our conscious experience introduces an irreducible transformation. However, since we are facing a case of pure reflexivity, where “experience observes itself,” the transformation alters observer and observed. The trade-off, thus, consists in the fact that the very transformation puts the original experience out of reach. We can have an original, naive experience, but we cannot inquire into it without the expert introspective skill that comes with phenomenological transformation. Or else, we can obtain the skill and inquire into our experience, but it is not the original experience anymore. Therefore, our phenomenological inquiry is, by definition, the inquiry of conscious experience under a mental state of epoché. It can be claimed that this last trade-off rests on the assumption that the naive observer is interacting with a real world, and that such an assumption is utterly wrong (Petitmengin & Bitbol 2009). After all, an epistemology such as radical constructivism claims precisely that the naive observer is as much constructing her perceptual realm as the trained phenomenologist (Riegler 2012). Nevertheless, even if the assumption is wrong, the fact remains that the naive and the experienced observers engage in a different kind of construction or enaction. They – and therefore their experience – differ, yet the naive observer’s experience cannot be studied thoroughly as she lacks the training phenomenologists (e.g., Varela 1996) claim to be indispensable.

6 This trade-off will not dissolve either when the scientific effort of phenomenology is guided by a constructivist epistemology to grasp the very process of construction or enaction as the author proposes, since, again, a naive enactive process must be assumed to differ from an expert one. In short, the process of becoming an expert introspectionist reduces the precision with which we can know what it is like to be a naive, non-expert introspectionist.

7 As the author warns, the project of a first-person endeavor such as phenomenology could fail to satisfy some of the most important aspects of mainstream scientific research, such as intersubjectivity and reproducibility. The author remains somewhat vague on how a constructivist epistemology can actually help phenomenology overcome these issues, yet, as I argue in this commentary, maybe the actual help consists merely of setting the boundaries of what phenomenology can achieve as a form of epistemic activity. On the other hand, a constructivist take on the activity of expert introspection such as phenomenology could reveal that the activity is radically different in kind from scientific research. This is clearly already suggested by the author when he writes that “Acquiring knowledge about experience is not so much about creating a categorical system as about expanding awareness to reach ever more subtle skills of bracketing the natural attitude and enhancing meta-experience (the experience of experience)” (§36).

8 Yet it would seem that the ambition persists that introspective research obtains the credentials to be considered a regular scientific endeavor:

"The new strategy we are searching for should, similarly to standard science, strive for stable, intersubjective patterns." (§39)

9 But this need not be so. The kind of insight that an expert introspectionist gains on her conscious experience need not be tantamount to science’s kind. To be sure, this is not to say that it is worthless, but simply that the modality of such knowledge cannot serve the same function as scientific knowledge. The idea is that introspective knowledge might belong to the so-called “know-how” or procedural kind of knowledge, whereas scientific knowledge is expected to be of the “know-that” or declarative kind. Indeed, procedural knowledge is typically dynamical and enacted, whereas declarative knowledge is “frozen” and passive. The consequences of this fact can be very deep and the marriage between constructivist epistemology and phenomenology proposed by the author appears to be a natural way of exploring them. However, rather than “bracketing” its expectations with regard to how well introspection will fare when compared to the results of standard science, as the author proposes (§62), a constructivist epistemology may need to be even more radical and “bracket” the very comparison with science itself. Perhaps expert introspection should proceed without complexes as if it was to conscious experience what, say, coaching is to sports.

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Constitution: Epistemological and Ontological

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> Upshot • Kordeš’s target article proposes to link constructivism and phenomenology, to their mutual benefit. In order to further this endeavour, this commentary suggests that it is important to distinguish two levels of constitution: the epistemological and the ontological. This may serve to clarify difficulties about achieving intersubjective validation.

1 The target article by Urban Kordeš proposes to link constructivism and phenomenology, to their mutual benefit. At several points, Kordeš refers to the process of constitution (§39 note 5, §§47, 51). It is relevant here to distinguish between the epistemic constitution of a scientific discipline and the ontological constitution of the object-matter itself. Epistemic constitution is the process whereby a community of scientists elaborate the theoretical concepts, the guiding principles and the set of empirical methods of the scientific discipline in question. Ontological constitution is the gesture whereby scientists define the very domain of existence of the phenomena that are to be investigated. I propose to elaborate on this distinction, and to explain how it may help in the endeavour proposed by Kordeš.
As I have argued elsewhere about cognitive science (Havelange 2010), phenomenology renews and displaces these questions of constitution. On one hand, phenomenology redefines epistemic constitution as the intentional constitution of objects, and seeks to elucidate the rules underlying this process (Husserl 1982). This constitution is “static” in the sense that it consists of a descriptive analysis of the intentional consciousness as it actively constitutes its perceptual and ideal objects. This static constitution is transversal, referring to transcendent objects of experience (“worldly” objects, or “external” objects in non-Husserlian terms); of course, this constitution is always dynamic in the sense that it takes into account the temporality of lived experience as intentional.

On the other hand, Edmund Husserl reformulates ontological constitution in terms of “genetic” constitution, i.e., as the historical formation of different types of acts in the apperception of subjectivity; the aim is to elucidate the transcendental laws of motivation and succession of lived experiences, as opposed to the laws of causal explanation proper to the natural sciences (Husserl 1989). Genetic constitution thus deals with immanent lived experiences, and introduces a reflexive dimension with respect to static constitution. However, the elucidation of a genetic constitution can only ever be carried out on the basis of the lived experience of intentional objects. This is why it is vain to ask whether one should privilege static or genetic constitution; they entertain a circular relation and are inseparable (Depraz 2000). The question is rather to examine the relationship between an epistemic constitution (redefined by phenomenology as the static constitution of intentional objects), and an ontological constitution redefined as the historical formation and construction of different types of immanent acts.

What then is the relation between “static” constitution and “genetic” constitution in the development of Husserl’s thought? Initially, at the stage of static constitution, Husserl considered that phenomenological enquiry was situated at a more fundamental level than scientific research, and provided the latter with its basic concepts (Husserl 1973, 1982). But this primacy was shaken by two concomitant factors: one negative, the other positive. On one hand, when the features of temporality, of the living body, and the facticity of worldly objects were taken into account, this shattered the project of establishing an over-riding constitution, without any remainders, of its objects by a sovereign transcendental subjectivity; an absolute constitution turns out to be radically impossible. On the other hand, this very impossibility both renders possible, and demands, a genetic constitution that undermines the primacy and the principled precedence of phenomenology with respect to the sciences. The genetic constitution elaborated by Husserl in the framework of the “way of psychology” and the “way of the life-world (Lebenswelt)” requires taking into account the constitutive role of the living body, of worldly objects, and historical traces in all their facticity. The fronts between “phenomenological psychology” and psychology, between “phenomenological sociology” and sociology, are thus anything but watertight. In this way, there emerges a hermeneutical cross-reference between static constitution and genetic constitution.

How may these considerations contribute to Kordeš’ proposal? In his text, he repeatedly refers to the issue of intersubjective validation (§§31, 34, 38, 52, 56, 58, 60, 62, and most insistently in §39). On the face of it, intersubjective agreement may seem to be an epistemological issue. However, the point I want to make is that for epistemological agreement to be even on the cards, there is a pre-condition: the ontological constitution of the various partners must be commensurate. In Crisis (Husserl 1970), Husserl himself expresses concern about the extreme diversification and fragmentation of lived-worlds in contemporary Europe, which produce a profound crisis not only in the sciences, but also in life itself. One can add that even within a single society, in a given territory, there are radical differences in the way individuals build their lived-worlds. To illustrate this point, Daniel Stern (1990)imaginatively evokes the lived-world of an infant, which is quite different from that of an adult; feminists will be quick to point out that women and men have quite different experiences of life; and socially, the lived-world of a corporate financial speculator has virtually nothing in common with that of an adolescent in a derelict suburb.

And to drive home the point, the lived experience of a natural scientist in a given discipline is actually highly specific and in its way very peculiar (cf. Latour & Woolgar 1979); it certainly has no ontological privilege.

To sum up: epistemologically, the attempt to construct a shared, intersubjective world-view can always be undertaken. However, a pre-requisite for possible success is that the subjects concerned should share a common ontological constitution of their lived-world. Given the immense diversity of the lived-worlds that are accessible to human beings, this is anything but trivial; and so the eventual failure to achieve intersubjective “validation” should not be a cause for undue dismay.

Véronique Havelange’s research, carried out at the Technological University of Compiègne, deals with the foundations of the mind sciences under their various guises: that of the classical human and social sciences embodied in the debate between explaining (erklären) and understanding (verstehen); and, more recently, that of cognitive science. This research involves a joint interrogation of cognitive science and phenomenology, radically different from the project of “naturalizing phenomenology” entertained by first-generation cognitive science.

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