

“What is it like to be a jellyfish?” – Husserl on the origins of consciousness in the animal world

Bence Peter MAROSAN

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation my main aim is to shed light on certain aspects of the question concerning the origins of consciousness in the natural world on a phenomenological basis. I would like to present here certain crucial elements of a project in which I attempt to contribute to a scientific and philosophical explanation of *minimal mind* or *minimal consciousness*, which is the lowest possible grade of any conscious activity; where under consciousness here I basically understand subjective, phenomenal, *lived experience*; (in German: *Erlebnis*). In my approach especially Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy plays a foundational and thus decisive role. My idea that Husserl’s phenomenological method – in which first person perspective experience and its structural, descriptive analysis serve as a point of orientation – and his sophisticated theory of consciousness could be helpful even today for contemporary scientific researches about the structure and genesis of conscious experience. However, there are already many authors and theories which facilitate the contribution between phenomenology and particularly Husserl’s philosophy and positive scientific researches on consciousness. Especially the authors and representatives of the so-to-say phenomenological branch of Embodied Cognition urged such a dialogue between phenomenology (in particular Husserl) and positive scientific consciousness studies. We are speaking about authors like Thomas Fuchs, Shaun Gallagher, Natalie Depraz, Evan Thompson or Dan Zahavi. These attempts nevertheless, while emphasizing their bond to Husserl’s philosophy and traditional phenomenology, are also getting a little far from Husserl’s original, mature standpoint. In attempts of “naturalizing phenomenology” these authors diverge a bit from Husserl’s *antinaturalistic* stance.

In this paper in certain regard I will be more faithful to Husserl’s original transcendental attitude as the mainstream of phenomenological Embodied Cognition is (in its attempts of naturalizing phenomenology), and thus I will present a somehow “heterodox” version of the standard reading of Embodied Mind. I came to such “heterodox” conclusion in regard of

traditional phenomenological Embodied Cognition, on – I believe – strictly Husserlian grounds; while in the end I will articulate such a position which is in certain details an alternate version to both orthodox Husserlian phenomenology and orthodox phenomenological Embodied Cognition, but – in my opinion – is still a strictly phenomenological and Husserlian conception; that perhaps offers a promising way to the exploration of the mystery of origins of consciousness in the natural world.

In the first half of my presentation I will talk about Husserl's theory of minimal mind and his correlated considerations on the problem of embodiment. In the second part I will try to clarify some elements of my idea of embodiment with regard to present-day's mainstream and standard version of phenomenological Embodied Cognition.

I. HUSSERL'S IDEA OF MINIMAL MIND – OR: “WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A JELLYFISH”

Husserl had a detailed, systematic theory concerning the fundamental level of consciousness and conscious life. Basically he had two general ways to approach this level. *Firstly*, the deconstructing-dismantling analysis of one's own consciousness (“Abbau”). *Secondly*, the phenomenological analysis of *anomalous intersubjective experiences*, that means, subjects, who presumably possess a much lower grade of conscious activity than us.

Regarding the first way, Husserl is of the opinion, that a fully conscious human being has several different layers in her consciousness, and through reflective analysis of one's own mind we can unfold the deeper layers of our conscious experiences. Fully matured human consciousness makes up a concrete, organic whole, and its lower levels could be excavated only in an abstractive way; but there are also situations when higher layers just stop working, and lower layers partially become manifest as at least partially independent moments in the mind. The highest layer is the completely rational, conceptual thought, which is built upon sensible *perception*. Sensible perception is the experience of concrete, three-dimensional spatial objects and their relations with their objective (gegenständliche) sense. According to Husserl, sensations (Empfindungen) are integrated into sensible perception as its dependent moments. However, there are occasions when we experience sensations as such, as a flow of purely immanent data, without concrete objective sense or reference. Partly due to abstraction (and phenomenological reflection) and partly due to phenomenological analysis of situations when lower levels themselves became available in a quasi-direct way, phenomenologist could describe the macro- and microstructure of such (purely sensible) layers of experience.

Also relevant in this context that according to Husserl experience essentially has an embodied nature at every level – on the level of sensory experience and perceptions as well as

on the level theoretical and conceptual thought, (cf. Zahavi 1994). The embodied character of subjectivity plays a crucial role – in Husserl’s opinion – in the constitution of the self and the world. It has a foundational function in intersubjective experience. We can conceive the body of another subject *as* the body of another *subject* (that is to say: as a body which is connected to a sensing, feeling and experiencing subject) thanks to the fact that my body and the other subject’s body share certain similarities in visual and functional regard, (Husserl 1960, 2000).

Body, in Husserl’s interpretation, is an organized system of *organs*. The peculiar aim of organs in phenomenological respect is to make possible the implementation and functioning of certain subjective capabilities. The particular modes of experiencing thus refer to a certain organ which serves as a bodily basis of the peculiar way of experience in question, (cf. Husserl 2000, Claesges 1964). For example: visual experience refers to a visual organ. *Nervous system* – according to Husserl – has a very special position amongst other organs: it integrates concrete human personal subjectivity into the world; it *realizes* the concrete being-in-the-world of human existence. It connects the subjective and objective aspect of the body (*Leib* and *Körper*) with each other.

Though in certain research manuscripts Husserl is of the opinion that every living being has a certain consciousness of its own, in the vast majority of his statements on lower subjects, he claims (at least he implies) that nervous system is a necessary condition and external basis of subjective experience. A simpler organization of body and nervous system in particular expresses a simpler subject. Husserl mentions from time to time the *jellyfish* (*Qualle*) as an example of the simplest subject, (Husserl 1973: 112-119, 2003: 121, 163, 2020: 52-53). So, we ask the question, what is it like to be a jellyfish, which – according to Husserl – is a minimal subject, then we should ask, what minimally necessary subjective capabilities and correlated bodily structures does such a subject need?

The experienced environment – such as that of a jellyfish’s – is made up of a sheer, constantly flowing hyletic (impressional) stream. That stream in this case represents an utterly wet surrounding, that does not feel like wet for a jellyfish, but a kind of normal world. According to Husserl, there are also *instinctual structures* behind the motor capabilities of the subject, that articulate the latitude (playfield) for the concrete, practical being-in-the-world of a subject (cf. Lee 1993). Moreover, minimal consciousness is accompanied by minimal embodiment. There are minimal bodily structures which are structurally connected to the consciousness; such as a minimal set of kinaesthetic and proprioceptive capabilities and events; (consciousness of motor capabilities and internal bodily sensations).

II. THE REALIZATION PROBLEM. WHAT REALIZES MINIMAL MIND?

According to Husserl a minimal subject experiences an environment that is built up of sheerly impressional contents and their relations, which have their peculiar normativity; certain impressional contents and sequences trigger certain instinct-based actions; and this minimal mind is connected to a form of minimal embodiment, with its internal experiential events and structures (proprioception – bodily sensations – and kinaesthesia – consciousness of movement and motor capabilities). The following crucial question is: what realizes this minimal mind? What are the conditions that make possible the functioning and manifestation of minimal mind in the natural world?

In this presentation I would like to propose a solution which is partly compatible with a peculiar interpretation of functionalism on the one hand, and with Embodied Mind or Cognition on the other – but on strictly phenomenological, and particularly Husserlian grounds. See the main possible answers to the question, what realizes consciousness. Basically, if I am right, we have four options. 1) *Classical mind-body dualism*, (Plato, Descartes). There is no realization problem at all. There are two separate substances, mind and body, which interact with each other. 2) *Functionalism*, (Fodor, Lewis, Dennett, etc.). Only formal aspects of the underlying material system are relevant in the realization of consciousness. Materiality is – in the end – irrelevant, what matters is the functional structure, the peculiar way of communication between nerve cells, within the nervous system. 3) *Matter-bound or Matter-sensitive Realization Theory* (MBRT). The standard position of Embodied Mind (Gallagher, Thompson, Zahavi, etc.). Formal and material factors are both relevant in the realization of consciousness, they realize consciousness together. 4) *Orchestrated objective reduction* (Penrose). Quantum based processes realize the consciousness.

Classical metaphysical dualism seems now to be highly unlikely, and so does Orchestrated Objective Reduction Theory. Most likely consciousness is realized through a peculiar communication of organism and its environment, and the communication between nerve cells. The main question is whether material factors are relevant or not in the realization of consciousness? Main representatives of Embodied Mind argue that we must consider material factors in the realization of consciousness relevant, or we get to functionalism, which they keep highly problematic. I, however, suppose that it is a more plausible position from a phenomenological point of view to claim that essentially the *formal structure* of the underlying physical apparatus is responsible for the emergence of consciousness, and not its peculiar material features.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that I fully endorse the 4E-model of consciousness (Rawlands, 2010). It is embodied, enacted, embedded and extended. *Yes – the consciousness*. It is not the entire organism which is *literally* extended in the environment, beyond the limits of its skin. Yes, the organism leaves the marks of its activity in certain material forms in the environment. Beehives, beaver lodges, ant-hills. We write books, diaries and make other material products. But these productions are not certain spiritual or mental entities in the literal sense of the word, outside the world. Nor consciousness embraces material factors in it in the literal sense of the word. Consciousness is strongly influenced by embodiment and environmental factors, and it is also essentially active in constructing the experience of environment (thus “enacts” it). From the viewpoint of conscious *immanence*, we cannot intelligibly argue for the position that *transcendent* material factors as such are somehow relevant in the very realization of consciousness itself.

I am of the opinion that under the phenomenological reduction – and “outside” the reduction also – the only tenable standpoint is that only the formal features and attributes of a material system are responsible for the realization of consciousness. At the end of my presentation I would like to mention four arguments for such an opinion. 1) Under the phenomenological reduction we don’t have a legitimate ground to think that one type of matter is capable of realizing the consciousness, while another is not. Every single type of matter is just reduced to a complexity of meaning. 2) According to Husserl there is an a priori structural, constitutive connection between the subjective and objective aspect of the body (Leib and Körper). If the matter played an essential role in the realization of consciousness, this connection would be empirical and contingent. And two other arguments from a third-person perspective. 3) Ockham’s razor. If we can explain the genesis of consciousness without a necessary reference to the specific type of matter, then it is the simpler and more rational explanation. 4) If on another planet there is a species, with an information-processing apparatus (like we with our nervous system), which has exactly the same formal and functional structure as ours, and they behave as conscious beings, it would be simply a sort of chauvinism to deny that they are conscious creatures like us, just because they are composed of drastically different materials than us.

So, in my opinion, from a strictly phenomenological viewpoint one could argue with profound reasons for a conception, according to which essentially formal factors and conditions are responsible for the genesis of consciousness in general, and minimal consciousness in particular.

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