

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DECISION MAKING

Urban Kordeš*

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

It is becoming apparent in modern cognitive science that the lack of knowledge about human experiential landscape implies the loss of a very important element, perhaps the very essence. Consequently, a rather new area of research has emerged recently: an attempt at a systematic observation and study of experience. This is the so-called *phenomenologically inspired research* (or just *phenomenological research*).

Part of this article aims to present this new area of research – it describes the common fundamentals of the field and some of its characteristic methodological derivatives, relating them to the possibility of studying *decision making* from the first-person point-of-view, i.e. decision making as an experiential phenomenon (and not as a neurological or behavioural process). The article also presents some of the findings phenomenological studies have led to and some theoretical reflexions encouraged by these insights.

KEY WORDS

experience, experiencing, phenomenology, phenomenological research, reason, first-person

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*Corresponding author, η : urban.kordes@guest.arnes.si; +386 1 589 2200;
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

RESEARCHING LIVED HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The research of cognition, consciousness and everything connected to these two fields is probably one of the biggest enterprises modern science has undertaken in recent decades. This is mostly due to enormous progress made by neurosciences, finally allowing for a scientific perspective of the processes which we were unable to observe in vivo until very recently. It is an interesting point that the very development of objective (third-person) research of cognition has stirred the revival of the research of direct lived (first-person) human experience. It was neuroscientists themselves who first began to realise that the gathering of the so-called “experiential data” is not that simple. It does not suffice to merely ask people about it or to prepare good questionnaires. If we are to categorise experience theoretically – how are we to research it, if even the person reporting it does not know how to observe it?

In the areas where we are faced with a direct contact with living, concrete, unique human beings, the ignorance about their (our) experiencing usually means the loss of a very important element, maybe even a crucial one. This is why a new field of research has emerged recently: the attempt at a systematic observation of experience. This consists of the so-called phenomenologically inspired research approaches, or phenomenological research, in short.

Before I embark upon the presentation of phenomenological research, let me state that it does not imply a negation of psychological theories or neurological explanations. Quite the opposite, the research of experience in modern science appears to be complementary to the progress made by neuroscience. It merely proposes that the naturalistic scientific method of gaining knowledge should not be taken as the only relevant instrument for “measuring” cognitive phenomena. The most important approaches in phenomenological research (e.g. neurophenomenology [1]) propose a balanced synthesis of both perspectives. Nevertheless, a certain degree of polarisation remains necessary, in order to enable the young and still very fragile field of phenomenological research to establish itself, and even more so to overcome the idea that we already know everything there is to know about experience and that there is not much left to study. Let us therefore start the presentation by describing the foundations on which experience research is based.

THE BASIC METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN RESEARCHING EXPERIENCE

The science of lived human experience that I wish to describe is interested in experiencing itself, such as it is; such as it appears in the field of consciousness. It does not inquire about what is “behind” experiencing, what causes it, or about the things “out there” – things as they would be without the intervention of our subjective properties (i.e. the properties characteristic only for me – the observer – which are therefore not shared by others)¹.

The fundamental phenomenological insight here is that experience, more accurately my first-person experience, is primary. Not only does it come first – it is all I have. I cannot get to know anything outside the domain of my experience. Thoughts, meanings, descriptions, visions, images, feelings, emotions... nothing exists outside of one’s conscious experience (or my lived experience). The experiential world can be organised (e.g. by classifying it into feelings, thoughts etc., or by explaining the observed phenomena with the help of science, or by classifying it to “outer” and “inner”), but I cannot get to know anything outside my experience. Phenomenological research therefore focuses on the observation of direct lived experience as it presents itself. The term “phenomenological” comes from a philosophical movement established, initiated by Edmund Husserl around 1900, which posed the above

mentioned statement as its basic epistemological credo. Some of the basic methodological guidelines of Husserl's research programme were:

- bracketing or epoché. Husserl suggests putting the usual early judgement calls about things as they appear in our experience into “brackets” and applying phenomenological reduction – the reduction of the observed phenomena “as the only thing given and certain in experience”. As Kotnik [2; p.102] says, the emphasis is on “the research of what is given in experience only, but it is imperative to include experience in its entirety”. The first step towards achieving this is to recognise the complexity and infinity of this field.
- rule: “Never explain, just describe!” This is the single most important methodological guideline of phenomenological research. This instruction may seem simple at first sight, but it is extremely difficult and complex to carry out in practice. It takes a great deal of reflection and skill. Only once we try to merely describe experience without classifying or explaining or situating it into frameworks in any way, we become aware of how deep our need to explain is and how hard it is to give it up. Kotnik [2; p.103] quotes Ihde [3] in talking about “how difficult it is to distinguish between the actually describable experience as it shows itself directly, and non-experiential elements such as assumptions or presuppositions. Any kind of theory, idea, notion or construction tending to go beyond the phenomena is already an explanation.”
- refrain from convictions or evaluations of the “reality” of the observed phenomena. Without intersubjective verification (typical of the scientific method) we cannot distinguish between “illusion and “reality”. From the stance of the priority of direct experience such distinctions are merely one way to classify the experiential world (and as such no more valid than other possible distinctions), that is why Husserl recommends that even this – at first sight primary judgement – be bracketed and we observe the field of experience as it shows itself, without judging it.

As Husserl believed that only by abiding to the above stated guidelines we would get “lost in phenomena” [3], he added a fourth guideline recommending the search for structure and invariable properties of the observed phenomena. Husserl believed that this way it would be possible to create a “transcendental” science – a system surpassing the ephemeral uniqueness of concrete experience by extracting the essential (“transcendental”, intersubjective) elements from it.

Phenomenological research (as a qualitative-methodological approach) takes the described epistemological-methodological standpoint after phenomenology as a philosophical discipline. However, it does not follow its philosophical distancing from empirical research, but rather endeavours to base as many of its assumptions as possible on the empirical research of experience. As the article explains below, the methods of gathering these data vary and have not yet been perfected, but all of them aim to avoid the so-called “armchair introspection”, the opinion that we already know everything there is to know about experiencing. Phenomenological research can thus be generally defined as a methodological category encompassing all empirical methods, approaches, means of gathering and/or analysing materials based on the above-mentioned (phenomenological) epistemological foundations and guidelines.

DIVERSE APPROACHES IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Recently, there has been a variety of attempts at a systematic observation of experience. This wide area could be subdivided according to several essential properties, the most important one perhaps being the research perspective, in other words: the question whose experience we are observing. First-person perspective implies the observation of one's own experience,

while third-person perspective means that we are interested in the experience of others. But there is also the possibility of second-person approaches, which are based on dialogue. The second-person approach represents a kind of synthesis of the first- and third-person ones.

The role of memory

At any moment, direct living experiencing can at best be observed, but hardly researched; therefore the research of experience is basically the research of memories of past experiences. In phenomenological research, memory is the fundamental medium enabling us to access the area of research. As mentioned above, in recent decades a number of alternative ways of researching experience has been developed. The fundamental question each of these methods has to deal with is how to approach lived experience as accurately as possible. There is no doubt that memory does not represent the ideal interface between me (the researcher, the observer) and the experience I am interested in. Thus the question arises how to preserve the past as incorrupt as possible.

In this regard, one might mention two schools of phenomenological research, distinct in their respective attitudes towards the problem of the “purity” of memory. The difference being that one of them attempts to reduce retrospection to the minimum, while the other tries to train the interviewer in the dialectical skill of “purifying” the constructs brought about by memory.

The Paris based phenomenological school with its most renowned representative Claire Petitmengin [4] is trying to perfect the art of interviewing to the level where it would become possible to approach even the memories which are no longer entirely fresh and cleanse them of the constructs accumulated in the meantime. Such “purification” is possible and often quite successful. There have been reported cases of séances after which people were able to recall incredible details (of which some could be verified).

A different approach is taken by Russell Hurlburt [5], the founder of the descriptive experience sampling (DES) technique. The goal of DES is to compose a kind of encyclopaedia of the basic elements of experience and their interconnections. DES could be compared to a geological ground survey, in which samples are taken at random locations in order to be analysed in a laboratory. Similarly, in DES experience is probed (sampled) at random moments, and the subjects are debriefed by researcher. In practice, such probing is carried out with the help of special devices subjects carry around with them. The device emits a gentle acoustic signal at random moments. The subject then tries to “freeze” his/her experiencing immediately prior to the beep – by describing it as accurately as possible into a handy notebook. No later than 24 hours after the probing, the subject has to meet with the researcher who tries to extract accurate data through an interview about the samples. Hurlburt instructs that the interview is to be stopped as soon as the subject begins to hesitate or becomes unsure about his/her answers (“hm...”, “I don’t know...”, “I think that...” – these are the so-called “subjectifications”), thus attempting to reduce retrospection to the minimum.

As one can see, the two conceptions of experience research are complementary. Approaches such as DES are a useful tool for “mapping” everyday experience, while dialectical methods often delve deeper into a specific (chosen) aspect. Let us now take a look at some of the results (related to the experience of decision making) gained by both kinds of approaches.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND DECISION MAKING

As mentioned above, the development of modern phenomenological research as an empirical scientific discipline and its recognition in the field of cognitive science was initiated by Francisco Varela with his *neurophenomenology* project, the beginning of which marks a new era in the scientific interest in experience. Already in his fundamental article on

neurophenomenology, he defined the research of volition and consequently decision making as one of the principal tasks and most promising potentials of the (neuro)phenomenological field: “The nature of will as expressed in the initiation of a voluntary action is inseparable from consciousness and its examination. Recent studies give an important role to neural correlates which precede and prepare voluntary action, and the role of imagination in the constitution of a voluntary act. ... Yet voluntary action is preeminently a lived experience which has been thoroughly discussed in the phenomenology literature, most specifically in the role of embodiment as lived body (*corps propre*, [6]), and the interdependence between lived body and its world (*Leibhaftigkeit*)”. [1; p.345]

Even though notions such as *volition*, *decision making*, *free will* etc. are apparently primarily experiential (i.e. they are descriptions of experiencing and not theoretical concepts), there have been so far few relevant researches in this direction. Often we are able to read in introductions to cognitive studies that “the phenomenology of the phenomenon is clear...”, while the task of the cognitive scientist is to research its neurological correlates. But all phenomenological studies without exception confirm that phenomenology, i.e. the specifics of experiencing, is anything but clear.

As explained in Varela’s quote above, philosophical phenomenology has already worked out the idea of voluntary activity, while so far there have been no experience studies carried out to empirically research decision making (at least not to the knowledge of the author of this article). Nevertheless, modern phenomenological researchers have sporadically considered this topic in the scope of more general experience research. Before presenting some of the empirical phenomenological findings in more detail, let me recapitulate some of the theoretical points which emerged from philosophical reflection upon detailed analysis of experiential reports related to decision making.

WHAT DOES DECISION MAKING MEAN FROM THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL POINT-OF-VIEW?

The first thing to point out in considering decision making from the phenomenological perspective is that most of the studies of this phenomenon (process) fail to define clearly whether decision making is a behavioural category (third-person perspective) or an experiential one (first-person perspective). In considering decision making, researchers tend to view this process as something “out there”, independent of the observer and of the way the subject experiences it. Decision making (like most of experiential phenomena) is reified – it is dealt with in a way similar to the one taken in the case of physical phenomena (for example gravity, which is “out there” whether I notice it or not).

From the point-of-view of phenomenological research, such attitude is completely inappropriate. Obviously, first of all we must clarify what we mean when we talk about decision making (this goes also for all other cognitive phenomena, of course). It would appear that in modern cognitive science there are (at least) three possible aspects, each determined by the epistemological background of the respective science, each one plausible inside the scope of its area:

- *the psychological aspect*; The category (e.g. decision making) is defined by the expert mostly basing on the observation of behaviour. In this sense, observing can include questions (usually in the form of a questionnaire), which are again interpreted by the expert according to other gathered data. The final categorising therefore lies in the domain of the expert, not the subject,

- *the neuroscientific aspect*; Neuroscience is not yet precise enough to be able to deduce cognitive functions taking place merely by looking at the physiology. But the efforts of this discipline are definitely aimed at this goal,
- *the phenomenological aspect*; phenomenological research does not ask about the causes of a given experience (unlike psychoanalysis, for example), nor about its physiological correlates. It is interested exclusively in what the subject experiences and it declares the subject the only expert on that. A phenomenological researcher can help a reporter focus his/her view on experiencing, he/she can help one inquire into one's own experiential landscape, but he/she cannot judge whether a report is true or not. The only expert on experiencing is the experiencing person himself/herself. From the point-of-view of phenomenological research, the subject whose experience is studied is the only one with the authority to evaluate what kind of experience he/she had.

This implies that, from the phenomenological point-of-view, what counts as *decision making* is only the experience recognised as such by the subject.

Many behaviours which could be defined as decision making when viewed from the outside are – from the experiential point of view – merely acting according to circumstance (in other words: appropriate acting in given circumstances). One can find numerous similar cases in psychological literature on decision making. For example, the founders of the so-called naturalistic decision making theory ([7, 8] and others) often mention their research conducted with firemen who have had to “make a decision” (this way or another) in situations of crisis, without experiencing their behaviour as decision making. The fireman who “decided” to leave the room immediately after he had entered it, at that moment experienced his behaviour as the only option and not as just one from an array of choices. Only later did he rationalise it and discovered (constructed) its causes or, to put it more accurately, its reasons.

The phenomenological reports I have analysed in the course of our study presented a number of cases which probably appeared as decision making from the outside, while the reporters did not perceive their experiencing in this way at all. E.g. in the case of purchasing an item in a bakery shop or choosing a meal in a restaurant, where the reporter, despite the large selection on offer, simply “felt” what he wanted to eat and did not experience the order as making a decision.

But phenomenological reports also present cases which are the exactly opposite: sometimes we experience decision making even in situations when our behaviour does not imply it. A good example is the report of a man with a Tourette syndrome. After taking a shower he experienced an intrusive thought of having to kill his father in case he left the shower. From the point-of-view of an outside observer one could probably detect some hesitation in leaving the shower, but one could hardly call it decision making as there are no visible alternative options.

Thus we can conclude it is not the nature of the world forcing us to make decisions. There is no decision making outside human reality, in other words, outside man's rational interpretation. The idea of choice and consequently the notion of decision making is a rational invention. Decision making only exists in language or in thought. According to the research carried out by Russel Hurlburt [5], decision making often appears in the form of “unsymbolized thinking”. This means thinking without experiencing the thoughts as being represented by words.

By no means are we forced to make decisions by lived situations. It is our interpretation of our lived situations which induces us to make decisions.

This raises the question for phenomenological consideration: What is it that makes certain lived situations “demand” decision making? Why do we start to “decide” in some situations, while in others – apparently quite similar – we do not? The answer to this question lies beyond the scope

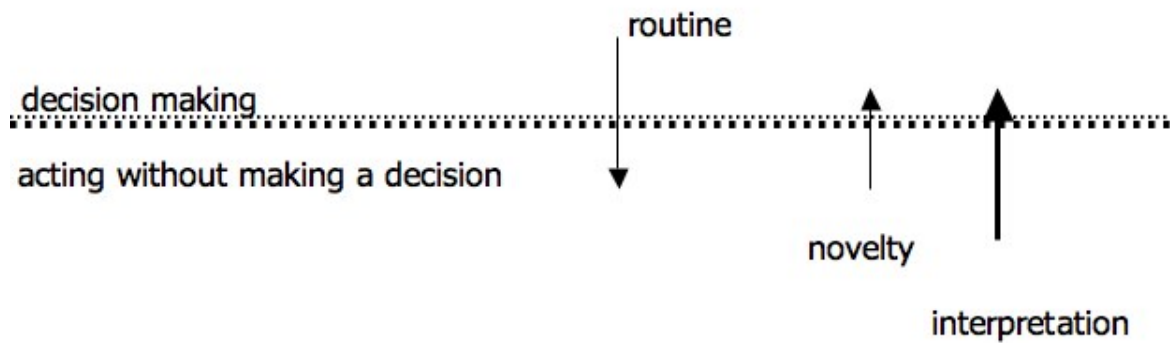


Figure 1. Factors that affect the subject to perceive one's experiencing.

of this article, but we can nevertheless graphically present some of the factors that affect the subject to perceive one's experiencing either as decision making or as a continuous flow.

SOME PARTIAL FINDINGS AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DECISION MAKING

What follows is an incomplete, but nevertheless telling compendium of phenomenological findings in the field of decision making. The compendium presents partial results gained by a phenomenological study of decision making carried out in the scope of an interdisciplinary research project entitled "Methodological aspects in researching cognitive processes – learning and decision making". As part of the project, some phenomenological surveys in the field of decision making were made, as well as an analysis of existing phenomenological reports related to this topic.

Contemporary phenomenological research offers a wide repertory of concrete techniques and approaches to the research of experience, which are quite diverse in their application. The patchwork of insights referred to below was gained by two approaches: phenomenological dialogue and descriptive experience sampling. Both approaches have already been mentioned in the first section of the article as representatives of two different views on solving the problem of introspection. Let us give a somewhat more detailed description of each method.

Phenomenological dialogue

A serious reflection on this phenomenon should make it clear that simple psychological experiments cannot grasp the experiential essence of decision making. This confirms the need (and ethical urge) for a dialogical approach in which both – the subject and the researcher – train their sensibility for one another, while the subject in turn gradually perfects the skill of observing his/her own experience. In phenomenological research, a basic epistemological question arises: who is actually the researcher? Is it possible to research the experiencing of another being unless that person has an honest and deeply existential interest in observing his/her experience? As the method in question is an example of the so-called second-person paradigm, it would perhaps be most accurate to say that both participants of the dialogue are researchers. What we are dealing with is thus not a case of observation "from the outside", but rather one of participatory co-research.

At times, dialectical phenomenological research is related to the so-called phenomenological case study [9]. It is based on the dialogical method in which the researcher poses questions in an attempt to open up the respondent's experiential space (or better: the awareness of it). The researcher has no fixed conception of the topics he would like to address, but rather attempts to

direct the dialogue towards the topics most relevant to the respondent. This way he allows the respondent's awareness of his/her experience to widen. The questions help one "discover" areas of one's experiential world one might earlier not have been aware of. The questions merely offer support – we use them to show our interest, our participation. It is imperative for the interviewer to maintain an open mind and to persist in the "I don't know" position. The more priory judgements, ideas and beliefs we manage to get rid of, the more space we create for new insights. The respondent must feel that his/her words "hit the spot", that he is being heard and seen. In a phenomenological dialogue, there is no place for questions beginning with "why", as it is not intended to encourage explanations and interpretations. Its primary interest is "how". Of course, it is useful to have an idea about the cognitive categories which are to be addressed before starting the interview, but this is merely a plan B in case that the respondent loses track. If possible, the respondent should determine the direction of the interview and it is not unusual for the dialogue to stray into completely unexpected terrains.

It is imperative for the interviewer to be as skilled as possible in putting his/her expectations and desires into brackets. The goal of the dialogue is to gain deeper insight into experiencing. Experience shows that the dialogue might stray into a dead end as soon as the interviewer tries to become a therapist and "solve" some "problem". The hardest task for the interviewer is to preserve curiosity and to trust experiencing such as it shows itself in a given moment.

It is characteristic of the phenomenological dialogue to make use of the hermeneutic circle when delving into the fields of research. The interviewer and the respondent gradually become more skilled in observing and describing, thus they often touch upon the "same" topics. It is used as a research method helping us to describe the experiential world of the respondent. Such a description, the result of a longer series of dialogues, is also called a phenomenological case study. The result of such a study is a clear, explicit and systematic description of the experiential landscape of the researched person – without attempting any theoretical comparisons, classifications etc. Sometimes the result can be also a thorough insight into specifics of experiencing of a certain cognitive phenomenon.

The method

In autumn 2008 I started a phenomenological case study with a young man with the Gilles de la Tourette syndrome. It was he who came to me first, acting on the advice of his neurologist, mostly because he realised that talking about his experiences related to the Tourette pathology offered him great relief. My intention was to inquire as much as possible into experiencing related to decision making. With regard to the above mentioned facts on phenomenological dialogue, this was merely my plan B, of course. In our work I tried to adapt to the respondent's interests and put my own expectations into brackets which included my desire to find out more about the processes of decision making. Nevertheless, several insights or rather interesting experiential reports about the topic did emerge in the end.

I also gathered some experiential reports from other phenomenological dialogues I have been leading during the first few months in 2009. Since those dialogues were not focused to the topics of decision making, I only selected relevant segments of reports.

Virtually any phenomenological case study I carry out, starts with a couple of days of descriptive experience sampling (described briefly in the first section). Descriptive experience sampling offers a relatively smooth introduction to phenomenological research and easy learning of how to observe one's own experience. The DES method is relatively simple (the subject reports about his/her experiencing at random moments), nevertheless it can sometimes render surprisingly profound insights into experiencing. The data gathered with the help of this method resulted in several interesting findings about the experiencing of decision making.

When searching for reports about experiencing decision making in other phenomenological studies, I found the collection of cases collected by Russell Hurlburt to be most helpful. In his work he listed some typical categories of experiencing and also equipped them with video-cases of reports.

A PATCHWORK OF INSIGHTS

The patchwork of findings presented below is a more or less arbitrary collection of data from studies, not necessarily aimed exclusively at the present topic. A focused phenomenological study of decision making is thus still pending.

Decision making is connected to unsymbolized thinking

As mentioned above, the DES method aims to provide a kind of map of subject's experiencing. Its founder Russell Hurlburt and his collaborators have determined several dozens of categories describing the most characteristic elements of experiencing, for example categories such as *inner speech*, *sensation*, *just observing* etc. [10]. One of the more interesting categories is the one designated as *unsymbolized thinking*². This is how Hurlburt describes this category: "*Unsymbolized thinking* is the experience of thinking some particular, definite thought without the awareness of that thought's being represented in words, images, or any other symbols" [10].

A striking feature is that approximately 80 % of reports Hurlburt listed in this category are connected to decision making or to processes in which subjects report about "weighing" different options. (These last ones are not necessarily decision making processes. E.g. "I was interested whether Joe will pick me up with his new car or not". But they are experientially very similar.)

As a rule, subjects studied experienced their thoughts in other ways as well (e.g. inner speech). Unsymbolized thinking therefore does not represent the only modality of their thinking. This begs the question if unsymbolized thinking is perhaps "reserved" for processes connected to decision making.

Free will

All my respondents report about the experience of free will. This observation is of course hardly enough to prove anything conclusive, as the sample is so negligible. Besides, there is always the possibility that the feeling of free will is culturally conditioned – that is to say, we might not get unified results if we researched this feeling in other cultures, for example the more community-oriented Asian societies.

But the sureness of all the reports I was able to gather is nevertheless indicative. Virtually all respondents gave reports about the feeling of freedom in their decisions without a shadow of a doubt. Such agreement in reports is extremely rare in researching subjectivity and therefore probably deserves some attention.

With this it is also interesting that in explaining our past decisions we very rarely tend to evoke our free will. As a rule, subjects explain their decisions as "necessary" results of given circumstances or their knowledge at the time of deciding. (This is related to the so-called attribution error – a phenomenon well-known to psychologists. Human beings are inclined to attribute other people's decisions to their free will, while our own decisions are often seen as inevitable.)

Reports on decision making depend on the world-view of the reporter

The conclusion that experience reports are culturally and socially conditioned is by no means surprising. Let me here mention an anecdotal example (not taken from any research, it was witnessed in a simple “just ask” situation; nevertheless it is quite to the point). When some colleagues from our interdisciplinary group for decision making research reported about how they decided to choose their desserts after a meal,

- the artificial intelligence expert reported that he decided which dessert to choose by inspecting the decision tree,
- the neuroscientist described his decision as “an undulating viscose liquid” in which at a certain point one wave (the desire for a given dessert) became strong enough to reach a certain perceptive threshold.

Both views appear to be a kind of a (metaphorical) report on how each reporter’s home science perceives the process of decision making. This is partly because humans tend to take the metaphors we use from the array closest to our interests – this is the part which can be “neutralised” by a well executed phenomenological dialogue (and later analysis). But there is more to it.

This phenomenon is somewhat similar to the research of dreams which indicates that prior to the invention of colour TV in the vast majority of cases people reported about dreaming in black and white [11]. But ever since the appearance of films and TV in colour, most people tend to report that they dream in colour. As already mentioned, the conditioning of our experiencing by our cultural background is no surprise, but nevertheless it poses several crucial epistemological questions related to the definition of truth in experience research. I.e. what exactly is the difference between a world-view and the world itself. Such difference might be easy to define in the case of things belonging to the “outside” world, but how about reports of experiencing? Is there any difference at all between the next two claims?

1. The B&W generation used to dream in colour too, but people have problems remembering it (i.e. socially conditioned conceptions overshadow the “real” picture).
2. The B&W generation dreamt in black and white.

The principal problem lies in the fact that truth in experience research cannot be defined in the context of correspondence. For a given claim to correspond to outside facts there must be – outside facts. But what is supposed to correspond to what in the case of recalling experience?

After having conducted numerous experience researches, I have a feeling that the advantage of dialogical phenomenological methods is not so much in gaining new propositional knowledge about cognitive processes, but rather in reaching a balance between rational ideas (assumptions about “how it should be”, ideals and values) and lived reality. The cases I referred to, demonstrate the extraordinary power of our conceptions: in many occasions they are able to interrupt our contact with the most basic experiential contents. They also indicate that one of the major tasks of thinking is actually to provide “excuses” for our behaviour (a fact neuroscience has been pointing out for quite some time now). But one can hardly say this tells us much about the phenomenon of decision making itself.

Decisions which will be carried out are experienced in a different way from the ones that will not

It appears that the destiny of the emerging decision is often known already during the process of decision making. The respondents report that they often experience decisions which will be carried out differently from the ones that will not be. They mention a “more fulfilling” feeling, a feeling that “this is the right thing to do”, a feeling of fluidity, as opposed to the feeling of

being “forced” into a decision or making one “off the top of one’s head” or simply because they “knew this is the right thing to do”.

Let me point out a difference between “feeling that this is the right thing to do” and “knowing that this is the right thing to do”. In the second case, the decision is usually a result of rational knowledge about which of the two options (choices, ways of acting etc.) is the better one. E. g. “I will start doing regular exercise” (because I “know” that this is the right thing to do, the healthy thing to do, etc.). On the other hand we have the “feeling that this is the right thing to do” which is not necessarily related to rational arguments. Sometimes it even opposes them. Such feelings are usually described as being more fulfilling and the probability of actually carrying out the decision made according to them is much higher. The extreme case of such experiencing is the feeling of “it is so” - these are the experiences which reporters do not perceive as decision making at all, but merely as acting upon their knowledge about the circumstances. A good example is the report of a young man who in a certain moment “became aware” of the fact that he and his girlfriend “do not get along”. This was experienced as an insight which dictated further action (breaking up). It pertains to the group of cases I mentioned above in describing the phenomenology of decision making: even though from the outside we could describe the young man’s actions as an important decision, this is not how he experienced it at all.

From the philosophical, as well as from the phenomenological point-of-view, decision-making is clearly a very broad category – or rather a family – of experiencing (processes), the big question here being how much do the different members of this family actually have in common. There is a dramatic difference between deciding “when” (I will put a glass on the table, for example) and “how” (I will present an article in a conference – this being rather an act of creativity than one of making a decision), thus begging the question if the two processes are indeed members of the same family at all.

TWO MODALITIES OF DECISION MAKING

Phenomenological studies confirm the neurological findings that a very important role of reason is to block certain processes which might otherwise manifest themselves in actions. The majority of reporters mention that thinking takes up most of their experiential time (and space). Often its role in containing spontaneity becomes even stronger than necessary for normal functioning in social situations. In the context of our research, I had an interview with a Tourette syndrome patient, whose experiencing was affected by characteristic mental vicious circles triggered by intrusive thoughts (an example being his report of how he thought he would have to kill his father if he left the shower – and as he could not stay in the shower forever, this led to an intense internal argument). Such complicated mental circles are not typical merely for pathological states, of course. Virtually anyone can at times experience them in their less emphatic varieties. A good example is a report of a respondent about weighing the options whether to visit the girlfriend he had a fight with earlier or not. He was able to find rational arguments to support each of the options. But even though at some stage it became clear to him that this balancing does not bring him any nearer to the solution, he was unable to resist the painful (and not entirely rational) pondering of the alternatives.

The solution finally emerged in the form of an impulse, when he suddenly “felt” that he had to visit her and did it at once (before a new mental circle could consolidate). In the case of the Tourette patient such circles usually result in a semi-voluntary movement (a tick), which might also be seen as a kind of energization, strong enough to short-circuit the rational vicious circle for a couple of seconds.

This shows that a rational process is rarely, if ever, capable of tipping the scales to either side. In this point phenomenological research agrees with neuroscientific findings that a kind of

energy surge is necessary to break the uncertainty crisis. In this light, one might see decision making as waiting or active searching for the impulse (energetization which reinforces one of the options so that it overpowers the others). The process of thinking appears more as an obstacle or as a cover for an entirely different process, one that is not rational at all. But contrary to the neuroscientific expectations, the impulse tipping the scales in most cases is not experienced as an emotion.

There have been reports about decision making strategies which are in accordance with the above mentioned insights. The famous cognitive scientist Max Velmans in a conference in Ratna Ling in 2009 recommended a strategy which included a reflection on all the predictable options, before – instead of getting caught in the circle of balancing – “switching” to an entirely different activity while at the same time waiting for the energetic impulse in the form of “knowing which choice is the best one”.

Above mentioned leads to a question: What if the art of decision making lies in using our reason to “view” different alternatives and silencing it afterwards in order to allow some other part of us to make the choice in the end? Or rather, in learning to perceive non-rational impulses in certain moments and train our reason to allow for synchronised action in such moments (therefore, to give some kind of approval by giving an appropriate interpretation of the decision).

HOW TO CONTINUE (INITIATE) A SYSTEMATIC STUDY OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DECISION MAKING?

This article can provide merely an introduction to the research area, bits and pieces which cannot bring us to any final conclusions. A real, wide-scope phenomenological study of decision making is still pending. But hopefully, this can give us a sense of the potential of phenomenological decision making research. Here are some guidelines for future research that can be extracted from what we have learned so far:

- a more in-depth research of the experience of free will. If possible, on an intercultural scale,
- research of the modes of decision making. Probably this would be most effectively done by a prolonged DES study conducted long enough to gain sufficient samples about decision making.

Perhaps the most promising direction of phenomenological inquiry is researching correlations between different ways of experiencing decision making process and their outcome (will those decisions indeed be carried out or not).

REMARKS

¹It is obvious that such research is problematic from the point-of-view of traditional science, which usually takes great pains to subtract anything unrepeatable, specific, or subjective from the phenomenon.

²Interesting because many believe it is not possible to think without experiencing symbols.

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FENOMENOLOGIJA ODLUČIVANJA

Urban Kordeš

Pedagoški fakultet, Sveučilište u Ljubljani
Ljubljana, Slovenija i

SAŽETAK

U modernoj je kognitivnoj znanosti sve očitije kako nedostatak razumijevanja profila ljudskog iskustva vodi na gubitak značajnog elementa, možda i same srži. Slijedom navedenog, relativno novo područje istraživanja nedavno je razvijeno kao pokušaj sustavnog promatranja i istraživanja iskustva. To je tzv. *fenomenologijom inspirirano istraživanje* (ili *fenomenološko istraživanje*).

Dio ovog članka teži prezentiranju tog novog područja istraživanja te opisuje njegove osnove i neka svojstva metodoloških izvedenica, povezujući ih s mogućnosti proučavanja odlučivanja sa stajališta prvog lica, tj. odlučivanja kao pojave iskustva (a ne kao neurološkog, ili biheviorističkog procesa). Članak navodi neke rezultate do kojih su dovela fenomenološke studije i njima potaknuta teorijska promišljanja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

iskustvo, sticanje iskustva, fenomenologija, fenomenološka istraživanja, razlog, prvo lice