

Ricerche

# Unforgivable Sinners? Epistemological and Psychological Naturalism in Husserl's *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*

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**Riassunto** *Peccatori imperdonabili? Il naturalismo epistemologico e psicologico nella Filosofia come scienza rigorosa di Husserl* - In questo articolo intendo presentare e discutere le tesi avanzate da Husserl contro il naturalismo epistemologico e psicologico in *La filosofia come scienza rigorosa*. Intendo mostrare come la sua critica si rivolga a posizioni generalmente più estreme rispetto alle varianti del naturalismo oggi dibattute; e tuttavia le tesi husserliane hanno implicazioni interessanti per la discussione contemporanea. In primo luogo, egli mostra come vi sia un nesso importante tra naturalismo epistemologico (la tesi secondo cui la validità della logica può essere ridotta alla validità delle leggi naturali del pensiero) e naturalismo psicologico (la tesi secondo cui tutte le occorrenze psichiche sono semplici eventi che accompagnano parallelamente le occorrenze fisiologiche). In secondo luogo, egli mostra come una versione robusta di naturalismo epistemologico indebolisca se stesso, non riuscendo a traslare la cogenza logica in termini psicologici. In terzo luogo – e questo è il tratto più importante per la discussione contemporanea – egli attacca il cartesianesimo in quanto forma di naturalismo psicologico per via del considerare la psiche come sostanza. Contro questa posizione Husserl afferma la necessità di formulare nuovi obiettivi epistemici per le ricerche sulla coscienza, sostenendo che il fattore di maggiore interesse circa la coscienza non sia la sua fatticità empirica, bensì la sua funzione trascendentale, che garantisce accesso conoscitivo a ogni tipo di oggetto (empirico e ideale). Lo studio di questa funzione richiede un metodo specifico (l'eidetica), da non confondersi con i metodi empirici. Nella parte conclusiva intendo sostenere come le analisi husserliane offrano nuove prospettive sulla struttura della coscienza, di cui oggi si sente il bisogno, ma anche argomenti persuasivi contro le incerte speculazioni metafisiche circa il rapporto tra mente e corpo.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Fenomenologia; Epistemologia; Filosofia della Mente; Coscienza; Naturalismo.

**Abstract** In this paper I present and assess Husserl's arguments against epistemological and psychological naturalism in his essay *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*. I show that his critique is directed against positions that are generally more extreme than most currently debated variants of naturalism. Nevertheless, Husserl has interesting thoughts to contribute to philosophy today. First, he shows that there is an important connection between naturalism in epistemology (which in his view amounts to the position that the validity of logic can be reduced to the validity of natural laws of thinking) and naturalism in psychology (which in his view amounts to the position that all psychic occurrences are merely parallel accompaniments to physiological occurrences). Second, he shows that a strong version of epistemological naturalism is self-undermining

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and fails to translate the cogency of logic into psychological terms. Third, and most importantly for current debates, he attacks Cartesianism as a form of psychological naturalism because of its construal of the psyche as a substance. Against this position, Husserl asserts the necessity of formulating new epistemic aims for the investigation of consciousness. He contends that what is most interesting about consciousness is not its empirical facticity but its transcendental function of granting cognitive access to all kinds of objects (both empirical and ideal). The study of this function requires a specific method (eidetics) that cannot be conflated with empirical methods. I conclude that Husserl's analyses offer much-needed insight into the fabric of consciousness and compelling arguments against unwarranted metaphysical speculations about the relationship between mind and body.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenology; Epistemology; Philosophy of Mind; Consciousness; Naturalism.



## Introduction

IN HIS LECTURE COURSE *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge* (1906/07) Husserl declares with his unmistakable gravitas that mixing up epistemology and psychology should be considered: «the specifically epistemological sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost of philosophy».<sup>1</sup> Rudimentary knowledge of Christian theology suffices to recall that in the Gospel (Mt 12: 31-32) sins against the Holy Ghost are deemed unforgivable.

Considering the dominant philosophical trend of the past few decades, there are reasons to be worried that down at the philosophers' hell there hangs a recently-posted "no vacancies" sign, and it would be no surprise if the sign were actually written in English.

A modern-day Dante could imagine a busy Husserl taking over old Charon's job and shipping crowds of lost Anglo-American philosophers' souls over to the place of their eternal punishment (it would be fun to imagine more specifically what that might actually be).

All jokes aside, it is true that the idea of a contamination of epistemology with psychology, which Husserl regarded as the most grievous fault in the laying out of basic principles for philosophy, is no longer considered taboo. Although the strong thesis defended by Quine in his famous essay *Epistemology Naturalized*,<sup>2</sup> where a case is made for the replacement of traditional epistemology with psychology, is no longer (and perhaps has never been) mainstream, various forms of "natural-

ism" in epistemology gained foothold as philosophically respectable positions.

Parallel to this development, another area of philosophy rapidly moved towards "naturalization": the philosophy of mind. Most contemporary philosophers of mind would likely characterize their position as some form of "naturalism". Debates in the field seem to be primarily geared towards a solid *formulation* of naturalism, rather than the adjudication of its correctness.

Although naturalism in epistemology and naturalism in the philosophy of mind are not necessarily part of the same package (at least in the sense that not all naturalists about the mind are naturalists in epistemology), the two projects share important features. It is fair to say that in spite of all differences among existing brands of naturalism, a polemical trait is common to them all.

Epistemological naturalism is a reaction against the idea that the requirements for true knowledge can be worked out in a purely *a priori* fashion, that is to say, without having to consider the empirical makeup of our human cognitive system and the deliverances of the sciences about it and its environing world. Psychological naturalism (which hereafter I will use as equivalent to "naturalism in the philosophy of mind") is a reaction against the idea that the mind constitutes an immaterial substance that is somehow metaphysically separated or separable from the body.

In this paper I will appraise Husserl's arguments against epistemological and psycho-

logical naturalism in his seminal essay *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*.<sup>3</sup> As I wish to show, however, the positions Husserl attacks under the headings “naturalization of ideas” and “naturalization of consciousness” do not entirely square with contemporary variants of naturalized epistemology and naturalized psychology. Husserl is concerned with much stronger versions of naturalism. When he rejects the “naturalization of ideas” he is rejecting a brand of so-called psychologism, according to which logic and semantics express nothing over and above psychological regularities.

His position does not revolve around whether or not actual natural scientific findings should be left out of consideration in epistemology. He only claims that when we do epistemology our gaze should be directed towards the invariant structures of scientific theorizing rather than its historically variable doctrinal contents. In a similar fashion, when he rejects the naturalization of consciousness he is by no means defending Cartesian substance dualism or some modified version thereof. Suffice to say that, much to the dismay of contemporary philosophers of mind, on Husserl’s account Descartes is the chief responsible for the kind of naturalization of consciousness that he sets out to combat!

The naturalization of consciousness for Husserl is primarily a mistaken formulation of the epistemic aims for a scientific investigation of psychic phenomena. This, of course, is based on a mistaken ontology of the psyche but this is precisely Descartes’ dualistic ontology.

In the end it might turn out that after all some of the philosophical sins committed by contemporary thinkers can be considered venial even by a rigorist like Husserl. However, this does not mean that Husserl’s arguments are outdated. On the contrary, a careful examination of them is helpful to identify all too strong variants of naturalism that (I hope) would be unpalatable also to today’s hardest naturalists.

More specifically, Husserl’s method for a direct investigation of the essential structures of consciousness *qua* consciousness offers

much needed resources for the continuation of work in the philosophy of mind after we realize, for instance, with Michael Tye that complete reduction of intentionality to brain states might be a pipe dream.<sup>4</sup>

Here is how I will proceed: in section one I will examine Husserl’s critique of the naturalization of ideas and try to position it in the context of some contemporary variants of naturalized epistemology. Section two will be devoted to Husserl’s critique of the naturalization of consciousness. In this section I will also show why Husserl believes that these two types of naturalism belong inseparably together. The third and last section shall entail some thoughts on what I take to be the lesson that we learn from Husserl in *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*.

### The inconsistency of epistemological naturalism

Larry Laudan gives a helpful definition of naturalism in epistemology worth quoting in full:

Epistemic naturalism is not so much an epistemology per se as it is a theory about philosophic knowledge: in very brief compass, it holds that the claims of philosophy are to be adjudicated in the same ways that we adjudicate claims in other walks of life, such as science, common sense and the law. More specifically, epistemic naturalism is a meta-epistemological thesis: it holds that the theory of knowledge is continuous with other sorts of theories about how the natural world is constituted.<sup>5</sup>

Later in his paper Laudan replaces the metaphor of continuity with another, very effective metaphor, where he writes that: «science and philosophy are cut from identical cloth».<sup>6</sup> This is a good starting point to approach Husserl’s position. As the title of his essay proves, Husserl would emphatically agree with Laudan on this last statement. Philosophy, for Husserl, is a rigorous *science*.

However, let us raise a question: what is the “cloth”, in Laudan’s metaphor, from which both science and philosophy are cut? Regrettably, Laudan does not address this issue but I believe he would probably agree that at a minimum the cloth from which science and philosophy (more specifically, epistemology) are cut is *logical* cloth.<sup>7</sup> Let us think of it this way: Unlike straightforward scientific theory, which is about objects and occurrences in the world, epistemology has a different subject matter.

The subject matter of epistemology is theory itself; it is theory about theory. However, both straightforward theories and epistemological theories share a basic stock of theoretical ingredients that do not depend on their respective subject matter.

If we examine any conceivable straightforward theory ST, we can first and foremost isolate a certain “material” content in it, i.e., the segment of reality that ST is about. We can engage in a thought experiment (Husserl would call this “eidetic variation”) and imagine to vary the “material” content of ST as we wished.

We would thus run through a variety of disciplines. The material content of ST (what ST is about) would change from, say, physical forces, to molecules, to varieties of plants, to phonemes and so forth. In all these cases, some invariant common features would clearly stand out.

Regardless of its material content, ST (if it has to be a scientific theory) would have to make use of certain basic concepts, such as “truth”, “evidence”, “concept”, “description”, “explanation”, and so forth. Moreover, ST should be articulated in a logically consistent manner, i.e., in observance of some basic logical laws, such as the laws of logical inclusion and exclusion, the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of the excluded middle and the like. Spelling out all the ingredients that constitute a straightforward scientific theory would be a lot of work. However, *that* there are such ingredients should be easily ascertainable with the aid of the variational thought experiment just proposed.<sup>8</sup>

If in a further imaginative step we then replace the content of ST with non-straightforward material, i.e., with another theory or set of theories, we enter the realm of epistemology. Although we have now left behind the straightforward reference to the empirical world, it should be intuitive that the same basic conditions obtaining for ST still obtain in the new realm of epistemological theories, ET.

If we now carry forward our thought experiment and vary the material content of ET as we wished, we run through a variety of epistemological theories. We can have epistemological theories focused primarily on the natural sciences and epistemological theories focused on the humanities, some working *a priori* and some working *a posteriori*, some operating with a coherentist notion of truth and some subscribing to more traditional views based on correspondence. And, of course, we can have naturalized epistemologies.

Also in the case of ET, however, the same stock of basic ingredients we identified for ST would remain invariant. ET, too, must operate with some notions of “truth”, “evidence”, “explanation”, and the like and observe the laws of logic. In the absence of such ingredients we would not take ET seriously as a scientific theory.

We can thus establish that in a very broad and minimal sense what makes a theory scientific is not its content but the “form” in which this content is articulated. The “form” at issue comprises both logical laws (inclusion/exclusion, non-contradiction, excluded middle, etc.) and semantic constituents (the notions of “truth”, “evidence”, “explanation”, just mentioned.)

The «naturalizing of ideas»<sup>9</sup> against which Husserl launches his attack is a position according to which these basic ingredients (both logical and semantic) of scientific theorizing are themselves natural phenomena, i.e., they are «natural laws of thinking»<sup>10</sup> which find their ultimate justification in spatio-temporal physical nature and its empirical laws. In other words, it is a position according to which knowledge itself is «a certain natural phe-

nomenon».<sup>11</sup>

Unless calling knowledge a natural phenomenon merely means that it is not a *super-natural* phenomenon (i.e., that no poltergeist of sorts is doing the work behind our back when we think we are cognizing), some reference to psychology is needed to substantiate this claim. A generic appeal to psychology such as the one often quoted from Quine's seminal paper,<sup>12</sup> however, is not enough.

One should make an effort to specify what kind of clarifying work psychology is supposed to do in regard to the basic theoretical constituents in question. Many philosophers defending naturalism in epistemology in Husserl's time specified this idea by interpreting the *cogency* displayed by logically articulated theories in terms of psychological necessity.

For example, when we perceive the connection between major premise, minor premise and conclusion in a well-formed syllogism as compelling, this is because three mental states occurring in us are linked by an empirically valid psychological law, ultimately rooted in the physiology of our brain. Logical necessity, on this account, is nothing but the experienced side of unexperienced psycho-physiological necessity.

Husserl (and many other philosophers with him) was quick to realize that a purely psychological account of knowledge bears fatal consequences for the very notion of epistemology. If all necessity that there is is the causal necessity of physiological processes in the brain with their psychological accompaniments, then the very notion of true knowledge dissolves and, with the words of Jaegwon Kim against Quine, «[w]hat remains is a descriptive empirical theory of human cognition which [...] will be entirely devoid of the notion of justification or any other evaluative concept».<sup>13</sup>

But on closer inspection the naturalist engaging in a *defense* of his position, as Husserl points out, is refuting himself: «The naturalist teaches, preaches, moralizes, reforms. [...] But he denies what every sermon, every demand, if it is to have a meaning, presupposes».<sup>14</sup> In

other words, in order to defend his position that the basic theoretical constituents of science are *nothing but* manifestations of psycho-physiological regularities the epistemological naturalist is *making use* of these constituents.

He wishes his readers to see the truth of his naturalistic theory based on the allegedly compelling force of his arguments, while at the same time he claims that they are not what they purport to be. They bear no special rational force of their own; they merely feed on the force of natural causality.

Although counter-arguments like this, revolving around hidden self-refutation, have some undeniable persuasiveness, they are not as strong as direct refutation. Husserl remarks that:

Prejudices blind, and one who sees only empirical facts and grants intrinsic validity only to empirical science will not be particularly disturbed by absurd consequences that cannot be proved empirically to contradict facts of nature.<sup>15</sup>

This is why, both in *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* and in earlier lectures on the relation between psychology and theory of knowledge, Husserl sets out to prove that, upon direct examination, the basic constituents of theory do not entail any necessary reference to mental content. Let us construe an example that will hopefully prove Husserl's point.

For the sake of simplicity, let us take as a representative for all basic theoretical ingredients under scrutiny a classic syllogism (S) such as:

- (P) All humans are mortal
- (p) Socrates is human
- (c) Socrates is mortal

Intuitively, (c) follows *necessarily* from (P) and (p). This necessity can be explained by reference to logical inclusion. However, if the naturalistic position opposed by Husserl is true then the necessity at issue is a case of natural necessity.

The segment of nature we would want to scrutinize in order to account for the perceived necessity of (S) would be the human psyche. Following this suggestion we should

be able to 'embed' the three different steps in (S) in three different mental states and see the necessary occurrence of the mental state embedding (c) after a mental state embedding (P) and a mental state embedding (p) occur. We should be able to rewrite (S) in the following way *salva veritate*:

(i) *If the appropriate psycho-physiological conditions obtain, then a psychic subject undergoing the mental state  $m(P)$  and subsequently the mental state  $m(p)$  will necessarily undergo the mental state  $m(c)$ .*

If we want to be serious with the claim that the necessity at stake here is natural necessity, then the above statement should express the same kind of rigid regularity expressed by a more patently naturalistic statement like the following one:

(ii) *If the appropriate physical conditions obtain, then water necessarily transitions from the solid, to the liquid, to the gaseous state.*

However, it is evident that while (ii) is true, (i) is at best probable and, most importantly, (i) does not translate the 'logical' necessity of (S) *salva veritate*. We can easily imagine a psychic subject forming the thought that (P) "all humans are mortal," subsequently forming the thought that (p) "Socrates is human" but then getting distracted and forming the thought (z) "I need a sandwich" instead of (c) "Socrates is mortal." The series  $m(P)$ - $m(p)$ - $m(c)$  and the series  $m(P)$ - $m(p)$ - $m(z)$  are equally possible. The necessity entailed in the initial formulation of (S) is thus dissolved and not simply reinterpreted when (S) is rewritten as (i).

We can thus conclude with Husserl that the kind of necessity characterizing (S) cannot be equated with natural necessity based on concatenations of mental states. In German Husserl (and most anti-psychologistic philosophers) would point out that the necessary connection obtaining between (P), (p) and (c) is *sachlich*, i.e., objectively rooted in the state-of-affairs represented by (S).

The fact that this objectively valid state-of-affairs can be *grasped* by psychic subjects who produce the appropriate series of thoughts in their minds, does mean that it is itself a psy-

chological state-of-affairs. While  $m(P)$ ,  $m(p)$  and  $m(c)$  may or may not occur in this order and can only be instantiated diachronically, (P), (p) and (c) belong together in the timeless unity of a valid syllogism.

Of course, whenever we form a correct syllogism in our mind a certain concatenation of mental states occurs. This, however, does not entail that a correct syllogism is a certain concatenation of mental states, as the naturalizer of ideas would have it. The naturalization of ideas is thus a failed attempt to explain logical necessity in merely psychological terms.

Unless the very notions of logical necessity and justification are jettisoned and the *prima facie* validity of (S) is dissolved in favor of psychological probability (a solution which may perhaps appear palatable only if its relativistic consequences are ignored) the different nature of logical necessity must be recognized and the naturalization of ideas must be abandoned.

In a desperate attempt to rescue psychology some philosophers (notably, Massey 1991)<sup>16</sup> argued that historical changes in logical theory prove that there is no such thing as a "different nature" of logical necessity and thus all the laws once deemed fundamental and timelessly valid should be dethroned.

The birth of paraconsistent logic, which allegedly violates the principle of non-contradiction, is produced as evidence that timeless validity in logic has been disproved. I find these remarks quite puzzling. In particular, the claim that paraconsistent logic violates the principle of non-contradiction seems as reasonable as the claim that airplanes violate the law of gravity.

Only if the binding force of the principle of contradiction (or the law of gravity) is adequately recognized it is then possible to find ways around it, in order to meet certain technical demands in logic (or transportation). But as much as the law of gravity is still valid even after the invention of airplanes, the principle of non-contradiction still retains its force after paraconsistent logic came into the world. In the end, after the birth of paraconsistent logic a philosophy student who contradicts himself

in his final paper will still get an F (or perhaps a B + due to grade inflation).

We will not congratulate him for being up-to-date with the most recent developments in logical theory. However, in the context of the present paper we can look at the faulty student with some gratitude for offering further evidence that the laws governing the empirical production of thought do not necessarily coincide with the timelessly valid laws of logic and cannot account for them.

### ■ The shortcomings of psychological naturalism

Considering his passionate defense of the autonomy of the logical and semantic sphere from the sphere of psychic phenomena, why does Husserl need a phenomenology of consciousness? Isn't an investigation of the mind superfluous for a philosopher who wants to defend the scientificity of his discipline?

Understanding this point adequately is critical to understanding what is distinctive about Husserl's anti-psychologism and his subsequent articulation of transcendental phenomenology. Perhaps unexpectedly, over the course of his article, Husserl ends up valorizing certain aspects of naturalism.

He finds the naturalist's attempt to uphold the ideal of scientificity in philosophy admirable.<sup>17</sup> There is a sense in which the idea of turning towards consciousness and experience in order to set the stage for the realization of this ideal is guided by good instinct. After all, although they cannot be hastily equated with thoughts, the basic theoretical constituents discussed above nonetheless manifest themselves and their validity to consciousness.

As we said, a psychic subject who forms the correct series of thoughts in his mind will grasp the logical necessity of the syllogism (S). The questions to ask regarding these considerations are: What exactly are we turning towards when we turn towards consciousness motivated by philosophical questions? And what are the best questions to ask when we turn to consciousness as philosophers inter-

ested in a clarification of epistemology? Is a turn to consciousness *necessarily* a psychological turn?

The turn to consciousness operated by the naturalizer of ideas is a good idea guided by a bad theory, or dogma, which Husserl effectively summarizes as follows: ND (*Naturalistic Dogma*): Whatever is is either itself physical, belonging to the unified totality of physical nature, or it is in fact psychical, but then merely as a variable dependent on the physical, at best a secondary "parallel accompaniment".<sup>18</sup>

The implicit inferences based on ND and propping up the project of naturalizing ideas as well as its connection with the project of a naturalization of consciousness can thus be easily spelled out: Since ideas (basic theoretical ingredients) are clearly not physical, as per ND they must be psychical. And since they are psychical, also as per ND, they must be variables dependent on underlying physical processes.

However, once the straightforward equation of "ideas" and psychic facts is proved untenable, as I tried to show in section I of this paper, some significant revision of ND seems to be called for.

As regards the revision of first part of ND (which states that whatever is is either physical or psychical) a helpful resource had been around for a while in Husserl's time: it was the Neo-Kantian's proposal – based on Hermann Lotze's reading of Plato<sup>19</sup> – to renounce the language of "being" altogether when dealing with ideas and think of them in terms of pure "validities" instead. In other words, while it may remain true that everything that there is is either physical or psychical, what characterizes items such as syllogisms is not that they "are" or "exist" (or fail to do so) but only that they "hold valid" [*Gelten*].

On this account, we would not need to endorse an unlikely Platonic ontology in order to salvage the autonomy of logical, ideal necessity. Syllogisms do not "exist" or "not exist", either in the mind or in the world, they just hold valid. They inhabit what philosophers like Sellars and McDowell would call a space of

reason, which has rules and necessities of its own.<sup>20</sup> Questions of existence are thus out of place in this context.

Husserl, however, is much more concerned with a significant revision of the second part of ND, which states that the psychic is merely «a variable dependent on the physical, at best a secondary “parallel accompaniment”». <sup>21</sup> Husserl believes that this way of looking at the psyche, or better, consciousness is legitimate but one-sided. In other words, it prevents us from seeing what is really interesting, philosophically speaking, about consciousness, which is not its dependency on the body but its presentive function or intentionality.

It is thanks to this fundamental feature of consciousness that items of the most disparate kinds, ranging from physical objects to objectively valid logical relations are accessible to us, without therefore being reduced to intra-mental entities. Let us see how his argument develops.

Treating consciousness as a mere variable dependent on the physical for Husserl is the distinctive trait of empirical psychology, one that is essentially mediated by the experience of consciousness's inherence in a human body:

It is the task of psychology to explore this psychic element scientifically within the psychophysical nexus of nature (the nexus in which, without question, it occurs), to determine it in an objectively valid way, to discover the laws according to which it develops and changes, comes into being and disappears. Every psychological determination is by that very fact psychophysical, which is to say in the broadest sense [...], that it has a never-failing physical connotation.<sup>22</sup>

However – and this is a fundamental move in Husserl's argument – the ascription of consciousness to a human body, which is the unquestioned presupposition of psychological inquiry, already presupposes the presentive work of consciousness. We know that we have a body, that there are other bodies, that some

of them are animated like ours and that this is because conscious states occur in them, on the basis of our conscious experience.

This is a particularly revealing example of the epistemically basic function of consciousness of presenting things to us (including our own body), which we can then set out to investigate scientifically only in a second moment. Prior to all consideration of psychophysical dependencies and even prior to all scientific investigation of nature, things are there for us, ready to be studied and this is due to the constant, intentional work of consciousness.

All naturalistic investigations, including psychological investigations exploring the mind-body relationship, presuppose the cognitive accessibility of their objects. This accessibility is granted by conscious experiences. Therefore, conscious experiences standing in this function (now viewed as what renders possible the cognitive access to objects and not as cognitively accessed objects) cannot be posited alongside the same “sphere” of reality of what is accessed through them. This would give way to a problematic circularity.

The presentive, access-granting function of conscious experience therefore calls for a different consideration, one in which consciousness is not merely a dependent variable, an accompaniment of physical processes or an *explanandum* of some natural-scientific theory. As I will explain below, a full appreciation of this point does not entail any concession to Cartesian substance dualism but, on the contrary, it rules out as forcefully as possible the idea that consciousness can be meaningfully construed as a substance.

At this stage of the argument, however, Descartes can be helpful to substantiate the meaning of intentionality for consciousness, even though the conclusions he draws from his famous thought experiment have to be rejected. After all, let us recall that the *res cogitans/res extensa* theory is not presented until the fifth of his meditations. Husserl's valorization of Descartes, instead, does not go beyond the first pages of the first meditation. If we apply the



Cartesian strategy of hyperbolic doubt or the more modern version of it known as the 'brain in a vat' hypothesis we learn something important about consciousness.

Even if our having a body were a mere illusion and in fact we were just brains in vats or ethereal entities systematically deceived by an evil genius, consciousness would *continue to manifest things to us and to do so in ways that can be rigorously studied*. The fact that we can make sense of Descartes' scenario in his first meditation, i.e., that it is not entirely unconceivable that our body is an illusion, for Husserl does not entail metaphysical evidence that consciousness is a separate substance but only indications for the development of new, more appropriate science of consciousness itself.

What does the fact that consciousness would retain its intentionality even in the Cartesian scenario mean? It means that unlike its dependency on a physical body, which is empirical, the intentionality of consciousness, i.e. its presentive function is essential to it. This is not all: The intentionality of consciousness is a general title for a vast array of phenomena (perceptions, imaginations, recollections), whose essential structures and connections bear critical consequences for epistemological purposes. Let us consider, for the sake of exemplification, the following statement, expressing an *Essential of Perception*: (EP) *Perception always gives its objects perspectively, i.e. through profiles* EP clearly does not express an empirical fact about perception depending on the physiology of our human body.

In Husserl's terms, EP is not a psychological statement but a purely phenomenological insight. Any conceivable minded being who were to have perceptions would have to have objects given perspectively. We can establish the validity of EP prior to all considerations of psychophysical dependencies.

Understanding EP is crucial to epistemology because, for instance, it clarifies why all knowledge of empirical physical objects is necessarily fallible. Since profiles (broadly construed) are only revealed one at a time and the object can in principle always reveal new,

previously hidden sides no knowledge of it can be deemed definitive.

Analogously, the interplay existing between actual perceptual consciousness and the possibility of recollection can clarify our awareness of the persistency of physical objects while we are not actually aware of them. This is why Husserl, in a later text, states emphatically that «an epistemology without phenomenology of perception, recollection, imagination and all the above mentioned acts of consciousness is nonsense».<sup>23</sup>

The possibility of knowledge, which is the traditional theme of epistemology, feeds on the structures and dynamics of consciousness, however, not so much on the empirical makeup of psychologically interpreted consciousness but on the essential makeup of pure consciousness phenomenologically analyzed. Accordingly, we can distinguish conceptually between "a phenomenology of consciousness" and "a natural science about consciousness". The latter, on Husserl's account, presupposes the former.

*It is only on the basis of what consciousness essentially does that we can meaningfully set out to determine what consciousness empirically is.* If we gloss over the essential structures of consciousness *per se* and move all too quickly to explanatory and metaphysical questions about its relationship with the body, the scientificity of our work is put in jeopardy. This is why Husserl is extremely critical of empirical psychology and the philosophy based on it:

The ubiquitous fundamental trait of this psychology is to set aside any direct and pure analysis of consciousness [...] in favor of indirect fixations of all psychological or psychologically relevant facts, having a sense that is at least superficially understandable without such an analysis of consciousness, at best an outwardly understandable sense. In determining experimentally its psychophysical regularities, it gets along in fact with crude class concepts such as perception, imaginative intuition, enunciation, calculation and miscalcula-

tion, measure, recognition, expectation, retention, forgetting, etc. And of course, on the other hand, the treasury of such concepts with which it operates limits the questions it can ask and the answers it can obtain.<sup>24</sup>

In a way similar to the shift from “existence” to “validity” in our understanding of ideas, advocated by the Neo-Kantians, Husserl would recommend to leave aside, or suspend phenomenologically, all metaphysical questions of existence and psychophysical dependency in regard to consciousness and consider instead what is really interesting about it: not that it exists in connection with the body or fails to do so but that it manifests things to us.

The history of science is full of cases where questions that appeared pressing for centuries were willfully pushed aside thus giving rise to more tangible progress in a certain discipline. Famously, modern physics was born when the pressing questions concerning final causes in nature were willfully suspended.

This suspension allowed physicists to look more carefully at how nature actually works, instead of forcing on it explanatory models and demands borrowed from the observation of purposiveness in human actions. Similarly, for Husserl, suspending the issue of its dependency (or independency) from the physiology of the body would set the stage for a first, true progress in the investigation of consciousness.

Instead of forcing on it explanatory models and demands borrowed from the investigation of physical processes, we would start to look more carefully at how consciousness actually works.

To the extent that the experimental psychology of his time retarded this much needed revolution in the formulation of epistemic aims for a scientific investigation of consciousness, Husserl deems it without reservations “pre-Galilean”.<sup>25</sup> Like a geometer drawing triangles on the board is not interested in their actual existence but in the ideally valid properties of a triangle in general (the essence

“triangle”, as Husserl would put it), the phenomenologist is not interested in the actual existence of conscious states in her or anybody else’s mind but in the ideally valid properties of consciousness in general – the essence of consciousness.

The issue of intentionality as essential property of consciousness has been discussed in some length in recent philosophy of mind. Self-styled naturalists in this area have been struggling with what has been labeled “Brentano’s problem”,<sup>26</sup> i.e. «how is it possible for a physical system to undergo intentional states?». <sup>27</sup>

The reason why this is perceived to be a problem for philosophy is that the intentionality of consciousness seems, in Fodor’s words, «recalcitrant to integration in the natural order». <sup>28</sup> Intentional relations can be established with non-existing, absent or “generic” objects. Nowhere else in the observable world there seems to happen anything like this.

Existing rocks cannot collide with non-existing or absent rocks in the same way in which existing thoughts can be about non-existing or absent entities. What is perceived as alarming about this situation is that if intentionality proves to be a non-natural property, then consciousness, which has intentionality as its essential property, might turn out to be a non-natural entity.

Without entering into the details of the debate ensuing from this issue, let us notice that the problematic situation is mostly construed in terms of consciousness *having the property of* intentionality. It is only from this point of view that the question “What is the kind of thing that instantiates this property?” makes sense. But is it legitimate to construe consciousness as some kind of carrier of properties?

This is for Husserl the really problematic point. Just because physical things appearing in outer perception allow to be construed in terms of properties and their substrates (or however we want to call that something in which properties inhere) and just because the whole notion of logical quantification revolves

around the idea that there has to be some  $x$  that  $P$ , this does not yet prove that the property/substrate model is the most appropriate to describe consciousness.

If we jettison this whole model and proceed to a direct description oriented towards the essential features of consciousness, we are relieved of all worries about consciousness possibly being some murky non-natural, free-floating immaterial substance as the result of its instantiating an allegedly non-natural property. It is no surprise that most psychological naturalists have been struggling to find ways to prove that conscious states are in some way identical with brain states.

If the property/substrate scheme is accepted to describe consciousness, then it seems extremely urgent to prove that the carrier of intentionality is something that fits in the natural world. But what if this scheme were simply abandoned when we deal with consciousness? Then we probably would not need to worry anymore about consciousness possibly being some non-natural substance.

Consciousness, on this account, would simply be no substance at all. It would entirely coincide with its intentional function and experience would provide enough evidence that this intentional function occurs empirically in certain physiological bodies such as our own.

An adequate understanding of this point reveals why Husserl believes Descartes is the chief responsible for the naturalization of consciousness, as he understands it. Suggesting that consciousness is a different species under the genus "*res*", substance, which also includes physical nature, Descartes dictated a number of misleading questions to later psychology (and we should add, to the philosophy of mind), questions whose discontinuation is critical to a truly scientific investigation of consciousness.

Accordingly, to naturalize consciousness for Husserl is primarily *to ask certain questions* about consciousness rather than other, i.e., questions about the derivation of conscious states from physiological processes. These questions, however, only touch on empirical,

non-essential features of consciousness. They are of prime importance only if the Cartesian property/substrate model is tacitly accepted.

However, they are not the most interesting or meaningful questions to ask if an investigation of consciousness is to be rendered fruitful in philosophy and epistemology. Empirically, consciousness *is* dependent on a physical body and conscious experiences *are* in principle explainable by reference to the physiology of the brain, even if, as Michael Tye speculates, this might be a task that we simply cannot fulfill.<sup>29</sup>

Husserl would be extremely reluctant to accept contemporary talk of an "explanatory gap" or a residue of "irreducible phenomenal qualia".<sup>30</sup> Direct experience tells us that consciousness is embodied throughout. However, the mere ascertainment of this fact leaves us clueless about the essential structures of consciousness that cannot be grasped with the aid of natural-scientific quantitative methods.

Whereas in natural science the notion of substances, i.e., of abiding objects having permanent physical properties and manifesting themselves in the changing flux of our experience as the same, is fully motivated, there is no such thing as a mental substance that underlies all conscious experiences and can be determined as it is in itself with mathematical tools:

Psychical being, being as "phenomenon", is in principle not a unity that could be experienced in several separate perceptions as individually identical, not even in perceptions of the same subject. In the psychical sphere there is, in other words, no distinction between appearance and being, and if nature is a being that appears in appearances, still appearances themselves [...] do not constitute a being which itself appears by means of appearances lying behind it. [...] A phenomenon, then, is no "substantial" unity; it has no "real properties", it knows no real parts, no real changes, and no causality.<sup>31</sup>

If the very notion of substance (which hinges on a distinction between an abiding

substrate and its properties) is out of place in the sphere of consciousness, then the very terms of the Cartesian problem are dissolved.

The recognition of intentionality as the essential, non-naturalistic trait of consciousness does not offer resources to substance dualism at all. Contrariwise, it discourages any attempt to conceive of consciousness in terms that are alien to it.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude with a brief recapitulation of Husserl's analysis and a few remarks about the lesson I think we learn from them.

In *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, Husserl connects the naturalization of ideas, according to which the basic constituents of theory are natural phenomena, and the naturalization of consciousness, according to which what is essential to consciousness is its dependency on the physiology of the body.

Against these positions he argues that as much as what is essential to ideas cannot be reduced to mental processes, what is essential to consciousness cannot be reduced to physiological dependency. As regards the first claim, he is not advocating some form of ontological Platonism. His point is only that the logical validity that constitutes the backbone of *both empirical science and philosophy* does not boil down to mere psychological regularity.

As for the second claim, Husserl does not believe, as some contemporary philosophers of mind do, that the essential feature of consciousness *qua* consciousness, intentionality, could be used to support Cartesian substance dualism. On the contrary, while he maintains that consciousness *is* empirically connected to a body and therefore empirical physiological dependencies between consciousness and body cannot be denied, he points out that an adequate understanding of consciousness in its presentive function rules out the possibility to treat consciousness as a substance, a notion that is only applicable to physical bodies.

Husserl's analysis, I believe, teaches us that the questions we are most immediately

prompted to ask and the explanatory models that we are most customarily inclined to apply, both in philosophy and in empirical science, are not necessarily the most interesting or pertinent to advance our understanding of crucial issues.

So, for instance, the *prima facie* centrality of the question concerning the relationship between mind and body reveals to hinge on a problematic interpretation of consciousness as a substance construed in a way similar to bodies in nature. The endless rivers of ink that flowed in recent years to articulate a plausible response to Cartesian dualism, for instance, could have been better spent if a serious reflection on the presuppositions of the very question asked – which appears so plainly meaningful at first blush – had been carried out.

Alarmism about intentionality and the fear that an unbiased acceptance of its essential, non-naturalistic structure would open the door to unpalatable metaphysical conclusions depended on the failure to actually delve into the rich texture of consciousness and subject it to direct investigation.

With a few exceptions, several discussions of naturalism in epistemology failed to address the actually crucial issue, which is not whether or not philosophers ought to ignore empirical science, but how are we to understand the identical “cloth”, to reiterate Laudan's expression, out of which philosophy and science are cut.

At the end of the day, perhaps, a good chunk of recent philosophical literature did not commit any mortal sin against the eternal spirit of philosophy, as Husserl puts it, but definitely did commit the venial sin of dissipating precious intellectual energies on questions that are philosophically interesting only at first glance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie. Vorlesungen 1906/1907*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XXIV, hrsg. von U. MELLE, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1985 (en. tr. *Intro-*

*duction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge. Lectures 1906/1907*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Collected Works*, vol. XIII, edited by C. ORTIZ HILL, Springer, Dordrecht 2008, p. 173).

<sup>2</sup> See W.V.O. QUINE, *Epistemology Naturalized*, in: *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York 1969, pp. 69-90.

<sup>3</sup> See E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (1911), in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XXV, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921)*, hrsg. von TH. NENON, H.R. SEPP, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1986 (en. tr. *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, in: Q. LAUER (ed.), *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, Harper & Row, New York 1986, pp. 71-147). I will not address the development of Husserl's critique of naturalism throughout his long and complex philosophical career. Readers interested in a thoughtful historical reconstruction of this issue will find an extremely helpful source in D. MORAN, *Husserl's Transcendental Philosophy and the Critique of Naturalism*, in: «Continental Philosophy Review», vol. XLI, n. 4, 2008, pp. 401-425.

<sup>4</sup> See M. TYE, *Naturalism and the Mental*, in: «Mind», vol. CI, n. 403, 1992, pp. 421-441.

<sup>5</sup> L. LAUDAN, *Normative Naturalism*, in: «Philosophy of Science», vol. LVII, n. 1, 1990, pp. 44-59, here p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 47. See also H. KORNBLITH, *In Defense of a Naturalized Epistemology*, in: J. GRECO, E. SOSA (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, pp. 158-169.

<sup>7</sup> As I will explain in what follows, "logic" must be taken here in a broad sense including both basic logical laws and some fundamental semantic constituents.

<sup>8</sup> It should be emphasized that existence of basic ingredients of scientific theorizing does not per se suffice to establish criteria for what should count as science. These ingredients provide only necessary but not sufficient conditions for scientificity. I am inclined to believe that the identification of sufficient conditions for science is impossible, but this would be another story and one that is not germane to our theme. For the sake of Husserl's argument it is sufficient to accept that there are some fundamental logical constituents of scientific theory.

<sup>9</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. tr. p. 80).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> H. KORNBLITH, *In Defense of a Naturalized Epistemology*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> See W.V.O. QUINE, *Naturalized Epistemology*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> J. KIM, *What is "Naturalized Epistemology"?*, in: «Philosophical Perspectives», vol. II, 1988, pp. 381-405, here p. 397.

<sup>14</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. trans. p. 81).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> See G. MASSEY, *Some Reflections on Psychologism*, in: T. SEEBOHM, D. FØLLESDAL, J. MOHANTY (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Formal Sciences*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1991, pp. 183-194.

<sup>17</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. trans. p. 82).

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi* (en. trans. p. 79).

<sup>19</sup> For an extensive treatment of this issue see A. KIM, *Plato in Germany: Kant – Natorp – Heidegger*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2010.

<sup>20</sup> For an illuminating treatment of Neo-Kantianism and the Sellarsian space of reason see S. GALT CROWELL, *Transcendental Logic and Minimal Empiricism: Lask and McDowell on the Unboundedness of the Conceptual*, in: S. LUFT, R. MAKREEL (eds.), *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010, pp. 150-176. Of course Husserl, unlike the Neo-Kantians, would point out that the objective validity of logical relations as well as semantic constituents of theory can be traced back to essential structures of consciousness and thus accounted for in terms of 'constituted' validities. This is in fact the project of his later, genetic phenomenology. Note that Husserl is not concerned with how our human consciousness happens to be empirically constituted, i.e., with 'natural laws of thinking' but with fundamental, essential configurations of consciousness that can be identified and studied regardless of the empirical variables that allow for their instantiation.

<sup>21</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. trans. p. 79).

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi* (en. trans. p. 86).

<sup>23</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Natur und Geist. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1919*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke - Materialien*, Bd. IV, hrsg. von M. WEILER, Kluwer, Dordrecht 2002, pp. 109-110.

<sup>24</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. trans. pp. 92-93).

<sup>25</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. trans. p. 100).

<sup>26</sup> See M. TYE, *Naturalism and the Problem of Intentionality*, in: «Midwest Studies in Philosophy», vol. XIX, 1994, pp. 122-142, here pp. 122-128; R. STALNAKER, *Inquiry*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1984, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> M. TYE, *Naturalism and the Problem of Intentionality*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> J. FODOR, *Semantics, Wisconsin Style*, in: J. FODOR, *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990, pp. 31-50, here 32.

<sup>29</sup> See M. TYE, *Naturalism and the Mental*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> For an insightful discussion of this point see F. STEFFEN, *Konstitution der Subjektivität – Zur Funktionalisierbarkeit von Qualia aus phänomenologischer Sicht*, in: P. MERZ, A. STAITI, F. STEFFEN (Hrsg.), *Geist – Person – Gemeinschaft. Freiburger Beiträge zur Aktualität Husserls*, Ergon Verlag, Würzburg 2010, pp. 17-51.

<sup>31</sup> E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit. (en. tr. p. 106).