The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy

Daniele De Santis, Burt C. Hopkins, Claudio Majolino

Consciousness

Publication details
Walter Hopp
Published online on: 25 Aug 2020

Accessed on: 27 Jun 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Consciousness is phenomenology’s fundamental subject matter. According to Husserl, phenomenology is a descriptive, eidetic or a priori science of “pure experiences.” That characterization, however, is only part of the story. Consciousness, as we will see, exhibits intentionality; it is directed upon the world and the objects in it. Describing its intentional achievements requires that we also discuss the contents, including meanings, in virtue of which it is about them, and the objects meant. As he expresses it, “To elucidate these connections between veritable being and knowing and so in general to investigate the correlations between act, meaning, object is the task of transcendental phenomenology” (Husserl 2008, 434). There could be no understanding of consciousness itself without understanding the nature of its relation to ideal meanings and real objects, neither of which are literally parts of it. As he writes, “To the extent … that every consciousness is ‘consciousness-of,’ the essential study of consciousness includes also that of consciousness-meaning and consciousness-objectivity as such.”

10.1. Some essential features of consciousness

In Ideas I, Husserl discusses a number of essential features and structures of consciousness that are peculiar to it. This section goes over some of the more salient ones.

a. The mode of givenness of consciousness

One of the first noticeable features of consciousness is that it is presented and presentable in ways unlike anything else. Husserl identifies four features of the givenness of consciousness that, jointly, are unique to it. First, conscious experiences are immanent rather than transcendent. Second, they are adequately given. Third, they are indubitably given. And fourth, they are capable of being given in reflection.

According to Husserl, the objects of “outer” perception are “transcendent.” This means that they are given to consciousness by appearing, at any given time, in one of a number of possible ways of appearing. To use his example, as I perceive the table, the table is given as a unified object over against a changing flow of perceptual experiences of it (Husserl 2014, §41, 71). This is not only true of the table, but of each of its properties, including its “secondary” qualities such as color (ibid., 72). Consciousness itself, however, is not given by way of appearances or profiles (Husserl 2014, §42, 75).
Rather, experience, and experience alone, “has the intrinsic property of being perceivable in immanent perception” (ibid., 74). Because of this, physical objects can only ever be given inadequately. “A thing can be given only ‘one-sidedly’ in principle” (Husserl 2014, §44, 77). Conscious experiences, by contrast, do not have hidden parts or sides that would come into view with changes in our experience—quite obviously not, since a change in our experience would be a change in the properties of the experience. “It is,” writes Husserl, “an essential property of immanent givenness to afford something absolute that cannot display itself in sides and profiles at all” (Husserl 2014, §44, 79).

It would be a mistake to conclude from these claims that in ordinary experience we confront two objects: the experience and, over against it, its object. On Husserl’s view, all of the components of consciousness are, while occurring, experienced or conscious. They are not, however, typically objects of experience (Husserl 1970a, 537). When I see a red apple, I do not see my own experience or its parts. In non-reflective awareness, “we know nothing of the processes of intuition itself or the essences and essential infinites inherent to it, nothing of their materials and inherent noetic aspects” (Husserl 2014, §150, 300). This does not mean we are unconscious of them. As he writes later, “there is also consciousness of every act. Every experience is ‘sensed,’ is immanently perceived (internal consciousness), although naturally not posited, not meant” (Husserl 1991, 369). In fact, they are not really objects of non-reflective consciousness at all, not even marginal or background objects (Zahavi 1999, 61). Rather, his view seems to be similar to Sartre’s, according to which every consciousness is both the positional or objectifying awareness of its object, and the non-positional awareness of itself (Sartre 1956, 13; Zahavi 2003a). Nevertheless, each conscious experience is “intrinsically ready to be perceived” (Husserl 2014, §45, 81; also §78, 142). Moreover, experiences are ready to be perceived no matter our orientation to the world. I do not need to find my way to an experience through bodily adjustments or through “continuously and coherently motivated series of perceptions” (ibid.). A simple turn of attention is all that is required. Moreover, this ability to be perceived in reflection is an essential feature of experiences. When made thematic, they are given to us as having been “already there” (Husserl 2014, §45, 81). It is, however, not an essential feature of a background object in perception that as long as it exists, it is “already there” for attentional consideration. A couch can fall out of the field of consciousness altogether, in which case it is not simply there to be attended to, without in any way losing its being as a couch.

b. The temporality of consciousness

A further feature of consciousness is that each experience is part of, and is itself, a temporally extended flow. “Every experience is in itself a flow of becoming” characterized by “a constant flow of retentions and protentions mediated by a phase of an originary sort, that is itself flowing” (Husserl 2014, §78, 143). When I dribble a basketball, for instance, I am conscious of it hitting the pavement. But it would radically underdescribe the experience to stop there. I am aware of it hitting-the-pavement-after-hitting-my-hand. The awareness of it having just hit my hand is also something of which I am aware at the time it hits the pavement. I do not, moreover, have a reproductive memory of it having hit my hand, but a “retention,” a perception of what has just passed as having just passed, “of what has just been” (Husserl 1991, §12, 34). At the same time it hits the pavement, I also anticipate it bouncing back up to my hand. I have, that is, a “protention” of the future (see Husserl 1991, §40, 89).

c. The attentional structure of consciousness

Paradigmatic acts of consciousness are those in which we are attentively aware of something—acts which Husserl designates with the term “cogito” (Husserl 2014, §35, 62). Not all conscious
awareness is in the mode of the “cogito,” however. For instance, I may focus on part of a basketball to determine whether or not the grip is too worn. In doing so I am not only aware of the basketball and its surface. I am also aware of a background of co-perceived objects. This is true, moreover, in every case of perception; “Each perception of a thing thus has a halo of background-intuitions,” each of which is also a consciousness-of something (Husserl 2014, §35, 61). Husserl regards this structure as essential to all types of consciousness. As he puts it, “The stream of experience can never consist of actualizations alone” (Husserl 2014, §35, 62). Furthermore, both actual or focal and non-focal experiences are convertible into one another. Given in the background of my basketball-perception, for example, is the pavement. But it belongs to the essence of my basketball-perception that the basketball can sink into the background, and that my perception of the pavement can become “actional” or attentive (ibid.).

d. Relation to the ego

“Every ‘cogito,’” writes Husserl, “is characterized in a pre-eminent sense as an act of the ego” (Husserl 2014, §80, 153). That is, attentional experiences are those in which the ego takes part, in which it “lives” (ibid.). In seeing a basketball, I undergo a visual experience. My visual experience of the basketball does not perceive the basketball, however. Rather, “I perceive it” (Husserl 2014, §80, 154). As for the background experiences, they “form the general milieu for the actuality of the ego.” While they lack the “pre-eminent relatedness to the ego” possessed by each cogito, they are still related to it. The pavement on the ground is part of my “background of consciousness” (ibid.).

e. The “two-sidedness” of consciousness

Each conscious experience has “a subjectively oriented side and an objectively oriented side” (Husserl 2014, §80, 155). This does not, Husserl insists, mean that the experience is directed at both an object and the ego. Rather, it means that the experience presents an object to or for the ego. In Donn Welton’s terms, consciousness has a “for-structure” (Welton 2000, 22). In being of an object, and presenting it as being a certain way, experience at the same time presents it to or for a perceiving subject.

10.2. Consciousness and intentionality

Now we turn to the feature of consciousness that has arguably captured the most philosophical interest: intentionality. In his attempt to distinguish physical from mental phenomena, Franz Brentano articulated one of the most well-known theses in the philosophy of mind:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call … reference to a content, direction toward an object … or immanent objectivity. (Brentano 1973, 88)

Perception is of the perceived; love is directed toward the beloved, and so on in other cases. Brentano adds that intentional inexistence of an object is exhibited by all mental phenomena, and that “No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it” (Brentano 1973, 89).

Like Brentano, Husserl rigorously distinguishes acts and their objects. But on Husserl’s view, merely distinguishing acts and objects, and being mindful of the intentional “relation” that binds
Consciousness

them, sheds very little light on the nature of consciousness. Husserl’s position is that conscious experiences are internally complex phenomena that instantiate a wide variety of distinctive properties, both intentional and non-intentional, and which bear law-governed and complicated relationships to one another. The distinctive “relation” that consciousness bears to its objects cannot be made intelligible without appealing to those features. All of the aforementioned features belong to consciousness and help explain its achievements. But it is intentionality that is “the main theme of phenomenology” (Husserl 2001, 161). Not everything making up the flow of consciousness is a bearer of intentionality. The stream of consciousness also contains sensory or “hyletic” components, which only acquire the feature of presenting us with corresponding qualities of objects by being “interpreted” (Husserl 1970a, Investigation 5, §§ 2, 9, 14, 15b). This is one significant point of dispute between Brentano’s view and Husserl’s. Nevertheless, it does appear to be Husserl’s view that while not all of the parts and components of consciousness are intentional, the non-intentional components are, in the case of a genuinely “psychical” subject, typically bound up as parts or moments of intentional experiences.

In ordinary experience, as we have seen, many of the components of the stream of consciousness are not objects of experience. Moreover, most objects of experience are not components of the stream. It is clear that not all objects of consciousness exist in the mind, for the simple reason that we can direct our thoughts to nonexistent objects, and they do not exist anywhere (Willard 1995, 156). I can think of or imagine the god Jupiter, but since Jupiter does not exist at all, he does not exist as a real component in my stream of consciousness (Husserl 1970a, 558–559).

Neither, for that matter, do most objects of consciousness, including all “external” or physical objects. The red apple I see is not a constituent of the stream of consciousness any more than the god Jupiter is. “Is it not obvious that an object, even when real (real) and truly existent, cannot be conceived as a real part of the act which thinks it” (Husserl 1970a, 352)? Nor is there an additional “immanent” or merely “intentional” red apple in my consciousness. The perception of a red apple has, as its object, the red apple, and this object is identical with the act’s intentional object (Husserl 1970a, 595). For Husserl this point is purely phenomenological. Whatever the precise ontological status of a red apple, it is a phenomenological mistake to try to identify it, or anything at all like it, with any real components of anyone’s stream of consciousness. For starters, none of the four features of the givenness of experiences is true of apples or any of the properties of apples.

When we are conscious of Jupiter, a red apple, or anything else, what is really in consciousness is the intentional experience, along with its parts and features. Furthermore, the presence of such an experience is sufficient for us to be conscious of the corresponding object. “If this experience is present, then, eo ipso and through its own essence … the ‘intentional relation’ to an object is achieved.” So while the red apple is nowhere “in” the mind which is conscious of it, what accounts for the fact that the act is of the red apple is.

So what does make up the intentional experience itself? Its “content,” certainly. Husserl, however, distinguishes a number of senses of the term “content.” The most important ambiguity to clear away is that between the “intentional” content and the “descriptive” or “real” content. By “intentional,” Husserl means the intended “content,” what we are conscious of—that is, the act’s object. As we have seen, that “content” need not be, and usually is not, a real content of consciousness. In part, no doubt, to curb the temptation to suppose otherwise, Husserl adopts the helpful practice of not calling the object of consciousness its “content” (Husserl 1970a, 580).

Within the real content of an act—the content which literally resides in and makes up the act—we find three distinct kinds of components. First, there are the act’s aforementioned sensory components. Second, there is the act’s matter, which determines both which object is meant and how it is meant (Husserl 1970a, 589). Finally, there is the act’s quality. The quality or “act-character”
is that moment which “stamps an act as merely presentative, judgemental, emotional, desiderative, etc.” (Husserl 1970a, 586). I can believe that an apple is red, but I can also doubt it, desire it, merely represent it, value it, and so on. The matter and quality together comprise an act’s “intentional essence” (Husserl 1970a, 590). Despite calling it an “essence,” Husserl is quite clear that the intentional essence is part of an act’s real content: “[W]e can mean by ‘content’ … its meaning as an ideal unity … To this corresponds, as a real (reelles) moment in the real (reellen) content of the presentative act, the intentional essence with its … quality and matter” (Husserl 1970a, 657).

Finally, as the last quotation makes clear, “content” can refer to an act’s ideal content—for instance, a meaning. Meanings can be made thematic objects through an “ideational abstraction” of an act’s intentional or semantic essence (Husserl 1970a, 590). This sort of content is sharable among numerically distinct acts. An act’s ideal content is not its intentional object. When I think that a certain apple is red, the proposition or meaning <the apple is red> is not what I am thinking about. Rather, I think about the state of affairs of the apple’s being red. Nor is the ideal content a real component or part of the act. When twenty people believe <the apple is red>, there are twenty acts, with twenty intentional essences, involved, but only one proposition. Rather, the ideal content is instantiated in the act (Husserl 1970a, 330).

Everything, for Husserl, instantiates ideal properties (Husserl 1970a, 11), and intentional acts are no different. What they instantiate are ways of being of something, and that is what meanings are (B. Smith 2000, 294).

10.3. Consciousness and knowledge

One of the most important distinctions among intentional acts is between those which are intuitive, such as perception, imagination, image-consciousness, and the “seeing” of essences, and those which are “signitive” or empty. One can merely think about an object. But that object can also, in many cases, be given. The distinction here is not between the objects of consciousness, but between their modes of givenness.

Two notable differences between intuitive and signitive acts immediately stand out. First, intuitive and signitive experiences are very different phenomenologically. There is a self-evident phenomenological difference between merely thinking of a red apple and perceiving one. Second, the two types of experience are radically different epistemically. Merely thinking that a given apple is red does not, in itself, provide any evidence at all that it is. Perceiving an apple to be red, however, provides excellent, though defeasible, evidence that it is red.

When it comes to empirical objects and states of affairs, perception is the “originary” mode of intuition (Husserl 2014, 9), that mode in which they are not merely presented, as may occur in memory or even imagination, but presented “in person” (Husserl 2014, 93). Intuition itself comes in degrees. The highest grade is immanent or adequate intuition. In adequate intuition, an object is completely given in a non-perspectival way. In such acts, “different perceptions have different objects” (Husserl 1997, §10, 22). Among the possible objects of adequate intuition, as we have seen, are one’s own “pure” experiences—that is, experiences grasped without any positing of natural realities. Physical objects, by contrast, cannot be given adequately, and neither can any of their parts or properties. They are transcendent to any act of perceiving them insofar as no experience of them is complete or fully disclosive. For any such entity, there are many possible perceptual experiences of it, each of which is originary but inadequate. This is true, Husserl insists, even with respect to the “secondary” qualities such as color; the appearance of any physical object or property “can and must continuously change in the course of ostensive experience of it” (Husserl 2014, §41, 72).

Husserl, as we have seen, holds that conscious acts intend their objects in virtue of their own internal parts and features. This is equally true in the case of transcendent objects. To characterize
Consciousness

an object as transcendent is not just to register the fact that there is more to it or that further experiences of it are possible. Rather, a transcendent object is also intended as having more to it in an experience that is, on its own terms, incomplete (Husserl 1969, §94, 233; also see A.D. Smith 2008, 324). When we perceive an apple, for instance, there is an intended surplus to the object. This sense of the object’s transcendence is due to the act’s horizons. “Every momentary phase of perception is in itself a network of partially full and partially empty intentions,” writes Husserl, and these empty intentions help constitute the act’s horizon (Husserl 2001, 44). Thanks to their intentionality, which exceeds that of the intuitive content of the act, we are aware of something on the side of the object that exceeds what is given. Naturally an act’s horizon does not merely specify that there is “more” to a perceived object, but intends the object’s features with varying degrees of determinacy (Husserl 2001, 42). As he puts it, “It is an emptiness that is not a nothingness, but an emptiness to be filled-out; it is a determinable indeterminacy. For the intentional horizon cannot be filled out in just any manner” (Husserl 2001, 42). When I see an apple, I anticipate that it will be approximately the same color on the unseen side, and that its interior will be, well, appley rather than hollow or filled with molten rock.

Intuitive acts can and normally do function as constituents of more complex acts of fulfillment. In fulfillment, an object is not merely intuited and not merely thought of, but “is seen as being exactly the same as it is thought of” (Husserl 1970a, 696). I can merely see a red apple. But I can also verify the proposition that the apple is red on the basis of such a seeing. In such a case, the state of affairs of the apple’s being red is intended by both the intuitive act and the conceptual act. Furthermore, the two acts must be synthesized in such a way that the object perceived is recognized as the object which is meant. This can fail to occur. One can perceive a B-flat without conceptualizing it. One can even perceive a B-flat while simultaneously thinking about a B-flat without recognizing the heard note as a B-flat. And one can veridically perceive a B-flat while misconceiving of it or misidentifying it as an F. In none of these cases is anything wrong with one’s hearing. Fulfillment, then, is a much more complicated type of act than mere intuition. It is a “union of the conceptualizing act with the object, on the basis of a corresponding intuition of that object together with a recognition of the identity of the object of the concept and of the perception” (Willard 1995, 152).

The epistemic importance of fulfillment ought to be clear. The single best way to verify a proposition is by directly confronting the objects or affairs with which it is concerned. If I want to know whether I left my car lights on, for example, I will go check. If they are on, then my thought that the lights are on will be fulfilled by my perceptual experience, and my belief that they are on will have acquired justification. According to Husserl’s “Principle of all Principles,”

[W]hatever presents itself to us in “Intuition” in an originary way … is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself there.

(Husserl 2014, §24, 43)

Because the state of affairs of my lights being on is given in an originary (though inadequate) way in perception, I am rationally permitted—perhaps even obligated—to take my lights to be on. My justification that the lights are on is not infallible, nor can it be made so. But this is not cause for complaint. To demand a higher degree of evidence for empirical propositions than can possibly be delivered by the acts in which their objects are originary given is absurd (Ideas I §79, 151). Neither ordinary life nor science demands any such thing. As Husserl puts it, “To reduce evidence to an insight that is apodictic is to bar oneself from an understanding of any scientific production” (Husserl 1969, §60, 161).
Regarded in one way, acts of intuition and fulfillment are simply species under the more general heading of intentional experiences. But this obscures the fundamental priority of intuition and fulfillment—of Evidenz and with it of knowledge—to empty thinking (Moran 2000, 15). First, empty acts provide by themselves no evidence whatsoever for the truth of their own contents. Nor do they, by themselves, provide any evidence for other contents.10 Merely thinking that (a) \( P \) and (b) \( \text{If } P, \text{ then } Q \) provides no evidence at all for \( Q \). Without acts of fulfillment, our beliefs would be entirely ungrounded. The reason is that empty acts do not bear within themselves an authentic relation to their objects. They are “only called presentations in an inauthentic sense; genuinely speaking they do not actually present anything to us, an objective sense is not constituted in them” (Husserl 2001, 113–114).

Secondly, objectifying acts—those which depict how things are—are not simply oriented toward beings and, with them, to truth. “Thanks to evidence,” writes Husserl, “the life of consciousness has an all-pervasive teleological structure” (Husserl 1969, §60, 160). What that “teleological structure” is oriented toward, in the case of objectifying consciousness, is not only truth but also the immediate consciousness of truth in fulfillment.11

Finally, for any object of which we are or can be conscious, there are intentional structures in virtue of which we are conscious of it in the way that we are. This is what A.D. Smith calls Husserl’s “transcendental insight” (A.D. Smith 2003, 28). As Husserl puts it, “every sense that any existent whatever has or can have for me … is a sense in and arising from my intentional life” (Husserl 1977, §43, 91). Again, he writes that “Nothing exists for me otherwise than by virtue of the actual and potential performance of my own consciousness” (Husserl 1969, §94, 234). These actual and potential conscious performances “constitute” the object for us, and the main task of phenomenology is to examine the conscious contents, structures, and relations in virtue of which objects of varying types are constituted (Husserl 2001, 269). Among these constituting intentionalities, however, the givenness of objects in Evidenz occupies a position of decided privilege.

What things are—the only things that we make assertions about, the only things whose being or nonbeing, whose being in a certain way or being otherwise we dispute and can rationally decide—they are as things of experience.

(Husserl 2014, §47, 85)

Because of this, the idea of an evidentially ungrounded noetic structure is an absurdity. Without a grounding in evidence, not only knowledge but intentionality itself would be impossible (Husserl 1969, §86, 209). The sense of any concept or meaning is best explicated with reference to its fulfilling sense, the intuitive acts which present what it represents.12 Intuition does not merely confirm judgments; it provides them, ultimately, with their sense and intentional reference.

10.4. Consciousness and being

Intentional acts are oriented toward beings, and understanding what those beings are is bound up with some sort of understanding of how they manifest themselves to consciousness.13 “The real cannot be conceived apart from its manifestation to subjectivity” (Sokolowski 1964, 219). Husserl is well aware that not everything we think about does or even can, as a matter of fact, present itself to our consciousness. But while not every object can in fact be given to us, Husserl holds that any object whatsoever could present itself to some possible consciousness.

To every region and category of alleged objects there corresponds not only a basic kind of senses or posits but also a basic kind of consciousness originally affording such
senses and, inherent to it, a basic type of originary evidence, that is essentially moti-
vated by the originary givenness of the specified kind.\textsuperscript{14}

So, even if quarks or black holes cannot be given with \textit{Evidenz} to us, they could in principle be given in such a manner to some possible consciousness. Objects beyond the \textit{possible} reach of intuitive consciousness, while \textit{logically} possible, are “material absurdit[ies].”\textsuperscript{15} Nothing could count as a rational motivation for believing in them.\textsuperscript{16}

A further interesting feature of Husserl’s view is that objects are not merely contingently or accidentally related to their modes of appearing to consciousness. Squares cannot be given in the way that violin sonatas are, and the ongoing flow of consciousness could not be given in the way external objects are. Of course, it is compatible with Husserl’s view that some things may superficially resemble others. And it is compatible with his view that there are more ways that squares—to say nothing of persons or galaxies—could possibly present themselves to conscious creatures over and above the ways that they present themselves to us. But the \textit{totality} of ways in which squares (and persons and galaxies) present themselves could not present something else. This is, arguably, equally true of natural kinds and individuals. Something might resemble water superficially. But there is no possible stuff, distinct from water, all of whose actual and possible ways of manifesting itself to any possible consciousness are identical with those of water. Not only could there be no rational motivation for believing in such a thing, but we cannot form any contentful conception of such a thing. Such a supposition is as implausible as supposing that something could feel exactly like pain but not be pain. The only difference is that water is given, in any single presentation, much less adequately than pain.\textsuperscript{17}

No doubt Husserl’s view on the relationship between consciousness and its objects will strike some as a version of metaphysical idealism, and this impression is only aggravated by his talk of “constituting” objects through conscious acts. But there is a realist reading of his view.

[S]eeing consciousness… is just acts of thought formed in certain ways, and things, which are not acts of thought, are nonetheless constituted in them, come to givenness in them.

\textit{(Husserl 1999, 52)}

Here constitution is identified with bringing objects to givenness, which may or may not involve any actual making of them. And Husserl does not seem to think it is a case of making. As he puts it,

Even God is for me what he is, in consequence of my own accomplishment of con-
sciousness [\textit{Bewussteinsleistung}] … Here too, as in the case of the other ego, productivity of consciousness will hardly signify that I invent or make this highest transcendency.\textsuperscript{18}

Immediately afterwards he writes: “The like is true of the world and of all worldly causation” \textit{(ibid.)}. Dallas Willard interprets Husserl’s position in realist terms as follows: “The connection between the act and the object is not, in general, an existential one, but is one of essences.”\textsuperscript{19} Any possible object is essentially such that it could be apprehended with \textit{Evidenz}. Each essentially has an \textit{appearance}, the manner in which “it is known or apprehended” (D.W. Smith 2004, 17). But it does not thereby owe its existence to consciousness. Similarly, salt is essentially soluble in water without thereby owing its existence to water. One could not tell the total story of salt without mentioning that it is soluble in water, and specifying how and under what conditions it enters into such a solution. This would be true even in a world that did not contain any actual
Similarly, no account of the world and the objects, properties, relations, and states of affairs therein could be complete which neglects to mention, and indeed spell out in detail, their ability to be known and the types of conscious acts in which they could be known. This is part of the total story of everything, including salt, even in worlds with no actual consciousnesses.

Of course, when it comes to appearances, most sciences do not say anything at all about this dimension of an object’s being. One cannot and should not expect a chemistry book to contain any statements about salt’s wonderful power to present itself to consciousness in knowledge and fulfillment, much less a developed account of how that happens. Nevertheless, the chemistry book itself stands as a testimony to salt’s capacity to do exactly that. Just like anything whatsoever, salt can only be given to us through our mental activities. But mental activities do not make salt, but make salt an object for us, something of which we can be consciously aware (Drummond 1990, 270). Our natural attitude is one of “infatuation” with objects at the expense of the “constituting multiplicities belonging essentially to them” on the side of consciousness (Husserl 1970b, §52, 176). This does not make the natural attitude deficient—infatuation with the world is exactly what is called for if we want to know about it (see Hardy 2013, 63). It does, however, mean that the natural attitude and the sciences taking place within it are incomplete and at the constant risk of misconstruing themselves and the nature of their subject matter (Husserl 1969, 13).

10.5. The mystery of consciousness

Finally, we turn to the “mystery” of consciousness. Consciousness is widely agreed to be among the most puzzling phenomena in existence. Husserl agrees, in part. Consciousness lies at the heart of what he calls the “enigma of subjectivity” or, more radically, the “enigma of all enigmas” (Husserl 1970b, §5, 13), namely “the essential interrelation between reason and what is in general” (ibid.). But that enigma is not insoluble. Indeed, Husserl’s account, as sketched above, provides the beginnings of an intelligible solution to it. Consciousness has an intelligible structure and nature that can be given to us and described as it is given to us, and what such descriptions uncover, among other things, are the essential relations that consciousness and its objects bear to one another.

What is noteworthy, however, is that Husserl’s reasons for finding consciousness enigmatic are not those that grip most contemporary philosophers. From a broadly naturalistic perspective, which of course has no shortage of adherents, consciousness appears to be a problematic outlier, a nonconformist in an otherwise intelligible, objective, and exclusively physical world. This gives rise to the mystery of just how “consciousness arises from the physical” (Chalmers 1996, 243). Even if we think we know that it does, any conceivable attempt to explain how leaves us with an apparently unbridgeable “explanatory gap” (Levine 1983).

This is a mystery to which Husserl devotes surprisingly little attention. No doubt part of the reason is that Husserl was unencumbered by any felt need to make consciousness “fit” into a preferred ontology. More importantly, though, Husserl does not think that the physical world investigated by the sciences is made ultimately intelligible by those sciences alone. Instead, he holds that the only way to make anything ultimately intelligible is by exhibiting how it is related to conscious intentionality (Husserl 1970b, §49, 168; also see §55, 189). At the very least, as we have seen, that means that no account of the world could possibly be complete that fails to spell out the appearances of things and the conscious acts in virtue of which they appear. As Dermot Moran puts it, “Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity” (Moran 2000, 15). And objectivity itself can only be completely understood as something that gets constituted or brought to givenness in subjectivity. “For,” as Zahavi points out, “how things appear is an integral part of what they really are” (Zahavi 2003c, 55).
It is also customary among many contemporary philosophers to draw a distinction between the intentionality of mental states and their phenomenal or qualitative or experiential character, which determines “what it is like” to undergo such an experience (Nagel 1974). For those who think that these features can come apart, there is an additional mystery: why is there consciousness, and in particular experiential consciousness, at all? What function might it serve if information processing, learning, the detection of features in one’s surrounding environment, and the regulation of action can occur without it? As Chalmers expresses this “hard problem,” “even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioural functions … there may still remain the unanswered question: Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?” (Chalmers 2004, 621).

This mystery is one which Husserl simply did not consider. It is arguably an artifact not only of a naturalistic metaphysics to which Husserl claimed no allegiance, but of what, on his terms, surely amounts to a radically flawed description of consciousness itself (Zahavi 2003b; Ratcliffe 2007; Fasching 2012). If not the only type of intentionality, for Husserl, it is clear that conscious phenomenal intentionality is the paradigmatic type. One obvious reason for this is that on Husserl’s view, as we have seen, intuitive intentionality grounds the whole structure of intentionality. But intuitive acts are essentially conscious. Detecting features and objects or extracting information from an environment is not at all the same as being intuitively conscious of anything. I believe Fasching makes this point best with respect to machines: “Regardless of how elaborate its computations may be, in whatever causal relations they may stand to the environment and how ‘intelligent’ its output may be … for the computer itself nothing is there at all, since no ‘thereness’ (consciousness) occurs in the first place” (Fasching 2012, 127). Since non-intuitive acts borrow their intentionality from their capacity, or the capacity of their components, to be intuitively fulfilled, it becomes difficult to make sense of their intentionality in the absence of consciousness either.

10.6. Conclusion

After reviewing some of the central tenets of Husserl’s conception of consciousness, it should be clear that if it really does possess most of the features discussed above, that suffices to mark off consciousness as a distinct region instantiating essences unique to it. Insofar as a science of objects must be grounded in experiences in which those objects are given, a science of consciousness must be grounded in reflection. “Reflection” is “the name for consciousness’ method of knowing consciousness at all” (Husserl 2014, 142). For this reason, Husserl criticizes the “modern exact psychology” of his time, whose “ubiquitous fundamental trait … is to set aside any direct and pure analysis of consciousness” (Husserl 1965, 92), largely because of “its naturalistic point of view as well as its zeal to imitate the natural sciences and to see experimental procedures as the main point” (ibid., 101–102). That criticism may still have some validity.

Understanding just how consciousness fits with everything else in the natural world remains, I think it is fair to say, a task so far unaccomplished. Nevertheless, it seems certain that a necessary condition of achieving such an understanding is to investigate consciousness on its own terms, and to allow those investigations to proceed without any imperative to ensure that the results conform to a favored set of metaphysical commitments. Whether the place of consciousness in the world is best captured by monism, dualism, materialism, idealism, naturalism, or some -ism not here mentioned or even yet conceived, the rich philosophical insights of the phenomenological tradition are in large measure explained by Husserl’s willingness to investigate consciousness as it shows itself, and a corresponding resistance to allowing premises from other disciplines, much less metaphysical theses from overarching worldviews, to override what is given in phenomenological reflection.
Notes

1 Husserl 2014, §75, 134; also Husserl 1970a, 862.
2 Husserl 1965, 90. This supports Dan Zahavi’s claim that “only a complete misunderstanding of the aim of phenomenology leads us to the mistaken but often repeated claim that Husserl’s phenomenology is not interested in reality or the question of being, but only in subjective meaning-formations in intentional consciousness” (Zahavi 2003c, 63).
3 Watzl (2017, 2) defines attentional structure as “organizing the mind into parts that are central or prioritized and those that are peripheral.” Husserl’s view on attention is helpfully discussed in Jacobs 2010 and Dicey Jennings 2012, 541–543.
4 Husserl 2014, §80, 154.
5 “A real being deprived of such experiences, merely having contents inside it such as the experiences of sense, but unable to interpret these objectively … would not be called ‘psychical’ by anyone” (Husserl 1970a, 553).
6 Husserl 1970a, 558. In Husserl 2014, §36, 63, he writes: “The essence of experience itself entails not only that it is consciousness, but also of what it is the consciousness.”
7 See Husserl 1970a, 559: “These so-called immanent contents are therefore merely intended or intentional, while truly immanent contents, which belong to the real make-up of the intentional experiences, are not intentional: they constitute the act, provide necessary points d’ appui which render possible an intention, but are not themselves intended, not the objects presented in the act.”
8 Husserl 1970a, 332; also see Willard 1984, 182.
9 See Peacocke 2001, 240. Also see A.D. Smith 2002, 75–76.
10 A point also made by Paul Moser (2011).
11 Willard 1984, 231; Bernet 2003, 159; Dahlstrom 2001, 60ff. also see Husserl 1970a, 726.
12 First Logical Investigation, §14; also see Benoist 2003, 22 and Willard 1984, 207.
14 Husserl 2014, §138, 276; also see Husserl 1969 §60, 161.
16 Such entities might, nevertheless, be possible. See Yoshimi 2015.
17 Crowell 2008, 346.
18 Husserl 1969 §99, 251, translation modified; also see Mohanty 1989, 151.
19 Willard 1984, 236. For two of the clearest and most compelling expositions of a Husserlian realist position, see Willard 2002 and Willard 2003.
20 This thesis has been recently defended by a number of philosophers. Some of the more prominent proponents are Siewert (1998, Chapter 7) Horgan and Tienson (2002), Loar (2003), Zahavi (2003b), and Kriegel (2011). Also check out the articles in Kriegel (ed.) (2014). One of the earliest explicit defenders of the view of which I am aware is David Woodruff Smith (1989, §4.1).

References

Consciousness


