Book Review   Open Access

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Thomas Szanto and Dermot Moran's edited collection of essays, *Phenomenology of Sociality – Discovering the 'We'* [*PoS* hereafter] has a two-fold aim. The first is to highlight the fruitful ways in which the phenomenological tradition can be brought to bear on current trends in analytic philosophy and interdisciplinary research focused on the nature of various social phenomena, such as joint-attention, joint-intentionality, group-formation, shared affectivity, and shared responsibility. We might refer to this as the volume's *pluralist-interdisciplinary aim*. In the pursuit of this aim, numerous essays in *PoS* helpfully locate phenomenological approaches to sociality with respect to Michael Bratman and Margaret Gilbert's works on collective identity and joint-agency; Stephen Darwall's second-person standpoint ethics; Austinian speech-act theory; contemporary developments on the nature of social cognition in cognitive science and developmental psychology, etc.

The second aim of *PoS* is broadly *historical*. This aim translates into a number of essays that primarily offer careful re-examinations of phenomenological distinctions and taxonomies, provided by canonical but also by lesser-known phenomenologist, with an eye to demonstrating phenomenology's ability to shed light on intersubjective experience and the social world in its multi-layered manifestations.

The more historically oriented essays will surely be of interest to those who already possess a solid familiarity with and interest in the phenomenological tradition and its guiding concepts. For this review, however, I have chosen to focus on a selection of articles that contribute primarily to the volume's pluralist-interdisciplinary aim, since, I take it, this aligns most directly with the interests of the readers of the *Journal of Social Ontology*.

In the phenomenological tradition it is widely argued that second-person experience plays a primary role in our understanding of others; the constitution of the social world; and the objective world more generally (for a compelling account that emphasizes the latter, see Cathal O'Madagain's integrative contribution to the volume, which augments Donald Davidson's interaction-based approach to objectivity with Husserl's intersubjective approach to theorize

contemporary empirical research on how children develop an understanding of the appearance/reality distinction). Despite the widespread agreement that second-person experience plays a central transformative role in capturing our human relation to others and the world at large, it is a real question how exactly this emphasis on second-person experience should be cashed out.

One common phenomenological approach, discussed by a number of essays in the volume, is to place primary emphasis on *concrete interactions* between two or more particular agents. In recent years, this approach has been appropriated and given an emphatic interdisciplinary spin in the form of *interactionist*–or *enactive*–theories of social cognition. In his contribution to *PoS,* Felipe León carefully examines the interactionist claim that social cognition is constitutively grounded in concrete second-person interactions. This claim, which is defended on the basis of both phenomenological and empirical insights, has recently come under attack by thinkers who are generally sympathetic with interactionism's theoretical commitments (Cf. Overgaard and Michael 2015). Though León grants this criticism a certain amount of legitimacy, he also shows that a re-interpretation of some of the relevant empirical evidence opens up an alternative picture regarding the value of the interactionist approach to social cognition – a picture, he argues, that can shed genuine light on how agents "can understand, coordinate, and accomplish tasks collectively" (p. 168).

Whereas León's essay foregrounds the explanatory power of understanding shared cognition through the lens of concrete second-person interactions, we also find a number of essays that call this priority into question. For instance, in a contribution that brings out the link between ethics and phenomenological conceptions of second-person experience, Steven Crowell argues that any empathic concrete grasp of particular others as free responsible agents *presupposes*, rather than constitutes, a more primordial second-personal "feeling of obligation;" a feeling of having been "normatively claimed by an address" (p. 79). To flesh out what this means, Crowell draws mainly on the insights of Sartre, Levinas, and Heidegger, while also incorporating Lyotard's speech-act theory. The big pay-off of Crowell's extensive engagement with phenomenological approaches to second-person experience is that it lays the foundation for a critique of Stephen Darwall's influential second-person standpoint ethics. Darwall holds that "any second-personal address necessarily presupposes symmetrical relations between free and rational beings" (p. 70). Crowell is able to make the case that this image of second-personal address is not only too narrow in scope but also phenomenologically questionable. As Crowell furthermore explicates, this poses a problem for Darwall because his investigation of the conditions necessary for genuine forms of second person address and obligation

is–at least implicitly–committed to the intuitions made available through phenomenological description.

The link between ethics and phenomenological conceptions of intersubjectivity and sociality are canvassed in a number of other contributions to the volume as well.

Havi Carel, for instance, develops a phenomenological contribution to bioethics by capturing the potentially alienating experience of illness, especially in the clinical context. Developing a conception of empathy according to which "the I-Though relationship, or the face-to-face encounter, and their ensuing ethical demands stem from the recognition of the uniqueness and irreducibility of each person," Carel proposes that "what happens in illness … is that empathy breaks down, or is reconfigured, in light of a growing distance between the embodied being-in-the-world of the ill person and that of her healthy counterparts" (p. 179). Though Carel captures the ways in which empathy can be tragically limited, she also suggests it can be expanded if we allow for a more robust integration of the I-Thou relationship into the clinical patient-physician setting.

For an account that challenges the conception of empathy put forth by Carel and other phenomenologists, namely the conception that presents our face-to-face encounter as exposing us first and foremost to the other's uniqueness, one can turn to Joona Taipale's interesting contribution to *PoS*. Taipale argues that any empathic grasp of the other in her particularity and uniqueness (i.e. as a "token") presupposes more primary acts of categorization in terms of *types* (e.g. categorizations related to gender, race, profession, social class, etc.). Taipale argues that "by rule, typification makes our experience of others prejudiced," adding that "strong" forms of typification can amount "to conquering others' freedom, their future, their transcendence; it amounts to 'the anonymization' of the other" (p. 144 and 155). Taipale's proposal requires some further clarification: for instance, Taipale seems to alternate between presenting our experience of others as first and foremost *grounded* in "type-orientation" and presenting it as "always" *oscillating* "between type-orientation and token-orientation" (p. 152). Furthermore, Taipale's prioritization of type-orientation seems, at times, to present our experience of the other as firstly observational in character, which puts him at odds with the more standard phenomenological view that our experience of the other emerges first and foremost in contexts of practical second-person engagements. Though these are theoretical commitments that need more fleshing out, Taipale's essay surely reveals that doing so is worthwhile for anyone working on empathy and its relation to ethical life.

There is a concern implicit in Taipale's essay that is explicated in more detail in Eric Chelstrom's contribution, namely the concern that our experience of others is organized in terms of shared, powerful *us-versus-them* affective states.

To be sure, Chelstrom's primary aim is in fact (1) to trace a development in Aron Gurwitsch's thought regarding the constitutive role of affect for collective intentions and social bonds; (2) to use Gurwitsch to critique the "intellectualist bias," characteristic of Bratman and Gilbert's work, which Chelstrom describes as the bias to view emotions as merely reactive rather than constitutively involved in the formation of social bonds; and (3) to show that Gurwitsch's constitutive approach enjoys the support of "contemporary interdisciplinary research." Although this latter aim is rather underdeveloped–we are given a short paragraph towards the end of the essay–Chelstrom's contribution compellingly indicates how divisive "us-vs-them based formulations of role prescriptions and social norms" are "mostly, if not entirely, constituted by affective stances" (p. 257). (For a much more in-depth contribution that addresses what it means to share an emotion, steeped in interdisciplinary research, see Joel Krueger's excellent contribution "The Affective 'We' – Self-Regulation and Shared Emotions").

The preoccupation with "us-vs-them" roles reappears in Nicholas De Warren's essay, which draws primarily on Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in an effort to theorize (1) the ontological structure and formation of social groups as they occur in a variety of more or less cohesive forms; (2) the relationship between individual and group-identities; and (3) the intimate link between group-formation and social exclusion. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the volume concludes with De Warren's account, which bears most directly on today's political climate and the polarizing 'us-vs-them' narratives used by xenophobic politicians in Europe and the US alike. As such the final impression that *PoS* leaves the reader with, is that phenomenological accounts of the sociality can directly contribute not just to contemporary theoretical debates in philosophy and cognitive science, but also to an understanding of our current socio-political reality.

Although I have only been able to highlight some of the ideas put forth in just a few of the 19 essays in *PoS*, what I hope my discussion has indicated is that *PoS* is a rich work that has the potential to enliven existing debates and generate new ones concerning the nature of social cognition, empathy, shared affects, group-formation, etc. That said, I will conclude my review on a minor critical note about the volume's intended audience or, rather, audiences. As I discussed earlier, *PoS* aims to make a two-fold historical *and* pluralist-interdisciplinary contribution. Though these two aims are not necessarily antithetical to one another, there are moments where they threaten to be. Some of the essays that fulfill the volume's historical aim speak to an audience with a deep familiarity with the phenomenological tradition and its central concepts. This could potentially alienate readers with a different theoretical background who are drawn to the volume's pluralist-interdisciplinary promise. To avoid this possible sense of alienation, I refer the

reader to the volume's helpful introduction, which does a good job of situating the different audiences *PoS* is likely to attract.

Bibliography

Overgaard, Søren and John Michael (2015): "The Interactive Turn in Social Cognition Research: A Critique". In: *Philosophical Psychology* 28. No. 2, p. 160–183.