

Autism and transcendental phenomenology

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Thom Janssen, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works – including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Beuningen date: 2024-05-31

Article abstract (109 words)

Despite 80 years of research the approach to autism remains an attempt to understand why autistic people do not receive the world correctly. Edmund Husserl's critique of naturalism can be applied to the state of autism research, and the transcendental phenomenology he once initiated as a foundation for the sciences employed to overcome unexamined presuppositions in theorizing about it. Key to this is the transcendental perspective Husserl's successors often rejected. With new Husserl scholarship and recent publications from his *Nachlass*, a specific form of the transcendental reduction can reveal the two incompatible roads to the same destination: the world. In doing so, Husserl's intended purpose for phenomenology is honored.

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Introduction

Being autistic is philosophically interesting. In the most ordinary experiences subjectivity shows itself as a problem. Though as a child I paid utmost attention to the behavior and speech of others, my behavior was somehow unsatisfactory because I had failed to notice something apparently obvious. The obviousness of these things were such that my failure to use them to construct the apparently intuitive response could often only be comprehended in the notion that I must inhabit an entirely different world. Whatever mismatch between my experience and theirs they were talking about, it had to be something different from the ordinary claim that our experience of the world we share can only be subjective. What did ‘world’ mean in the sense these people were using it, and how were they so assured of their access to it? What did my experience mean if the world was not so readily available to me?

I remembered these childhood thoughts the first time I learned about Edmund Husserl’s concept of the natural attitude. With this notion Husserl characterizes our ordinary engagement with the world of experience. In the natural attitude we approach the world as simply there, independent of our experience of it and yet immediately available for us to know. Husserl even portrays the nature of this attitude as naive, but as a kind of productive naiveté: the attitudes scientists have towards the world — as the world of physics, biology or meteorology — presupposes the acceptance of the world’s existence inherent to the natural attitude.¹ The natural attitude is an achievement of consciousness, but one we may forget so totally that we start taking these beliefs as the actual structures of reality. In doing so, Husserl warns, we become unable to ask fundamental questions about the relation of consciousness to being.² Rather than being the interface through which anything objective and universal is known, subjectivity now becomes that which must be removed in order to gain the real.

Where Husserl conceived of a natural attitude that a truly transcendental phenomenology had to break through in order to investigate how our experience can be structured such that it appears as the world, I saw a parallel to a ‘neurotypical attitude’ that plagues research into the

¹ Dermot Moran and Joseph D. Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, Continuum Philosophy Dictionaries (London ; New York, NY: Continuum, 2012), 216–17.

² Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 218.

nature of autism. Reading case studies of autistic children I often found the interpretations of observers bewildering. Atypical behavior, for them, had to be rooted in some kind of inability to correctly receive the world. The child lacked, in a sense that had to be related to the brain, something that would have allowed them to receive ‘signals’ from the world that ought to lead them to the right way of engaging with it. The fact that experience is lived through, and as such involves the activity of a person who cannot be reduced to a signal-processing brain, is passed over.

While this article will make an argument that only Husserl’s mature phenomenology can give us the right kind of attitude to understand autism without relegating it to another world, the intention is not simply to point researchers in the direction of phenomenology. It is also to point phenomenologists back in the direction of the problem of the world. Rudolf Bernet once lamented that though phenomenologists have enthusiastically taken up Husserlian concepts such as lifeworld to explicate the experience of marginalized subjects, they have precisely forgotten to ask how all of these very different experiences are possible aspects of the one real world:

Basic questions, such as what it means for the world to appear and how the subject is involved in the disclosure of the world, are often taken for granted. [...] Life-world phenomenologies flourish without their authors giving much thought to the fact that their descriptions of the life in the world presuppose a stance at the limit of or beyond this world. There is also a need to look more closely into the different forms under which ‘the world’ reveals itself to a subject. In particular, the question how manifold local and self-contained worlds refer to a common and unique ‘open’ world deserves more attention than life-world relativists are usually willing to concede.³

The suggestion that autism, as a disorder of experience, should be investigated phenomenologically is not new. Merleau-Ponty is here often suggested, as in Sophie Boldson’s work on autism, as uniquely suitable because of his specific focus on the involvement of the body. I will claim that, lacking a true transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty will be unable to address the problem that autistic subjectivity raises: how it is that such an abnormal

³ Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota, eds., *Edmund Husserl - Volume V: Horizons, Life-World, Ethics, History and Metaphysics*, vol. 5, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 19.

consciousness, or indeed any consciousness, experiences the very same world as others? Using a discussion of a transcendental reduction leading directly to genetic phenomenology by Bower, I aim to show a phenomenology of autism is possible without abandoning these questions.

The attitude of naturalism and the empirical problem of autism

Autism has a now-traditional narrative. In the 1940s researchers vividly described a new kind of child; socially withdrawn and repetitive or awkward in their activities while being of normal or sometimes high intelligence. After a misstep in blaming parents for the emotional detachment of these children, researchers came to understand the nature of autism as a neurobiological developmental disorder and ultimately resulted in the unified diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the DSM-V.⁴

To Verhoeff the above narrative is a distortion of the history of autism as a research object, presenting what is actually a highly discontinuous field of developments as a necessary linear development towards our current understanding. In presenting an alternative history that highlights the discontinuity in what was considered as an essential feature of autism, I claim Verhoeff also unearths a different continuity: the unexamined presupposition of the natural sciences Husserl calls the natural attitude.⁵ Supplementing Verhoeff's work from 2013, I will refer to a 2022 review of neurobiological research. I will close this section with some remarks on Husserl's conception of a transcendental phenomenology.

Verhoeff's history begins with the psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, who derives the term autism from the Greek *autos*, implying a 'self-ism' or withdrawal from the social world into an inaccessible but vivid inner life by schizophrenics. As a term in widespread use, both Kanner and Asperger resorted to it in describing what they saw as an essential feature of their unusual patients: their aloofness, an affective remoteness causing bizarre behavior like in schizophrenics. Kanner remarks how a patient paid no attention to others entering or leaving the room, not even to the appearance of someone dressed as 'Santa Claus'. The children were

⁴ Lorna Wing, "The History of Ideas on Autism: Legends, Myths and Reality," *Autism* 1, no. 1 (July 1997): 13–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361397011004>; Berend Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux: A History of the Concept from Leo Kanner to DSM-5," *History of Psychiatry* 24, no. 4 (December 2013): 442–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X13500584>.

⁵ Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux," 443.

still engaged with the world around them, but would not play with others and instead focused on unusual activities like spinning an object for hours — becoming upset if the carefully ordered environment was disturbed.⁶

Despite eventually distinguishing between Bleuler's autism and his own "early infantile autism", Kanner still considered the phenomenon he described in his cases to be rooted in an incapability of the autistic subject to connect to the readily available world that others experience, with oddities or difficulties in speech being secondary and even transient. In the 1960s, a shift in methodology from observation to epidemiological and experimental studies would reverse this implied causality: researchers noticed that if they followed patients for longer periods of time, their withdrawal lessened while deficits in language and intellectual development persisted. In a view heavily influenced by the rise of the cognitive and computer sciences, the primary dysfunction of autism was now thought to be in processing meaningful stimuli. Autistic children were not incapable of or uninterested in being open to the world of others, but they lacked the ability to properly 'decode' the stimuli that informed them of this world.⁷

Verhoeff sees the third phase of research as commencing in the 1980s, with the intervention of Lorna Wing. First, an epidemiological study on the co-occurrence of social, language and cognitive impairments in intellectually disabled children allowed focus on not merely 'pure' syndromes but also borderline cases. These studies resulted in a clear distinction between intellectually disabled but social children and those who were socially awkward or withdrawn: in the second group Wing observed a 'triad' of co-occurring deficits in imaginative play, social interaction and verbal/non-verbal communication. In addition, Wing's 'rediscovery' of Asperger's much more intellectually gifted yet still socially awkward patients influenced a re-evaluation of autism as an essentially social impairment that embraced these previously different disorders. Yet this social impairment is not the 'extreme autistic aloneness' of Kanner, but a deficit in the comprehension and utilization of 'unwritten rules of social behavior' — which will later be called 'theory of mind'.⁸

⁶ Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux," 446–47.

⁷ Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux," 449–50.

⁸ Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux," 450–52.

Verhoeff's overview is meant to show a discontinuity in the supposedly linear progression of our understanding of autism. However, I see an underlying similarity between the three separate phases of conceptualization: the autistic subject is approached as not 'properly receiving' the external world. Kanner's patients did not play normally, they did not react normally to situations like Santa Claus entering the room; behavior it is implied would not happen if not for their withdrawal from the world of others where these norms are simply apparent. In the second phase, the inability of the children to respond or behave in the right way is conceived as an inability to 'decode' the otherwise straightforward stimuli received from the world. In the third phase's return to social dysfunction as primary, this becomes most obvious: ordinary social behavior is explained by an inherent 'instinct' or 'theory of mind' that autistic people lack, rendering them incapable of seeing what is simply there.

In the neuroscientific study of autism, the assumption that the adequate behavior of the normative person is founded on their unproblematic 'correct' reception of the world takes a physical form. The nervous system becomes the 'antenna' that receives, processes and responds to the signals from the world outside it. With this view comes the promise of a diagnosis of autism that does not need to rely on subjective experience. In 2022, a review of these 'biomarkers' by Frye et al urges a sober attitude towards apparently promising studies. These studies use known autistic individuals against a control group, making their apparent success questionable in their translation to discovering if a child with abnormal development may be autistic. They also warn that many biomarkers have no clear relation to possible biological processes underlying the disease, and could be epiphenomena that teach us little about what causes autism.⁹

In both psychiatry and neurobiology, the question of autism departs from the assumption that something is going wrong in the reception of the world. The autistic person is assumed to have normal eyesight and hearing, and yet seems to fail to heed what is simply there. But what does it mean for the world to simply be there? What is it that 'ordinary' subjects accomplish that allow them to engage with this world correctly? This standard of epistemological validity is always invoked as the background against which to understand autism, but is not itself reflected on. This may be considered a kind of 'neurotypical attitude',

⁹ Richard E. Frye et al., "Emerging Biomarkers in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review," *Annals of Translational Medicine* 7, no. 23 (December 2019): 12, <https://doi.org/10.21037/atm.2019.11.53>.

rendering invisible the assumptions on which evaluations of autism are based. Yet this is not a problem that may be overcome by intently listening to actually autistic people, because the problem is encompassed by an assumption disciplines like psychiatry and neuroscience must make: that we experience in subjectivity an external world that exists independently of us.

Precisely this inherent limitation of natural-scientific investigations into our experience is exposed by Edmund Husserl in his phenomenological descriptions of the natural attitude. The natural attitude is the most fundamental of the ‘stances’ towards world-experience a person may take. I find this theme most easily explicable using a story from the mathematician G.H. Hardy about the mathematical savant Ramanujan. Hardy visited Ramanujan on his sickbed and wished to make conversation, mentioning that the number of the taxicab that brought him there seemed mathematically uninteresting. Ramanujan immediately interjected that the number did in fact have an interesting mathematical property.¹⁰ Ramanujan had taken a ‘mathematical attitude’, in which Hardy’s number appeared as a mathematical object.

Husserl articulated many distinct ‘attitudes’ that orient our involvement with the world. However, all of the attitudes excepting the one proper to the phenomenologist are situated within the natural attitude. The attitude is ‘natural’ precisely because that is the experience characterizing it: everything in experience is simply there, straightforward for me to bring to attention and interact with. It is not a question whether I will bump into an object in front of me, nor whether a loud noise is heard by others in the room. I accept everything in the way it is given to me, naively as Husserl often puts it. Something doesn’t appear to me as an external object, it is one. Pervading the natural attitude is the ‘universal thesis’, accepting unquestionably that the world appearing to me is there in a manner independent of me.¹¹

The natural attitude is not something a person chooses to enact, nor can the scientist step outside it. All scientific activity, even that of mathematics, must take place within the natural attitude. The physicist would not be able to proceed in theorizing and experimenting if he couldn’t assume that his object of study existed. Yet here Husserl sees a danger for the natural sciences in particular: in being naive to the natural attitude amidst the tremendous success of these disciplines, scientists fall prey to a naturalistic attitude. The world as it can

¹⁰ Joseph H. Silverman, “Taxicabs and Sums of Two Cubes,” *The American Mathematical Monthly* 100, no. 4 (April 1993): 331, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2324954>.

¹¹ Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 216–17.

be known by the sciences, as mathematizable spatio-temporal physical nature, is made absolute. Empiricism results: all possible scientific knowledge must be justified by perceptual experience of Nature — true being.¹²

For Husserl, the move of naturalism is a catastrophic distortion of the scientific. It ignores the success of the other source of scientific knowledge, the ‘eidetic intuition’ exemplified by Ramanujan’s immediate seeing of the taxicab number’s mathematical essence. What Ramanujan saw was a different kind of truth than what is found in empiricism: the a priori, something that must be so. Nature permits no such truths, and so empiricism collapses into a self-refuting relativism; the one source of knowledge it accepts is one that cannot ground its universal claim. Moreover, naturalism renders impossible the question of how it is that consciousness manages to provide us with valid experiences of objective reality: consciousness itself can only be approached as another natural phenomenon, something about which no a priori truths can be provided.¹³

The ‘neurotypical attitude’ I posited above can only be something like the naturalistic attitude: a further consequence of our naive engagement with the world in the natural attitude. This attitude remains invisible as long as there are no autistic people involved. Disagreements may exist about what is experienced in common, but subjectivity ultimately remains a kind of window into what is really there. This thesis is disturbed by the presence of an autistic person. They too are recognized as a subjectivity, but conflict with them about what is there seems more substantial than mere disagreement. While the problem of subjectivity as such remains out of sight, as it must within the natural attitude, autism now presents itself as the problem of a ‘bad’ subjectivity: how is it possible that they don’t see the world as everyone else does?

If the problem of autism relies on an understanding of how subjective experience becomes experience of an external world, natural-scientific investigations will not be able to progress further by themselves. They will continue to approach autism as a problem with the reception of the world, the way a congenitally blind person does not see because the structure of their brain prevents ordinary reception and interpretation of the visual world. This hunt for the distinct structural neurological aberration of autism has come up short, despite the succession

¹² Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 217–20.

¹³ Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 219.

of theories Verhoeff catalogs providing clear answers on what brain function ought to be dysfunctional. Only with a phenomenological dimension, where the functioning of consciousness in itself is considered, can the roadblock of naturalism be overcome.

Failing to breach the surface

The question of how phenomenological insight should be integrated into autism research might prompt this consideration: has Husserl's phenomenology not been surpassed? Merleau-Ponty can be put forward as a phenomenologist who continues Husserl's critique of the natural sciences, while also being more amenable to using data from these sciences? To show why Husserl is precisely the most suitable for this research program, this section will discuss Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, academic research on autism that uses it, and the limits imposed by it.

Of the post-Husserlian phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty might have the most sympathy for Husserl's project. He was one of the very first philosophers to avail himself of the Husserl Archive in Leuven. Going beyond the works Husserl was able to finish and have printed in his lifetime, he pushed back against an interpretation of Husserl that still appears today. Rather than being stuck in a Cartesian solipsism, Merleau-Ponty saw Husserl move towards a primary role for embodiment and intersubjectivity in the constituting of our worldly experience.¹⁴ Echoing almost exactly what Husserl privately writes 11 years earlier, Merleau-Ponty states in a letter: After all, Husserl's philosophy is almost entirely contained in the unpublished manuscripts....¹⁵

In his main work *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty undermines the tendency of naturalism criticized by Husserl through a focus on the body's role in perception. The body is not some object in the world that just so happens to 'receive' it, but a multidimensional center of preconscious activity for the assembling of an apparently ready-made world. Yet his criticism is also aimed at 'intellectualist' responses to this naturalist error, which move the center of gravity from a world-in-itself to a mental activity synthesizing myriad sensations into a world. Here too, Merleau-Ponty points out, bodily and preconscious associative

¹⁴ Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree, eds., *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, vol. 45, *Contributions to Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002), 6–8, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9944-3>.

¹⁵ Toadvine and Embree, *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, 45:6–7.

structures in a ‘phenomenological field’ underlie the seemingly solid mental activities such as judgment or memory.¹⁶

However, Merleau-Ponty is not merely bringing forward and changing the signification of Husserl’s later writings. He imports material from the medical sciences, revealing the body’s unseen activity through the behavior of patients with brain injuries. A patient with a brain injury experienced a disruption to the body schema of associations between movement and space. When asked to point at his nose, he can only do this if he may touch it directly. If he may only touch the nose through an external object, he becomes incapable of locating it in space.¹⁷

With this interest in pathological cases and a focus on the body, it is no wonder that Merleau-Ponty has already been suggested for a phenomenological approach to autism. Sophie Boldson uses Merleau-Ponty to clarify an autistic behavioral peculiarity not easily explained by reference to a ‘theory of mind’: their abnormal bodily movements, postures and engagements with objects. Why might an autistic person rock back and forth, or position their hands in an uncommon way, or have an atypical involvement with certain objects like rubbing or chewing?

Boldson identifies two emerging avenues of research going beyond the classic ‘cognitive’ perspective of theory of social deficiency; the sensorimotor perspective on the emergence of autistic behavior and the integration of autistic subjective experience. Leary and Hill criticized a reliance on the observing of autistic behaviors, which invited their misinterpretation as resulting from social impairment, suggesting a focus on the origin of behavior in how an individual senses their own movement and regulates bodily motion by means of these sensations. The functioning of these systems can be measured, avoiding a reliance on observed autistic behavior. An increasing participation of autistic individuals in

¹⁶ Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2023 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/merleau-ponty/>.

¹⁷ Colin Smith, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception,” *Phenomenology of Perception*, n.d., 118–20.

research, both as researchers and activists, has led to the incorporation of autistic experience.¹⁸

To Boldson, these developments suggest the question of how we bridge the gap between these two areas of study: “[...]how does the subjective experience of autistic individuals relate to the measurable physiological motions arguably underlying natural behavior?”¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, with its focus on both subjectivity and the involvement of the body in pre-reflective awareness, seems to provide a framework for this bridge. Using Merleau-Ponty’s framework Boldson reflects on the autobiography of the non-verbal Indian autistic man Tito Rajashi Mukhopadhyay, *How can I talk when my lips don’t move?*. While mindful of Ian Hacking’s critique of autistic autobiographies as being misinterpreted as insights into ‘the autistic mind’, Boldson argues reports such as that of Mukhopadhyay can be taken as inroads to a wider phenomenological engagement with autistic subjectivity.²⁰

I agree with Boldson that despite potential criticisms of *How can I talk if my lips don’t move?*, including questions of Mukhopadhyay’s autonomy in the ‘facilitated communication’ method used to communicate with him, the themes evoked in it are important for a phenomenological consideration of autism. As with Merleau-Ponty’s examples of the brain injury patient, Mukhopadhyay’s abnormal experience reveals the otherwise obscured importance of bodily self-experience. I will touch on the topics of bodily self-experience and kinaesthetics below.

Bodily self-experience is the prereflective background in which the body is not a collection of objects, but a unified whole suffused with my subjectivity. The typical subject feels at ease in the body, stretching it as a whole towards some object. Mukhopadhyay’s childhood was marked by a feeling of bodily fragmentation, a discomfort he could only prevent by

¹⁸ Sofie Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 42, no. 4 (December 2018): 894–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-018-9590-y>.

¹⁹ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 895.

²⁰ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 899.

‘gathering together’ his body in repeated movements like mimicking the spinning of a ceiling fan.²¹

In performing these movements, Mukhopadhyay could reassert a feeling of bodily unity and ownership. When the fan stopped spinning during a power cut, he would experience a sudden disintegration of the body into parts. In the case of his ‘climbing’ up and down stairs, his mother preventing him from doing so caused a total disorientation: “[...]And when I got disoriented, I got scared. I felt as if my whole existence depended on those staircases. ‘What if I stop existing when I stop climbing them?’[...]”²² Robbed of the certainty granted by the movements, Mukhopadhyay’s world completely dissolves; he ‘disconnects’ from his body and his own screams of panic become a mere auditory object that he recognizes as his only by its sound.

The perception of actual bodily movement plays a role in the structuring of experience, but it is supplemented by ‘abstract’ bodily movement. When I see a water bottle and wish to pick it up, I do not carefully ‘test’ the movements I should perform to see if they have the desired result. The appearing of the water bottle ‘invites’ certain movements: the steps I must take to get closer to it, the stretching out of my arm and the grasping of my fingers all present themselves to me as meaningful in case I want to pick up the water bottle.

For Mukhopadhyay, the kinaesthetic significance of the world is disrupted. When he wished to write in his notebook, he could not do so if the notebook and pencil were in another room. While visible to him, he could visualize opening the notebook and writing in it. He had ‘rehearsed’ these movements and created what he calls a ‘mental map’ for the act of writing. Even if he knew the notebook and pencil were in the other room, he does not experience the potential movements of getting up and fetching them when he thinks of them.²³

Central to Mukhopadhyay’s account is the disintegration of the world and objects into a flux of parts and sensory qualities and his reflective cognitive efforts to glue them back together.

²¹ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 899–900.

²² Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 900.

²³ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 901–2.

In his account of experiencing a door as an unfamiliar object, he analyzes different parts like its color and its hinges before finally answering the question of what this object might be for. For Merleau-Ponty, this would be the reverse of the normal procedure: the door as object with discrete parts emerges after an intuitive grasp of its function and meaning as a door.²⁴

While I agree with Boldson that Mukhopadhyay's work highlights the involvement of prereflective bodily awareness in the appearance of a solid objective world completely independent of our subjectivity, I now wish to turn to a limit I claim to be inherent to the Merleau-Pontian analysis she chooses to use. I will begin with Inkipin's question of whether Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is transcendental before explaining the relevance of his answer to the phenomenology of autism.

In the first section I already discussed one of Husserl's arguments for a distinction between empirical sciences and phenomenology: the inability of the former to go beyond or justify the presupposition that our experience is of a world independent of consciousness. Husserl is not trying to undermine empirical claims in stating this, but calls attention to phenomenology's necessarily transcendental dimension. If objectivity can only ever be reached from subjectivity, how is it that subjectivity can intuit something universal and necessary? In other words: to be able to ground the validity of the real in what appears to a subject, the real or actual may not be presumed.

Because Merleau-Ponty claims a continuity with Husserl, Inkipin first examines the basis on which Husserl is able to secure a distinction between (natural-scientific) empirical and (phenomenological) transcendental claims before turning this 'transcendental challenge' on Merleau-Ponty. Leaving aside the idea of the transcendental ego, which Inkipin acknowledges Husserl considers less central later without abandoning his transcendental perspective; the key moves to a transcendental phenomenology are the unlocking of a transcendental field of 'pure phenomena' through the phenomenological reduction, and the intuiting of necessary structures in this field through 'free variation'.²⁵ These notions will be discussed in detail in

²⁴ Boldson, "Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism," 905.

²⁵ Andrew Inkipin, "Was Merleau-Ponty a 'Transcendental' Phenomenologist?" *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, no. 1 (March 2017): 28–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-016-9394-0>.

the third section, and appear here in their relation to a suspension of the actual/possible distinction.

Actual experience is contingent. What I aim to write appears to me on a monitor in front of me in concert with my typing on a keyboard. This is by no means necessary, as the computer may break or the power may be cut. The phenomenological reduction ‘brackets’ the question of whether what appears is real, its validity. My intention, the monitor and my physical involvement with the keyboard do not disappear; however, I am now only interested in describing what necessarily belongs to these phenomena. As Inkipin puts it: “[...]for phenomenology’s purposes fictive or ‘as if’ experience is just as good as — and perhaps better than — experience of the real.”²⁶ The way I access this necessity is by free variation: I could imagine my hands passing through the keyboard, or my cursor going beyond the monitor. In such cases, I would not just say “this isn’t real”, but “this is not possible”.

In these ‘fictive experiences’, I intuit something about what it means for the keyboard to be a physical object and the monitor to display an interactive image. Husserl presents phenomenology as dealing with description of not just the reality of an experience, but the very conditions of possibility for something appearing as that kind of experience. The phenomenological reduction has liberated what appears to me from the constraints of actuality. Their ‘purity’ means I derive from their description, fine-tuned by free variation, something a priori and necessary. What Inkipin will argue next is that Merleau-Ponty’s modifications to Husserl’s phenomenology result in a necessarily ‘impure’ phenomenological field that cannot sustain a distinction between the empirical and transcendental.

Though Inkipin lessens the importance of the transcendental ego as a necessary element, I will remark that some implications of the embodied subject Merleau-Ponty puts in its place already chafe against Boldson’s description of Mukhopadhyay’s experience. Merleau-Ponty resists speaking of the body’s role in the emergence of meaning as ‘synthesis’ or ‘constitution’, since speaking of a manifold of distinct parts somehow put together by an act of the subject belongs to the ‘objective thought’ he wants to question.²⁷ Yet, Mukhopadhyay seems to reverse this logic: he loses ownership of his body or feels it disintegrate into parts he

²⁶ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 29.

²⁷ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 32.

must gather together by willed actions.²⁸ He experienced a door as a succession of parts he had to examine in order for the meaningful whole of ‘door’ meant to precede such objectification to appear.²⁹

For Inkipin, the decisive move away from a true transcendental philosophy is Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the phenomenological reduction in the sense Husserl uses it. For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl himself apparently recognized that “[...]the main lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction[...]”,³⁰ an ambiguous position he himself adopts. The impossibility Merleau-Ponty sees is in the reduction’s purported ability to reach beyond the natural attitude. One reason for this is in continuity with the later Husserl: other subjects, which are opaque to us, stubbornly resist the ‘Cartesian’ reduction of Ideen I and mark a limit to our own constituting power.³¹ The second reason is much more damaging to a compatibility with Husserl: Merleau-Ponty rejects that the reduction can go beyond the natural attitude. This is because for Merleau-Ponty, the world’s existence is presupposed by any reflective attitude, which must include the reduction and the transcendental attitude it unveils.³²

Despite Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to show a continuity with the later Husserl and still speaks of a transcendental philosophy, Inkipin points out that even if Merleau-Ponty accepts a form of the phenomenological reduction “[...]Merleau-Ponty denies himself the central means that Husserl relied on to make sense of the idea that phenomenology is a transcendental discipline[...]”³³ by placing the natural attitude beyond its reach. Merleau-Ponty claims “[...]the transcendental attitude is already implied in the psychologist’s descriptions[...] so that the phenomenal field becomes [the] transcendental field[...]”³⁴ Psychology, contrary to

²⁸ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 900.

²⁹ Boldsen, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 904–5.

³⁰ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 35.

³¹ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 35–36.

³² Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 36–37.

³³ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 38.

³⁴ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 38.

Husserl's efforts, is explicitly not to be distinguished from phenomenological inquiry. The transcendental field is never freed from the contingent; it always retains the opacity and incompleteness shared by embodied subjects. For Inkipin, that Merleau-Ponty insists phenomenological reflection must be directed at a factually conditioned phenomenological field means he denies an essential difference between truths of fact and truths of reason: "[...]there is no truth of reason that does not retain a coefficient of facticity[...]"³⁵

I will now remark on Reynolds' application and critique of Merleau-Ponty's work to show how a denial of a truly transcendental phenomenology impacts an investigation of autism and indeed all disability. Reynolds wishes to reject the notion of disabilities such as blindness as a privation, and initially finds in Merleau-Ponty an ally. Merleau-Ponty denies that a determination of my consciousness as deficient is any kind of self-awareness; it is instead part of my objectification as I engage with the intersubjective world of facticity. Reynolds' criticism is that in Merleau-Ponty's example of the blind man's cane as an incorporation of objects into the body, the social dimension of disability completely vanishes.³⁶

I can agree with Reynolds that in simulating the use of a white cane through a blindfold, we do not even with practice experience what it is really like to be blind or how the cane features in such an experience. He mentions the conspicuousness of the white cane inviting reactions from others or the unsuitability of an environment for navigation by a blind person, which disrupt the smooth incorporation of the cane into the body Merleau-Ponty might experience in simulation. However, Reynolds' point is not that there is more to the empirical experience of a blind person using a cane than being an object incorporated into the body; it is that Merleau-Ponty makes an 'ableist error' in placing the blind person's usage of the cane in this category altogether. Blindness, or disability in general, is not comparable to 'ordinary' consciousness but constitutes a world entirely its own. This error must be criticized and corrected by a radicalization of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology Reynolds calls "non-normate phenomenology."

Reynolds' description of this new practice, which in its focus on how concrete social inequalities underlie the sense of a subjectivity as deficient appears to merge with sociology

³⁵ Inkipin, "Was Merleau-Ponty a 'Transcendental' Phenomenologist?" 39.

³⁶ Joel Michael Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies:" *Chiasmi International* 19 (2017): 422–25, <https://doi.org/10.5840/chiasmi20171934>.

in the way Merleau-Ponty does with psychology, brings to mind Bernet's comment on the disinterest 'lifeworld phenomenologists' have in the transcendental implications of their work: >Non-normate phenomenology constitutes a form of non-philosophy through its insistence on the irreducible multiplicity of worlds created through the constitutive phylogenetic polymorphism and ontogenetic variability of human corporeality. There is, for such a method, no fundamental split between subject and object, body and mind, consciousness and nature, being and beings, or ability and disability.³⁷

The reference to an irreducible multiplicity of worlds would from the perspective of Husserl's phenomenology imply the impossibility of phenomenology altogether. Merleau-Ponty already denies any access to necessary a priori truths about how consciousness comes to experience the world, but by splitting Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological field into irreconcilable abled and disabled forms the question of the world disappears altogether. This must be the case even though topics like the conspicuousness of the cane — it constituted as visible for others in blind experience — transgress the boundaries of a world where vision plays no part in perception. It remains true for even a congenitally blind person that the world and objects in it are possibly visual; it is not a constant surprise for them that the conspicuousness of the cane causes them social difficulties. The social dimension Reynolds highlights suggest the 'worlds' of the blind and sighted are interdependently constituted, but in a necessarily 'impure' phenomenological investigation this cannot be thought as a transcendental structure of the only possible world all subjects must experience.

It can be said that Merleau-Ponty, Boldson and Reynolds do succeed in challenging the basic presupposition that disability or autism in particular simply involves a failure to correctly receive the world. However, they do so at the cost of neglecting the question of how it is that a disabled subjectivity must still be an experience of the same world a normative subjectivity is assumed to simply have. To end this section, I return to Bernet's lament on the incuriosity of 'lifeworld phenomenologists' in the transcendental implications of their own work:

Life-world phenomenologies flourish without their authors giving much thought to the fact that their descriptions of the life in the world presuppose a stance at the limit of or beyond this world. There is also a need to look more closely into the different

³⁷ Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies," 425–26.

forms under which 'the world' reveals itself to a subject. In particular, the question how manifold local and self-contained worlds refer to a common and unique 'open' world deserves more attention than life-world relativists are usually willing to concede.³⁸

Without the breaching of the surface Husserl's transcendental methodology enables, a phenomenology of autism will only ever be a description of what it contingently happens to be like to be autistic. For Merleau-Ponty, whatever claim phenomenology makes will always be conditioned by facticity. We see the outcome of this restriction in Reynolds' use of blind experiences that are particular to capitalist economies, or Boldson's taking on of elements of Mukhopadhyay's life shaped by his mother's very particular attempts to parent him. As an autistic person, I am not interested in replacing the assumption that my world-experience is of the same kind as inattention or error in normative subjectivity with the insistence that any attempt to rise beyond what just happens to be the case is fruitless.

A transcendental phenomenology by way of autistic subjectivity

If the natural attitude undergirding all empirical experience must be breached to get to autism, how does Husserl suggest we do this? To clear the way to the specific form of the transcendental reduction I have in mind, a distinction must first be made between two meanings of 'transcendental reduction' that often run together in Husserl scholarship. The latter, the transcendental reduction as the distinct way we try to approach the correlation between subject and world, only makes sense in light of an explanation of what is most often called 'the reduction': the epoché.

The epoché is the 'bracketing' of the natural attitude as a presupposition. This is not a denial of reality, but a change in our perspective on it. By not going along with what appears to us as an external world we focus in on that appearance; on the givenness of the real. We are not imagining the constant threat of deceit by a Cartesian demon, but instead accept only what is given within the limits of how it is given.³⁹ It is not given that the monitor I perceive is a

³⁸ Bernet, Welton, and Zavota, *Husserl Volume V*, 5:19.

³⁹ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 44–45.

subjective stand-in for a causative real monitor in the objective world, but the monitor is given as perceptual physical object.

If the epoché opens up the realm of transcendental reflection, the transcendental reduction is how we orient our research in this realm. While the reduction is often identified with the presentation in Ideen I, this is but one of the ‘ways’ to the reduction — the ‘Cartesian way’. What distinguishes these reductions are their motives. The Cartesian way, serving as an introduction to this new mode of reflection, wants to focus in on a fundamental difference between how objects are given to consciousness and how consciousness is given to itself. The statue I perceive is never given to me completely; there is a backside I cannot see. I could somehow At the same time, my experience perceiving the statue is all there. It is a perception of the statue; even if the perceived statue later turns out to be an optical illusion whose other perspectives in no way resemble my expectations, this experience was given to me in its totality.⁴⁰

What is revealed here is the notion of constitution, something often misunderstood as merely reversing the lines of causality between consciousness and the world. Constitution as an activity of the subject is something that, in the words of Heidegger, a “letting something be itself”.⁴¹ What this means can be understood by imagining that your entire perceptual field of experience became totally flat, devoid of space. As you moved, or even if you stood still, this field would dissolve into a phantasmagoria of meaningless appearances. Could you experience any physical object at all, or a sound or texture? No: you would be even more helpless than someone who has suddenly become blind, since at least the rest of their perceptions are formed into a world. Only by the constitutive effort of consciousness — distinguishing and organizing — can this undifferentiated field come to present us with a floor to walk on, or a wall that impedes our path. The floor, which we normally take as simply there, can only be what it is through an achievement of consciousness.

The Cartesian way focuses heavily on the different modes of givenness. This method can be repeated infinitely, moving from the initial least determinate form of givenness for consciousness and any of its object to more specific ones. In this way we unearth the constitutive activity of consciousness normally hidden by the natural attitude. The immediate

⁴⁰ Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 46–48.

⁴¹ Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 71.

reduction to transcendental subjectivity also allows Husserl to make one of his most controversial claims: that of the absolute being of consciousness. He does not mean by this that consciousness creates the world, but rather that it has an epistemic priority over it. We can — in the reduction — imagine our experience as non-worldly, but we cannot imagine a subjectless world. The subject is a condition for the appearance of a world, but all conditions for the appearing of a world are in the subject.

Despite revisiting this way of doing the reduction in *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl regretted the misconceptions it engendered. Despite the pedagogical utility of immediately revealing the primacy of a constituting consciousness over a constituted world, many readers took this to mean transcendental phenomenology was concerned only with an isolated disembodied subjectivity existing outside time and space. Husserl would develop other ways of leading the reduction to transcendental subjectivity. The ‘ontological way’ starts from the other end of the intentional relation subject-world by focusing on the structures of the everyday world of experience. Describing these ‘ontological regions’ in their appearance, the phenomenologist is then led back to transcendental subjectivity by considering the conditions of possibility for anything to appear in such a way.⁴²

One objection may still remain: do these reductions not presume a kind of classical rationalism where the mind fortuitously possesses the structures to mold meaningless sensation into experience? The objection can be met, as others that accuse Husserl of having his own unexamined presuppositions, by turning to the genetic phenomenology largely found in his *Nachlass*. Genetic phenomenology can be contrasted with the ‘static phenomenology’ described above, where an already available type of object is correlated a priori to a likewise already available constituting intentional act.⁴³ The theme of genetic constitution is to describe how it is that these structures become available in the first place; in other words to investigate the self-constitution of consciousness.⁴⁴

⁴² Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 50–51.

⁴³ Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 94.

⁴⁴ Matt E. M. Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” in *The Subject(s) of Phenomenology*, ed. Iulian Apostolescu, vol. 108, Contributions to Phenomenology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 189, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29357-4_10.

Yet, genetic phenomenology as an antidote to misconceptions about Husserl suffers from the weakness that it is not clear how we must take on something like the reduction to go there. When Merleau-Ponty writes “[...]the transcendental attitude is already implied in the psychologist’s descriptions[...] so that the phenomenal field becomes [the] transcendental field[...]”⁴⁵, he could be read as making this implication. For Bower, the reason for this is that the motives for the distinct forms of the reduction most well-known preclude an interest in genetic matters. The Cartesian way must make clear the epistemic priority of consciousness, and in doing so consciousness and what may be constituted are entirely separate. The ontological way likewise has a one-sided interest in consciousness as constituting rather than constituted.⁴⁶

The turn to genetic phenomenology must thus take place by means of another change in perspective, going from our previously phenomenological discoveries back to the necessary genesis of the the revealed structures of consciousness.⁴⁷ It might be asked why we do not start from here, freed from Husserl’s baggage? I believe that in Bower’s discussion of a direct way to genetic phenomenology, I have found a way for a phenomenologically informed autism research to stand against this intuition.

In my earlier musing about a ‘neurotypical attitude’ I was not merely giving the natural attitude a different name. A notion very much like this is foreshadowed in Husserl’s writing. As Bower phrases it, a problem in our attempt to take up the transcendental stance is that we are inclined to be influenced by a notion of normal conscious life — something we ourselves assume to represent. Husserl warns that such investigations are still abstract, still only one level of the meaning of the world, leaving unexamined the constitutive contributions of abnormal subjects like children or even animals.⁴⁸

Normality and abnormality are important phenomenological themes for Husserl, constitutive of our experience. Our experience is guided by an anticipation of normality; as in the example of the illusory statue that shows a very different shape from other perspectives,

⁴⁵ Inkipin, “Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘Transcendental’ Phenomenologist?” 38.

⁴⁶ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 189–90.

⁴⁷ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 191.

⁴⁸ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 194–95.

which we expect not to be the case for statues.⁴⁹ In another sense, the one Bower and I are using, normality is also related to the idea of a guiding optimum. I may see a sign and not be able to read it. Here the abnormality is not that my expectations signs can be read is violated, but that my abnormal experience implies a normal one: the optimal perspective from which I am able to read the sign.⁵⁰ Abnormal subjects are of this second sense.

In realizing that normal constitution is but one way of constituting the world, Bower sees the possibility of a normality reduction. Normal is after all distinct from possible, such that in normal constitution the conditions of possibility for a world to appear are not exhausted. Bower presents the possibility of analyzing normal and abnormal subjectivity in their (in)compatibility over time. The subjectivity of an animal cannot precede that of an adult human being, but a human baby's can. By turning to the question of 'sequential compossibility' within a single life, we immediately enter into genetic constitution: what could motivate the appearance of a certain type of experience, be it a normal or autistic subjectivity?⁵¹

Inserting autistic subjectivity broadens the scope of Bower's imagined project significantly. The period of early childhood is abnormal, but the way in which it is for an autistic child is not compossible with a later normal subjectivity. When we suspend the presumption of normality and open up the question into its genesis in the abnormal, we also take leave of the neurotypical attitude that must presume autistic subjectivity is a simple failure to correctly apprehend the world. Autistic perception, time-consciousness or empathy as something abnormal can now only be analyzed as having had different motivations for their emergence than their normal forms.

It is worth pointing out that the normality reduction answers well to the demands of Reynolds' 'non-normate phenomenology' without the flaws discussed above. We are forced by the problem of genesis to attend to a multiplicity of forms of consciousness, instead of relegating others to a bad approximation of the normal. This is done not as a corrective to a societal injustice, but because our phenomenological task demands a full accounting of the

⁴⁹ Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 133.

⁵⁰ Bower, "Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology," 194–95, footnote.

⁵¹ Bower, "Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology," 196–97.

transcendental community of subjects.⁵² We arrive here not via a radicalization of Merleau-Ponty, but — as Bower indicates — by a further implication of the elements of Husserl’s work most widely rejected by his successors: “All of this is carried out eidetically and within the transcendental stance. In fact, what Husserl does in turning to this problematic, as we have seen, is a necessary refinement and advance of the reduction.”⁵³

Conclusion

Autism research gives the appearance of progress. We have moved from children shut out of the world to autism as a disorder of social instinct, merely awaiting a final grounding in the neurosciences. Yet this result has so far not come, and the increasing similarities between autism and attention deficit disorders suggest this phase of autism theories may be destined to join ‘autism as intellectual developmental disorder’ in a chronology of past paradigms. I have suggested this is to be expected as long an unexamined presupposition continues to guide our research: that the nature of autism is to be sought in a faulty neurological reception of the external world normal subjects have access to, an assumption neuroscience can by definition never give up on.

Edmund Husserl’s unveiling of the natural attitude, the basic assumption underlying our ordinary experience, offers a clue in another direction. Once we become aware of the active involvement of consciousness in the appearing of the world, subjectivity offers itself as the domain where the nature of autism can be properly investigated. Yet Husserl’s move into transcendental phenomenology remains controversial, and other phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty are a more common choice to approach autism in this way. I have argued that if we abandon the transcendental level or allow it to mix freely with the empirical, much of the strength of phenomenology as a method for autism research is lost. The question of how such my abnormal subjectivity is still aimed at the same world as the others I meet every day is rendered impossible if there is no such thing as an a priori necessary structure of that world-consciousness.

Using the ‘normality reduction’ suggested by Bower to trace the genesis of a distinct autistic form of consciousness leads us away from the ‘neurotypical attitude’ where autism must

⁵² Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 194–95.

⁵³ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 198.

appear as a failure to properly constitute the world. Neurotypical development motivates the appearance of certain types of experience, and this same relation holds for autistic subjectivity as well. General structures of consciousness such as perception or empathy can be taken as a first index for investigating the distinction between, and genesis of, neurotypical and autistic forms.

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Research project proposal

Title

Autism and transcendental phenomenology

Summary of theme and aim of the project (185 words)

This research project brings together a modern problem in scientific research on autism spectrum disorder and an old-fashioned philosophical solution from the founder of phenomenology. A succession of incompatible paradigms have defined autism as first a biological incapacity for affective contact with others, then an inability to process symbolic meaning, and now finally a deficiency in ‘theory of mind’ or social instinct. All of these have been external interpretations of why autistic people behave the way they do. My aim is to leverage Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology in the way he intended it: as a guiding foundation for scientific research.

Phenomenology has been applied to the problem of autism, but in order to rid natural scientific and clinical research of its presuppositions about how people experience the world it must be taken up in a systemic way. To ground and justify scientific knowledge, Husserl wanted to discover how subjectivity directly relates to a world that transcends it. I claim that to transcend the endless production of autism theories, we must describe the distinct way in which autistic subjectivity reaches out to this very same world.

Description of proposed research (2193 words)

State of the Art and social/scientific relevance

In the late 1930s, a peculiar kind of child was discovered. These children did not seem to pay attention to other people or seek them out. They developed strange habits like arranging objects, reacting distressed when they were interrupted in this activity. They would delight in making certain sounds or movements, but otherwise lacked spontaneity. Some displayed remarkable feats of memory exclusively with certain subjects, or would repeat words said to

them continuously.⁵⁴ Using a term intended to describe the disconnection from the world exhibited by schizophrenics, these children were called autistic.⁵⁵

Since the work of Kanner, our understanding of autism has changed dramatically. Three phases may be discerned, Kanner's research being the first. The second benefited from epidemiological and experimental studies on a wider range of children, and was influenced by recent advances in computer science to conceive of the primary deficit in autistic children differently. Rather than simply not being interested in the world, these children had difficulties 'decoding' or 'processing' symbolic meaning and transferring it between domains. The third phase had to incorporate the rediscovery of Asperger's work, which featured still quite obviously autistic children who exhibited a high intellect not compatible with previous assumptions. The primary deficit of autism here returns to a social impairment, now understood as a lack of 'social instinct' or 'theory of mind'.⁵⁶

In each case, what autism research has tried to define is the way in which autistic people like me fail to correctly 'receive' the world. It tries to explain why these people, who are physically healthy, do not respond appropriately to what is simply there. This expected relation is almost causal, as if the brain receives signals that directly trigger a certain behavior. Missing from this picture is the person who actively lives through experiences. Autism research can so be said to suffer from a 'neurotypical'⁵⁷ attitude', where the basis for non-autistic behavior is considered so obvious that any deviation from it must be sought in a physical pathology of which the resulting individual is an epiphenomenon.

In the 21st century, autistic people have become increasingly involved in discussions about their own diagnosis and treatment.⁵⁸ It could be said that such involvement could be an

⁵⁴ Leo Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 217–20.

⁵⁵ Berend Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux: A History of the Concept from Leo Kanner to *DSM-5*," *History of Psychiatry* 24, no. 4 (December 2013): 446, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X13500584>.

⁵⁶ Verhoeff, "Autism in Flux," 446–52.

⁵⁷ A term originally meaning "not autistic", but now sometimes expanded to also exclude attention and personality disorders.

⁵⁸ Mitzi Waltz, *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 185–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31015-7>.

antidote to neurotypical presumptions guiding basic research: a grown adult can give a much more coherent report of their experiences than the young children who have made up the vast majority of autistic test subjects. However, McCoy et al have raised concerns: are we exchanging unexamined prejudices for unimpeachable personal reports? Can such subjective perspectives even do justice to the wide variety of ways in which autism presents itself, or will we privilege a more able kind of autistic individual?⁵⁹ While Ne’eman and Bascom have responded to these concerns in the context of advocacy and policy making, their reply is not intended to address research methodologies.⁶⁰

During my studies I discovered the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Rejecting the naturalistic tendencies many philosophers adopted in the wake of natural science’s great success, Husserl pushed for a return to “the things themselves”. What he means by this is a focus on and fidelity to what is actually given in first-person lived experience.⁶¹ My experience of a tree does not give itself as being a mental phenomenon that *corresponds* to something outside of me. I have a perception of *the tree itself*, which shows me now only one side but which also immediately suggests there are other sides I could potentially see. Though the tree appears to me, the meaning of the experience is precisely that it isn’t *just* there for me. Husserl had discovered something distinct from psychology: a way to describe structures of subjective experience by virtue of which something like objectivity was possible.

Husserl was concerned about unexamined metaphysical assumptions in the celebrated and very successful natural sciences. While such sciences had given us unprecedented amounts of knowledge in record time, there was one thing they simply had to assume without further comment: that in our waking experience there is an external world beyond our consciousness. Though this presupposition seems so fundamental it would be hard to fathom how you could lead a life without it, let alone do any scientific research, it does remain something we naively accept. Husserl called this most fundamental orientation towards our experience the ‘natural

⁵⁹ Matthew S. McCoy et al., “Ethical Advocacy Across the Autism Spectrum: Beyond Partial Representation,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 20, no. 4 (April 2, 2020): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1730482>.

⁶⁰ Ari Ne’eman and Julia Bascom, “Autistic Self Advocacy in the Developmental Disability Movement,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 20, no. 4 (April 2, 2020): 25–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1730507>.

⁶¹ Dermot Moran and Joseph D. Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, Continuum Philosophy Dictionaries (London ; New York, NY: Continuum, 2012), 264.

attitude'.⁶² The danger Husserl saw in the natural attitude was that its invisibility distorted our idea of science, leading to the presumption that scientific knowledge exclusively exists within the measurable and mathematizable world of the natural sciences. Even consciousness would become 'naturalized', rendered a mere consequence of the natural world, and with it all of the things that can only appear there.⁶³ The parallel with the neurotypical attitude above is intended: just as not questioning the natural attitude can lead into a naturalistic one, it can also lead into an equally distorting neurotypical attitude.

Phenomenological investigations of autism have become more common in the 21st century. Boldson has used Merleau-Ponty's account of the involvement of bodily sensation and movement in investing experience with meaning to make sense of autistic 'stimming' behavior,⁶⁴ and Zahavi & Parnas have critiqued the idea of a 'theory of mind' deficiency in autism through the phenomenological treatment of self-awareness.⁶⁵ Nilsson et al have published a review of clinical phenomenological approaches to autism.⁶⁶ What has so far been left out is Husserl's interest in explicating the phenomenon of 'world'; how rather than receiving the world as it is, the subject constitutes its experiences as worldly.

Research questions and themes

Guiding research question: How can Husserl's idea of transcendental phenomenology as a foundation for scientific research inform autism research and clinical practice?

The aim of my research is to expand phenomenological investigations of autism to include Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which is often passed over by his successors. In Husserl's Legacy Zahavi relates authoritative sources in philosophy that consider Husserl's

⁶² Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 44–45.

⁶³ Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 216–19.

⁶⁴ Sofie Boldsen, "Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 42, no. 4 (December 2018): 893–913, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-018-9590-y>.

⁶⁵ Dan Zahavi and Josef Parnas, "Conceptual Problems in Infantile Autism Research," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10, no. 9-10 (January 2003): 53–71.

⁶⁶ Maria Nilsson et al., "Arguments for a Phenomenologically Informed Clinical Approach to Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Psychopathology* 52, no. 3 (2019): 153–60, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000500294>.

transcendental turn a kind of embarrassment, involving a “solipsistic, disembodied Cartesian ego.”⁶⁷ However, as Husserl’s Nachlass finds its way into publication, a re-evaluation of this received tradition is taking place.⁶⁸ Husserl once hoped that his philosophical project could provide a new foundation for the ever-more estranged natural sciences. What this project asks is: how can Husserl’s phenomenology provide a new foundation for autism research?

Research question 1: Which elements of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology are primarily relevant for an investigation of autism?

Husserl’s Nachlass comprised forty thousand pages of an obscure stenographic writing system, and publication of it is by no means complete.⁶⁹ Given such a breadth of material, it is prudent to determine which subjects in Husserl’s work are most relevant to autism and this project. One theme I wish to highlight in this proposal is the constitutive relation of the subject to the world. In paragraph §49 of *Ideen I* Husserl asks us to imagine that the style of our experience could no longer be characterized as worldly. In switching our focus from an experience of the world to phenomena that may or may not *appear as a world*, Husserl makes conspicuous that the grounds for an experience of something that transcends the subject lie within that subject and its activity.⁷⁰

What Husserl asks the reader to imagine is something autistic people, as Narzisi and Muccio suggest,⁷¹ often naturally experience. Boldson relates a similar experience from Mukhopadhyay’s autobiography, where an unexpected event collapses the entire structure of the world into a disembodied scream.⁷² However, autistic experience need not be this extreme

⁶⁷ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy: Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Transcendental Philosophy*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

⁶⁸ Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy*, 4–5.

⁶⁹ Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy*, 3–4.

⁷⁰ Matheson Russell, *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Continuum’s Guides for the Perplexed (London ; New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), 69–71.

⁷¹ Antonio Narzisi and Rosy Muccio, “A Neuro-Phenomenological Perspective on the Autism Phenotype,” *Brain Sciences* 11, no. 7 (July 10, 2021): 916, <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11070914>.

⁷² Boldson, “Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism,” 900.

to bring the constitutive character of subjectivity to notice. The natural attitude the transcendental reduction is meant to reveal as always operative in normal experience has since its introduction described in terms of a deep familiarity or trust. Things are simply there and they readily suggest their natures to the subject.⁷³ While I do not go about my life pondering whether the next physical object I will see will be solid, I do often find experience to be less intuitive than described; requiring specific focus in my attention and bodily compartment to fully grasp.⁷⁴ What stands out about both these and more extreme experiences is that they are not an aporia: I can find my way back to the world, though less immediately or flexibly than the ordinary case.⁷⁵ Boldson's investigation of stimming comes to a similar conclusion: by generating consistent feelings of bodily movement⁷⁶ like spinning, Mukhopadhyay was able to 'gather' his body and its relation to the world back together.⁷⁷

Research question 2: What is the place of the transcendental reduction(s) in Husserl's phenomenology?

The implication I see here in such experiences is that autistic subjectivity is still ultimately pointed at the world, albeit in a different manner. The task of working out how even an such an abnormal subject can still — excluding the brain as a kind of ready-made receiver — participate in the same world as everyone else requires clarity on two issues. The first is the most misunderstood feature of Husserl's later philosophy, the transcendental reduction. To reveal the transcendental subjectivity operative beneath the veil of the natural attitude, our going along with how things appear to us must be suspended. This does not involve a disappearance of the world, but a new focus on how it appears to us. The term 'reduction' is

⁷³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy - First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 51.

⁷⁴ Something that is not related to diseases of the nerves or muscles, or brain damage.

⁷⁵ An interesting contrast with autism's formerly related disorder, schizophrenia.

⁷⁶ The experience of actual or potential bodily movement is called 'kinaesthetic experience' by Husserl, and features heavily in his later work.

⁷⁷ Boldsen, "Toward a Phenomenological Account of Embodied Subjectivity in Autism," 899–900.

sometimes used as synonymous with *epoche*, the suspending of our ordinary attitude towards experience that is only a first move in several distinct reductions Husserl offers.⁷⁸

Research question 3: How can the essential structures of autistic subjectivity and their development be described by Husserl's genetic phenomenology?

The second topic to be clarified involves a methodological distinction in transcendental phenomenology. There is a *static phenomenology* investigating the correlation between the structure of the subject's 'act' — for instance a perception or judgment — and the object that appears to it. The above example of the tree is one instance of this: my perception of the visible side of the tree and its implied other sides or closer details correlate to an appearance of *the* tree itself. Complementing this is the lesser known *genetic phenomenology*. This kind of investigation answers a common criticism of Husserl: that he presents the world as originating from a timeless subject that just so happens to already grasp notions like physical objects or people so that those may appear to it. Genetic phenomenology, so named as to suggest the theme of genesis, "questions back" to the necessary development of the ready-made essential structures we discover in our static analysis.⁷⁹

The way forms of experience come to relate to each other are not causal, but instead motivational. An example given by Bower is how laying out a series of clear premises motivates the inference of a specific conclusion.⁸⁰ Both the neurotypical subject fully 'at home' in the world and the autistic subject develop according to such motivational laws. What autism research and basic experience with autistic people tells us is that these two tracks of development and motivation are incompatible. Autistic children do not become neurotypical adults, and autism does not suddenly appear in a later stage of life. Husserl, though he could not have known about autism, was interested in 'abnormal' subjectivities. He writes that until such investigations are carried out, "the phenomenon world [is] not

⁷⁸ Moran and Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, 273–74.

⁷⁹ Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 93–94.

⁸⁰ Matt E. M. Bower, "Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology," in *The Subject(s) of Phenomenology*, ed. Iulian Apostolescu, vol. 108, Contributions to Phenomenology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 197, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29357-4_10.

explicated in its full concreteness” nor has “the full transcendental community [...] been accounted for.”⁸¹

Research question 4: How can a transcendental phenomenology of autism inform scientific research and clinical practice?

Pending the outcome of these investigations, I will turn to their relevance for autism research in neuroscience and clinical treatment. The project of ‘neurophenomenology’, which aims to bridge and integrate phenomenological first-person and neuroscientific third-person accounts of subjectivity, is a promising partner here.⁸² Nilssen et al already mention the broad idea of a clinical phenomenological interview, which even suggests an *epoché* of the interviewer’s natural attitude. This review also highlights Parnas’ Examination of Anomalous Self-Experience, a concrete form of this idea intended for schizophrenia.⁸³

Method

This research proceeds primarily through textual analysis of phenomenological works and literature on autism from both clinical and autobiographical perspectives. Phenomenological works include relevant sections of the Husserliana such as the volume on the lifeworld, *Crisis of the European Sciences*, the three volumes of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, the volumes on First Philosophy and intersubjectivity, *Experience and Judgement*, the works on time-consciousness and the 1907 lectures on spatial objects. Modern interlocutors include the phenomenologists Dan Zahavi and Annabelle Dufourcq; as well as Léon de Bruin, who is approaching autism from the compatible perspective of enactivism. Use will be made of Matt Bower’s presentation of the ‘normality reduction’ in Husserl’s later works, suspending the ‘normality’ of neurotypical subjectivity in order to reveal incompatible but valid and ultimately interdependent tracks of development.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 194–95.

⁸² Aviva Berkovich-Ohana et al., “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Neurophenomenology – The Case of Studying Self Boundaries With Meditators,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (July 21, 2020): 1680, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01680>.

⁸³ Nilsson et al., “Arguments for a Phenomenologically Informed Clinical Approach to Autism Spectrum Disorder,” 157.

⁸⁴ Bower, “Finding a Way Into Genetic Phenomenology,” 195–98.

Summary in keywords

Autism, phenomenology, transcendental, subjectivity, natural science, neurobiology, clinical research

Timetable

Period	Research and education	Output
Sept24-jan25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD course on research methodology • Chapter 1: Autism as phenomenological topic. Select autism research and autobiographical corpus. Research Husserliana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft of chapter 1 of dissertation
Feb25-aug25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 1. Correlate autism corpus with phenomenological themes. Research existing phenomenological work on autism. • Chapter 2: The reduction(s) in Husserl's phenomenology. Research Husserliana and scholarship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 1 of dissertation • Draft of chapter 2 of dissertation
Sept25-jan26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 2. The reduction as natural autistic experience. • Chapter 3: The genesis of autistic experience. Develop 'normality reduction' implied in Husserl by Bower with regard to autism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishable article 1 • Chapter 2 of dissertation • Draft of chapter 3 of dissertation
Feb26-aug26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 3. Work with prof. Dufourcq. • PhD course. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 3 of dissertation
Sept26-jan27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 4: Towards science and the clinic. Results of research brought into conversation with research and treatment. Work with dr. De Bruin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft of chapter 4 of dissertation
Feb27-aug27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 4. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 4 of dissertation
Sept27-jan28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write introduction and conclusion • Incorporate final feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft of Introduction and conclusion of dissertation

Feb28-aug28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate final feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete dissertation

Standard vacation times implied

Summary for non-specialists (373 words)

Phenomenology is a broad movement in philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Its basic point is to overcome hidden presuppositions and metaphysical speculation through a sharp focus on subjective experience and the precise way it is given. This means for instance that it does not postulate a ‘thing-in-itself’ that we indirectly know through what we experience but which can never actually appear to us. Instead, what appears to us is the things themselves. Through careful description and analysis of how a certain kind of experience is given, the essential structures of an experience can be derived. This may be something like ‘a perception’, but also time-consciousness or even the character of an experience that is ‘real’ altogether.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulty in social interaction and what are called “restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests.” Known since the 1940s, it has received a significant increase in attention as diagnosis rates rapidly increased since the 1990s. The underlying deficiency considered responsible for autistic behavior has changed several times over the course of the last 80 years, while autistic people themselves have moved from a position of exclusively child research subjects to adults directly involved in the conversation. I am one of these autistic adults.

Edmund Husserl saw phenomenology as a necessary foundation for the increasingly successful but reductive natural sciences, and announced a form of it that could suspend and question our almost automatic belief in an external world beyond our own consciousness. This turn has historically been maligned as an outmoded kind of philosophy, but recent scholarship on Husserl’s unpublished works portrays him as anticipating many themes associated with post-Husserlian phenomenology — such as the role of embodiment in the constituting of worldly experience.

This proposal looks to the possibility of a transcendental phenomenology of autism, using newly available works by Husserl and modern phenomenologists to discern the different way

in which autistic subjectivity intends the world. I claim that by comparing the different way the necessary structures of a worldly subject develop in the case of autism, this research can resolve the impasse between a reductive naturalism where my conscious behavior is a byproduct of a brain abnormality and a merely contingent report of autistic experiences.

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2003-2006 - HAVO, Economie en Maatschappij – Mariëndael

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Relevant activities

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Consolidated Services, Service Desk Manager

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Responsibilities: Setting up IT infrastructure, 3rd line support for customers. Managing contact between costumers and provider of service tools.

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NMA ICT Solutions (Now KNNS), Kaseya Manager

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Managing Kaseya monitoring and remote management tool. Third line support. Managing helpdesk workers. Configuring, troubleshooting and upgrading Windows Server 2003/2008, Exchange 2007/2010. Managing and configuring BackupExec. Troubleshooting SonicWall.

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