinerary begins with a study of "self" and "self-awareness" in which he defends the account of a minimal notion of the self. Starting from this perspective, Zahavi investigates the structures of intersubjectivity developing a broad reflection on the concept of empathy (1999, 2014). This line of research leads him to question the phenomenological status of collective experiences, shared and social emotions, and investigate the relationship between the individual and the community. In approaching these themes, Zahavi recognizes Husserl's thought as the theoretical horizon to draw on for clarifying some key notions such as consciousness, collective intentionality, personalities of a higher order, empathy, and community. Zahavi's approach to the Husserlian philosophy has promoted a significant renewal of its interpretations through the valorization of some lesser-known aspects of Husserl's works and manuscripts. Indeed, Zahavi is the author and editor of numerous works centered on the father of phenomenology (Zahavi 2017, 2018) and on the promotion of other lesser-known figures of the phenomenological scene, with particular attention to the thinkers of the so-called first-generation of phenomenologists. His work offers a wide-ranging overview of orientations and developments of the Husserlian and post-Husserlian phenomenological thought. Zahavi's books, translated into numerous languages,

make him an essential reference not only for specialists but also for scholars of other fields interested in these themes or exchanges with phenomenology. Alongside this line of research, the Danish philosopher has also developed a broad interest in other disciplinary perspectives which can shed light on different aspects of some nodal points of his thought: consciousness, intersubjectivity, and different forms of community. From this point of view, the author is often confronted with new trends in the fields of cognitive science, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, making them interact with his own philosophical and phenomenological perspective. In 2002, Zahavi was among the founders of the Center for Subjectivity Research (CFS) at the University of Copenhagen whose aim is to promote an interdisciplinary investigation of subjectivity and its bounds with others and the world. In its first twenty years of activity, the Center has worked on topics such as disorders of the self, perception, imagination, embodiment, empathy, and normativity, encouraging dialogue between different fields in order to investigate these phenomena in their complexity. Since 2020, the Center has been engaged in a five-year project entitled *Who are we? Self-identity, social cognition, and collective intentionality* that proposes to challenge one of the main criticisms often lobbied against phenomenology: its inability to carry an analysis of the collective phenomena out due to its first-person perspective. Coherently with Zahavi's philosophical and investigative posture, this research is conducted through the rehabilitation of some concepts of Husserlian philosophy, and more generally of phenomenology, and through the dialogue with other disciplines. The project therefore intends to deepen the perspective of the first-person plural focusing on collective identities, collective intentionality, and on the different forms of participation by questioning how these elements interact with individuals and their experiential perspective. The project addresses the important implications that these questions, in particular the tension between individuals and communities, have on a political level by trying to provide hermeneutic tools and insights for research in the socio-political field.

Your biographical and professional itinerary shows a strong bond with Denmark, where you graduated, founded the Centre for Subjectivity Research (CFS) and where you carry your teaching and researching activities out. Going back to your philosoph-

ical education, your experience in Leuven, the site of Husserl's Archives, where you were able to work on Edmund Husserl's manuscripts, played an important role in the development of your thought. Thinking back on your trajectory, how did your interest in phenomenology mature? Which readings and teachers played a crucial role in your orientation towards it, leading you to the Husserl Archives?

I started studying philosophy in Copenhagen back in 1986. During the first year of study, I encountered a short text by Husserl, which caught my interest. It was some paragraphs from *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*[1], a text that I would later come to count as one of my least favorite texts by Husserl, because of its Cartesian slant. But initially it captivated me, and I started getting more and more interested in phenomenology. I initially thought that phenomenology might offer a way of bringing together the essentialism of Aristotle and the transcendental philosophy of Kant, two other philosophers that I had been fascinated by. I didn't have the opportunity to attend any courses on Husserl during the following years – none were offered in Copenhagen. But already in high school I had planned to go to Germany to study, and when I managed to obtain a DAAD grant and the opportunity to study in Germany in 1989, I decided to choose a university where I could learn more about phenomenology. My first choice was Freie Universität Berlin, but I soon realized that Theunissen and Tugendhat were no longer doing much work in phenomenology. Eventually I had to decide between Bochum with Waldenfels and Wuppertal with Held. I ended up choosing Held, and spent 16 months in Wuppertal, where I wrote my master thesis (and first book) on Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. My period in Wuppertal proved decisive (although I in November 1989 briefly regretted not having gone to Berlin, where I could have witnessed the fall of the wall). I owe a substantial debt to Held. Not only has his interpretation of Husserl influenced my own, but he was also the one who introduced me to the international phenomenology scene. After Wuppertal, I knew my next step had to be Leuven. I managed to obtain a PhD fellowship from the University of Copenhagen and arrived at the Husserl Archives in January 1992. Initially the plan had been to defend my

1. E. Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology, in Husserliana: Edmund Husserl Collected Works*, vol. XVIII, Springer Dordrecht 1999.

thesis back in Copenhagen, but shortly after arriving in Leuven I realized that if I wanted to make a career in phenomenology, I might be better off with a degree from Leuven, and I managed to enroll there with Rudolf Bernet as my doctoral supervisor. In 1994, I then defended my doctoral thesis on Husserl's theory of transcendental intersubjectivity.

You begin your research path from an extremely thorny point of Husserl's thought: the notion of transcendental intersubjectivity. This theme has exposed the father of phenomenology to many criticisms, both inside and outside the phenomenological horizon (think, for example, about Ricoeur 1967 and Habermas's ones 1992), which can be, essentially summed up in the denunciation of its aporetic character and of the oxymoronic nature of a "monadological intersubjectivity" (Husserl 1931), briefly in the famous and widespread accusation of transcendental solipsism. What is the richness that you felt it could be found in such a highly debated and problematic notion?

Perhaps the first relevant question to ask is this: is subjectivity an obstacle to or a precondition for intersubjectivity? My view (and Husserl's) is clear. You cannot have inter-subjectivity without subjectivity. If you eliminate the latter, you will lose the former as well. So, I don't think that Husserl's insistence on the importance of subjectivity threatened his attempt to account for intersubjectivity, or that it was somehow in tension with it. A further question then concerns the notion of transcendental intersubjectivity (in contrast to, say, mundane intersubjectivity). Again, I find it hard to fault Husserl here. His insistence on the transcendental (or constitutive) role of intersubjectivity is precisely a manifestation of how serious he takes intersubjectivity and also an indication of how different his conception of the transcendental is from its classical articulation in Kant. Again, as I mentioned earlier, for Husserl a transcendental clarification of objectivity, truth, and reality calls for a proper consideration of the constitutive role of intersubjectivity.

You have repeatedly argued in your works that social conceptions of the self express a partial view because they neglect those aspects that are irreducible to the social dimen-

sion and which you identify with reference to the notion of "experiential self" which you consider a necessary precondition for any socially constructed self. You referred, among others, to Heidegger and Husserl as philosophers in whom it is possible to endorse this minimal notion of an experiential self without committing it to some kind of self-enclosed and self-sufficient interiority (Zahavi 2005). In your opinion, can G. H. Mead's conception of the self (2005), which, as is well known, functionally but not dualistically distinguishes a socially objectified component ("me") from an ineffable and unpredictable one ("I"), constitute a sui generis *position within social conceptions of the self that would bring it closer to a multidimensional proposal, one that would make the minimal notion of self compatible with a social notion of self?*

Just to be clear, I have never claimed that the minimal notion of self is incompatible with a social notion of self, on the contrary, I think they are very much compatible, though I would also claim that the minimal notion has a certain priority in the sense that it founds the social self. So, whereas there cannot be a social self without a minimal self, I don't think the reverse implication holds. Now, what is more debatable is how to fit Mead into this structure. On the one hand, I find his entire discussion of perspective taking and role reversal very interesting, and I have in previous publications pointed to its affinity with certain ideas in phenomenology. But ultimately, I think Mead remains too one-sided. I don't think he is doing sufficient justice to first-personal subjectivity. And I don't think his distinction between "me" and "I" is sufficient. Mead is quite consistent in describing the "I" as a reaction to the socially constituted self. It is a retrospective reflection on the way we inhabit social roles. It has neither primacy nor autonomy vis-à-vis the "me", and so it cannot at all be equated with the minimal or experiential self.

In your opinion, not recognizing this minimal but irreducible "minenss" we miss not only the meaning of the self, but an essential constitutive part of experience and a correct comprehension of communal life too (Zahavi 2007). How can the intersubjectivity-ego relationship be understood in phenomenological foundational terms? Can we say that phenomenology's effort is to overcome any reductionist account on self and intersubjectivity, which aims to derive one from the other, in order to promote the correlation between these two dimensions, or is this only a way to cut the Gordian Knot?

I have for many years defended a multidimensional account of self, where the most fundamental level of selfhood is a precondition for intersubjectivity, but where social interaction then allows for the constitution of higher and more complex layers of selfhood. So, depending on which level we are talking about the direction of constitution will change. What I am fundamentally opposed to is the claim that first-personal subjectivity is intersubjectively constructed. I find that not only theoretically implausible, but ultimately nonsensical.

Our relationship with the others may be influenced and obstructed by prejudices and lack of attention. In this regard Arlie Hochschild (2013), coined the expression "empathic maps" characterised by zones of high-empathy, low-empathy, and no-empathy. Trying to transpose Hochschild's sociological reflection into the phenomenological frame: if empathy is configured as a sui generis perception*, which reveals the otherness of the other, the fulfilment of this intentional experience can assume different degrees. By grasping the other within the horizon of another monad, another concretion of the transcendental ego (with her own lived body, her own irreplicable flux of* Erlebenisse*, and personality) one can thematise different aspects of this* alter ego *who is as complex and layered as my own. Is it possible to speak of the empathic experience in terms of adumbration (*Abschattung*)? Could this multiplicity of layers and degrees of fulfilment give rise to different forms of interaction, so that it could be possible to combine the study of social interactions with that of empathy?*

In my book, *Self and Other*[2], I suggested that one should distinguish different levels of empathy. On the one hand, we should distinguish our ability to grasp empathically the mindedness of the other, that is, our coming to experience that another has a mind in the first place, from our ability to determine another's specific state of mind. On the other hand, we should distinguish our ability to determine the current experiential episode of another from our ability to reason about that person's past and future mental states and behaviours. Let me label these different achievements the grasping of the *that*, the *what*, and the *why*. In

2. D. Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

daily life we often wonder whether others like us or not, find us trustworthy or not, or attractive or not. We wonder whether others are being truthful or deceptive, and whether others are motivated by greed or generosity. We very rarely wonder whether others are minded in the first place. Even if there is much about the other that is not readily accessible, although we might be uncertain about the specific beliefs and intentions of others, this uncertainty does not make us question their very mindedness. Furthermore, consider the distinction between the what and the *why* question. It is one thing to determine *what* a person is experiencing or doing, say, being sad or angry or reaching for a cup. But even if empathy might allow us to grasp directly (part of) what a person is experiencing or doing, this will not as such provide us with an understanding of why somebody is sad or angry or performing the action in question. According to the phenomenological proposal, basic empathy amounts to an experiential acquaintance with other minds. But although we should recognize its importance, we also need to recognize its limitations. There is a limit to how far empathy (plus sensitivity to the immediate context) can get us. Our everyday understanding of others draws on other resources as well. If we wish to unearth why somebody is feeling the way he does or why he is acting the way he does, we might have to consider the larger social, cultural, and historical context and thereby go beyond the offerings of empathy. Another obvious possibility is to engage and interact with the person you are trying to understand. As Schutz once pointed out, one obvious advantage of addressing the other is that it gives you the unique possibility of having your beliefs about the other confirmed or disconfirmed by direct questions[3].

In the phenomenological tradition, the term "recognition" conceived as an intersubjective dynamic does not recur. In a recent article (Zahavi 2022), you distinguish four forms of empathy: 1) "unilateral empathy", which we could associate to the experience of the other described by Husserl in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation (1977), *"parallel or simultaneous empathy", as to say the mutual observation in which each subject ignores the other is perceiving her 3) "reflexive empathy", whereby one subject*

3. A. Schutz, *The phenomenology of the social world*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1967 (or. ed. 1932).

*realises that she is perceived by another without the latter knowing and 4) "reciprocal empathy" in which the two subjects are both aware of their mutual perceiving of the other, creating a "being-for-each-other" (*füreinander*). Considering this plurality of empathic forms, it seems that the phenomenological studies on empathy (*Einfühlung*) as the other experience* (Fremderfahrung) *are able to intersect the discussion on recognition. In your opinion, how can these two themes be intertwined?*

I certainly see a connection, and I would even say that Husserl's real contribution to this topic is not so much to be found in his discussion of reciprocal empathy, but rather in his discussion of communication. As I have recently argued, for Husserl communicative engagement involves an interplay and interlocking of address and response and results in the establishment of something Husserl calls an I-you community or a communicative community, where the subjects are not merely next-to-each-other, or for-each-other, but within-each-other. Communicative engagement is for Husserl a reciprocal process of intentional co-determination, one that establishes a certain unification of two co-subjects. There is a certain element of recognition at play here, but it is perhaps also worth emphasizing that Husserl's account is normatively quite undemanding when compared to, say, post-Hegelian recognition theory. For Husserl, the crucial point is mutual address, and this does not require any particular kind of pro-social behaviour, nor is it characterized by attitudes of esteem and respect or a concern for the well-being and dignity of the other. If one is on the lookout for these kinds of elements in Husserl, they are not to be found in his discussion of reciprocal empathy or communication, but in his ethics and his discussion of the love community.

*The Husserlian effort in describing the experience of the other consists in holding together the otherness of the other, her irreducible transcendence and, her similarity at the same time, valorising the two meanings that dwell in the expression "*alter ego*". Can a relationship aim to reciprocity without forgetting the asymmetry between subjects (Levinas 1991)? In short, how could the age-old question of the right distance be solved*?

I do indeed see clear parallels between Husserl and Levinas. Both of them highlight the importance of doing justice to the otherness of the other. But in

contrast to Levinas, I don't think that reciprocity amounts to simply reversibility. Here I would side with Iris Marion Young. As she pointed out in an article with the title "Asymmetrical Reciprocity"[4], any talk of reciprocity might indeed require that the other is "an 'I' to herself just as I am an 'I' to myself and that I am an 'other' to her just as she is an 'other' to me," but for Young, this "neither describes nor presupposes a reversibility of standpoints". To recognize that the other is a self is not to reduce the other to a copy of myself, or to assume that the perspective of the other is exactly like my own. We should consequently be wary of the assumption that we can understand others by some facile reversal of perspectives, by some imaginative perspective-taking. Often that kind of perspective taking is nothing but a form of self-projection that does violence to the other. One area where Husserl's recognition of the irreducible otherness of the other comes to the fore, is in his description of communication. When I encounter the other, when I am addressed by the other, I am, according to Husserl, subjected to a transformation that I couldn't accomplish on my own, that I couldn't bring about by some kind of imaginative self-displacement.

In your texts, you have often pointed out how Husserl's ambition for a phenomenological foundation of sciences, together with his interest in intersubjectivity, spiritual world, communication and personalities of a higher order, make a dialogue between phenomenology and social sciences inevitable to the point that Husserl himself considered his phenomenology a proto-sociology or a transcendental sociology (Zahavi 2019). What are the peculiarities of this approach and what can it bring to sociological investigation?

Contrary to a persisting misinterpretation, Husserl was indeed very concerned about intersubjectivity and ascribed it a central role in his account of the constitution of objectivity. But as has gradually become clear, Husserl's interest in intersubjectivity was neither restricted to an account of the empathic face-to-face encounter, nor to a fairly formal investigation of the extent to which objectivity must be understood as intersubjective validity. What can also be found

4. I. M. Young, *Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, And Enlarged Thought*, in «Constellations», (3) 3, 1997, pp. 340-363.

in Husserl's many writings are profound explorations of many different social formations and community types. To mention just a few, Husserl distinguishes life communities, love communities, language communities, I-you communities, communicative communities, practical communities of will and so on. He is not alone in offering this kind of taxonomy. Many other early phenomenologists including Scheler, Stein, Walther, Vierkandt, Gurwitsch and Schutz offer related distinctions. Insofar as we are talking about analyses of social formations, they should be of interest to sociologists, and indeed, Husserl's work was taken up by sociologists from early on. Vierkandt was one of the first. Schutz is the most well-known, and later prominent figures include Garfinkel, Berger and Luckmann. What does Husserl offer? As I see it, a much more careful investigation of (self) experience, intentionality, meaning and inter-subjectivity than one usually finds in sociology. Now this is not to say that Husserl's work, or for that matter the work of later phenomenological sociologists, is all that sociology needs. Far from it. There are many meso and macro structures that phenomenology has not and cannot analyse convincingly, but Husserl's investigation of the first-person perspective, of embodied intersubjectivity, of habituality, sedimentation, normality, communication etc., remains pertinent for an understanding of sociality.

Concerning the interdisciplinary approach, you make a distinction between pure and applied phenomenology (Zahavi 2021). What contribution can phenomenology offer to qualitative research, without these intersections ending up diluting its meaning? Doesn't the mobilisation of key concepts of phenomenology in other fields, removing them from their own transcendental framework, risk to empty them of their sense and to reduce phenomenology to a mere descriptive method? At the same time how can we adopt a "serious" phenomenological perspective without being too attached to a philological approach which can be quite irrelevant to this kind of investigations?

I have in the past argued that the application of phenomenology, its use outside of philosophy proper, must avoid the twin dangers of superficiality and hyper-philosophizing. It must avoid producing results that are either too trivial or too abstruse. Occasionally, the argument has been made that a study is phe-

nomenological as long as it contains careful first-person descriptions of experience. This is a much too broad definition, one that would ultimately fit most approaches in qualitative research. As I see it, a phenomenological approach must also draw inspiration from the philosophical texts of phenomenology, but this immediately confronts us with the next challenge, which is to avoid technical concepts or methodological requirements whose non-philosophical relevance is unclear. It is essential that phenomenology is being used in a transparent way, i.e., in such a way that it is clear which elements are being used and what role they are supposed to play. When it comes to applied phenomenology, a certain pragmatism is consequently appropriate. One should only use resources that are pertinent to the task at hand, and which can make a valuable difference, i.e., which can allow for new insights or better therapeutic interventions. But there are plenty of such resources, think merely of phenomenological analyses of the lifeworld, of empathy, or of embodiment, and the potential role they might play in, say, anthropology, psychiatry, or health care. It is of course true that there will be philosophical dimensions of these notions that cannot without further ado be transferred to and adopted by the empirical disciplines, but I don't see why that should be a problem. After all, the aim is not to transform anthropologists, psychiatrists and nurses into philosophers, but rather to offer them tools and concepts that will allow them to pursue their own work in a more informed manner.

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