




Varieties of the Lifeworld: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience

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Accepted: 27 April 2022
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Abstract

In this contribution we first sketch an outline of the concept of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), to introduce the readers to the guest-edited collection of essays *Varieties of the Lifeworld: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience*, special issue of the “Continental Philosophy Review.” We trace back the origin of the concept of lifeworld to Husserl’s late phenomenology, although also explaining (on the basis of the careful historical-conceptual reconstructions offered by some distinguished scholars of Husserl and the phenomenological movement) that the development of Husserl’s phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt* was gradual and was connected, among other things, to the question of the natural world of experience. Then, quickly referring to Gadamer, Landgrebe, Fink and other authors belonging to the phenomenological tradition, we explain that different interpretations of the topic “Lifeworld” in Husserl’s thinking have been provided: In our view, this contributes to the fact that still nowadays this topic is a fascinating and philosophically stimulating one. Finally, making reference to more recent works by such authors as Fial, Gallagher, Zahavi and Shusterman (a pragmatist philosopher, whose somaesthetics is nonetheless very rich in insights that can be connected to phenomenological views of the body and its place in the world), we emphasize how the question concerning the lifeworld is still capable today to open a great variety of perspectives and plurality of paths for thinking, as testified by the essays collected in this guest-edited special issue of the “Continental Philosophy Review.”

Keywords Lifeworld · Phenomenology · Aesthetic experience · Edmund Husserl · Contemporary philosophy

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Few concepts in the history of 20th -century and 21st -century philosophy are probably so rich, fascinating, dense, complex and, so to speak, intrinsically variegated and stratified as the concept of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). The term “lifeworld” unifies in a very original way in a single concept the two notions of life and world, and thus shows how essentially connected and intertwined with each other the notions of *Leben* and *Welt* are. In doing so, the concept of lifeworld proves to be able to disclose a great variety of perspectives and plurality of paths for thinking. This idea is immediately graspable in the title itself of the present collection of essays: *Varieties of the Lifeworld*. The subtitle of this guest-edited special issue of the “Continental Philosophy Review,” *Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience*, is aimed to further explain to the readers of the journal that the present work is obviously rooted in the phenomenological tradition, in general, and that, in particular, it pays a special attention to questions concerning the role played by the lifeworld in the investigation of aesthetic questions.

As we said, all the contributions collected in *Varieties of the Lifeworld: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience* are rooted in the phenomenological tradition and are aimed to further develop a phenomenological inquiry into the potentialities of the concept of *Lebenswelt* and its different dimensions and possibilities of application. The connection to the phenomenological tradition is clear and obvious, inasmuch as it is precisely the name of Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological movement, that immediately comes to one’s mind when one simply hears the German word *Lebenswelt*. As is well-known, with his late masterpiece and groundbreaking work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* from the mid 1930s, Husserl established once and for all the question concerning the reality of the lifeworld and its fundamental epistemological implications as a veritable key-question for contemporary philosophers: indeed, as “a universal problem for philosophy.”¹ However, beside the strict epistemological dimension of the question concerning the life-world, also other aspects, implications, possibilities of application and, so to speak, nuances of this concept were soon recognized and further developed in various directions by other authors, originally intersecting phenomenological research in the rigorous sense with sociological, psychological, anthropological and also aesthetic investigations.

As has been noted, nowadays “this key term from Husserl, ‘life-world,’ appears increasingly in both scholarly circles and public discussions,” for example with reference to the people’s search for “a model of the world that represents a place where they could feel at home, where they could ‘live’ in the fullest sense of the word.”² On the one hand, this is a fact that deserves attention and may also generate a genuine appreciation. In fact, it testifies the positive possibility that rigorous philosophizing should not be confined or limited to expert, specialized and sometimes very subtle debates in the academic world, but should become accessible to a broader audience and stimulate new reflections and discussions. On the other hand, however, this and other similar cases of widespread diffusion of certain philosophical concepts and topics beyond the limits of their rigorous theorization and application may also appear

¹ Husserl (1970, § 34f, pp. 132–135).

² Held (2003, p. 32).

as dangerous. In fact, in freely using some notions outside of their context (and sometimes with little knowledge of their original meaning), one may run the risk of applying them in an arbitrary way, thus losing sight of the fundamental problems that had originally led a certain philosopher (in this case, Husserl) to coin and use that concept. As the readers of the “Continental Philosophy Review” will see, one of the common aims of all the contributions collected in *Varieties of the Lifeworld: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience* is to investigate the intrinsic complexity and variety of the concept of lifeworld. It is thus our aim, as editors of the present collection, to show the fruitfulness of the concept of lifeworld also in slightly different contexts than the ones that were strictly at the core of Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. At the same time, it is also our aim to remain very well-rooted in, and very faithful to, the attitude or “spirit” of serious and rigorous phenomenological philosophizing, without ceding to any temptation of transforming the discourse on the lifeworld into a mere occasion to express one’s opinions about life, world or other general questions.

As had been noted in the early 1960s by Hans-Georg Gadamer, “[t]he real discussion of Husserl today concerns [...] the late elaboration of Husserl’s phenomenology and especially *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.”³ Gadamer noted that “[t]he word ‘life-world’ [had] found an astounding resonance in the contemporary mind,” and observed that “[a] word is always an answer,” thus asking: “What does this new word, ‘life-world,’ answer? What is the question to which this word presents an answer that has been accepted by the general consciousness of language?”⁴ For Gadamer, “Husserl came to the characterization of the life-world that still functions as valid, that is, as the pregiven world”: according to him, this showed, among other things, that Husserl’s late concept of *Lebenswelt* must also be connected to his early phenomenological investigation of “the totality of our natural experience of the world.”⁵ Also in *Truth and Method*, his main work from 1960 that had a fundamental influence on the development of philosophical hermeneutics as one of the main currents and approaches in contemporary thinking, Gadamer made reference to Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld and observed:

Using a concept consciously formulated in contrast to a concept of the world that includes the universe of what can be made objective by science, Husserl calls this phenomenological concept of the world “life-world” – i.e., the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pregiven basis of all experience. This world horizon is a presupposition of all science as well and is, therefore, more fundamental. [...] The life-world exists in a constant movement of relative validity. The concept of the life-world is the antithesis of all objectivism. It is an essentially historical concept, which does not refer to a universe of being, to an “existent world.” [...] [T]he life-world means [...] the whole in which we live as historical creatures. [...] [T]he life-world is always at the same time a

³ Gadamer (1977, p. 151).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. (p. 155).

communal world that involves being with other people as well. It is a world of persons, and in the natural attitude the validity of this personal world is always assumed. But how can its validity be based on an achievement of subjectivity? For phenomenological analysis of constitution, this presents the most difficult task of all [...]. Though it is supposed to bracket all the validity of the world and all the pregivenness of anything else, transcendental reflection must regard itself too as included in the life-world. The reflective “I” sees itself as living in the context of ends for which the life-world is the basis. Thus, constituting the life-world (as well as intersubjectivity) is a paradoxical task. But Husserl regards all these as only apparent paradoxes. He is convinced that they are resolved if we consistently maintain the transcendental meaning of the phenomenological reduction and don’t fear the bogey of a transcendental solipsism. Given this clear tendency of Husserl’s thought, it seems to me wrong to accuse him of any ambiguity in the concept of constitution.⁶

Like every interpretation of a philosophical text or philosophical theory, also Gadamer’s hermeneutical interpretation of the meaning of Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld can be discussed, compared to other interpretations and potentially revised, rethought or criticized. However, this is not the adequate place to undertake a critical comparison of the different interpretations of Husserl’s theory of the lifeworld and the phenomenological analysis of constitution that have been proposed, not even of those of Jean Wahl, Eugen Fink or Ludwig Landgrebe that Gadamer himself explicitly mentions and discusses in his work on the phenomenological movement. What is important for the limited aims of an Introduction to a special issue of a journal dedicated to the topic *Varieties of the Lifeworld: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience* (and thus the reason why the abovementioned Gadamerian quotations are interesting and relevant in this context) is simply that such references to the question of the human “natural experience of the world” immediately show, for example, that even before *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (namely, the book that most readers spontaneously and reasonably associate to the topic *Lebenswelt*) the problems fundamentally addressed by Husserl’s late phenomenology of the lifeworld were already present in his philosophical reflection, although not conceptualized exactly in the same way as in his masterpiece from the mid 1930s. Apropos of this, Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach have noted that, although it is understandable and acceptable to firstly and, in a sense, immediately connect the very use of the term “lifeworld” to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, it must be also considered that Husserl had actually started to sporadically use this expression already before 1920. Thus, during the 1920s the lifeworld had already become a fundamental question of his philosophy, precisely in connection with the questions of the “natural concept of the world” or the “natural world of experience.”⁷ In a more recent work, namely a research monograph on the role played by the concept of *Welt* in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s philosophies, the Italian scholar Guelfo Carbone has defined the Husserlian notion of the “natural concept

⁶ Gadamer (2004, pp. 239–240).

⁷ Bernet et al. (1989, Chap. 9).

of the world” as an anticipation of the topic that would be later presented under the name “lifeworld,”⁸ reconstructing the progressive development of these questions and themes on the basis of Husserl’s lectures *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* from 1910 to 1911 (emphatically defined by Husserl himself as *Vorlesungen über den natürlichen Weltbegriff*) and *Natur und Geist* from 1919, his fundamental works *Ideen I* and *Ideen II*, the materials collected in the vol. XXXIX of the *Husserliana*, and finally the *Krisis*.⁹

From this point of view, another interesting question that is quite relevant in this context is the question concerning the possibility to inquire into the relation between Husserl’s notion of *Lebenswelt* and, for example, the original use of the notions of *Welt* and *Umwelt* in 20th -century philosophical anthropology. Beside this, another relevant in question is that concerning the complex relation between the progressive Husserlian development of a phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt* and Heidegger’s understanding of the concepts of *Welt*, *In-der-Welt-sein* and *Weltlichkeit* in his early lecture courses and works: a question, the latter, that is explicitly addressed by some contributions included in the present collection, as the readers of the “Continental Philosophy Review” will see. In such cases, it is always important to pay adequately attention to both the similarities and the divergences between different thinkers: so, for example, following Günter Figal’s remarkable observations about the Husserl/Heidegger relation on these topics, we can say that

[i]n the life-world, things and matters of fact are significant and can be experienced, confirmed or discovered in their significance. In this respect, it is comparable to the world as Heidegger describes it in *Sein und Zeit*; except that Husserl’s understanding is neutral enough to avoid being reduced to a world of useful things and work. The life-world in Husserl’s sense is in any case distinguished from the world in *Sein und Zeit* in a decisive respect: It is not a world in which one can “fall” into a “flight” from the openness and indeterminacy of one’s own *Dasein*. “Being” in the life-world is no “inauthentic” existence [*Das-ein*]; Heidegger could have found a model for his understanding of inauthenticity as the press toward what is already actual, assured, in the “natural attitude”; but he could have found no point of reference for inauthenticity in Husserl’s idea of the life-world. The life-world is prior to the natural attitude as well as *Dasein* itself in its world-fallenness. To state it with Heidegger’s concept, the life-world is *Dasein as world*, or, to put it in Husserl’s own formulation, as “the domain of something subjective that is completely and utterly self-contained.” The life-world is thus the world in which everything is *phenomenal*, without being recognized phenomenologically as phenomenon. [...] The life-world is what Husserl calls “constitution” as world. One could therefore also call it the world of phenomena; it would be the world of appearance and not only of

⁸ Carbone (2017, p. 62).

⁹ Ibid. (pp. 62–84). In his reconstruction and interpretation, Carbone draws inspiration from, and compares, the sometimes not entirely coinciding views expressed in the works of such scholars of Husserl as C. Bernes, D. Carr, H.-H. Gander, K. Held, G. van Kerckhoven, I. Kern, L. Landgrebe, E. Soldinger, M. Sommer, A. Staiti, and many others.

what appears taken as real. This would of course mean that it cannot be further phenomenologically reduced, taken back into appearance. Indeed, it is the pre-given “horizon,” in which something is appearance.¹⁰

Of course, what has been said above apropos of the lifeworld and the natural experience of the world basically point in the direction of the need, for rigorous phenomenological research, to describe and clarify the (problematic) connection between the kind of natural relationship to the world that the abovementioned expressions apparently hint at and the specific kind of relationship to the real that the modern scientific worldview discloses, often inviting us to consider as the only legitimate and right one. This was already clear in the very title chosen by Husserl for his late masterpiece that radically and definitely put the question of the lifeworld at the center of phenomenological philosophizing: namely, this was already clear in Husserl’s choice to draw close the project of a phenomenological-transcendental account of the lifeworld to the diagnosis of a veritable crisis of science in the present age. More recently, in their fascinating development of phenomenological inquiry in the field of the philosophy of mind, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi have convincingly observed that

[t]he phenomenological dictum “to the things themselves” can be seen [...] as a criticism of scientism [...]. This criticism is by no means to be interpreted as a rejection of scientific rationality. The idea is not that a scientific exploration of reality is false, invalid, or superfluous. The target of the criticism is not science itself, but a certain inflated self-interpretation of science. As both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl point out, there is a more original relation to the world than the one manifested in scientific rationality. In our pre-scientific perceptual encounter with the world, the world is given concretely, sensuously, and intuitively. In daily life, we do not interact with ideal theoretical objects, but with tools and values, with pictures, statues, books, tables, houses, friends, and family [...], and our life is guided by practical concerns. [...] Scientific discourse is embedded in the world of experience, in the experiential world, and if we wish to comprehend the performance and limits of science, we have to investigate the original experience of the world of which science is a higher-order articulation [...]. Even the most exact and abstract scientific results presuppose the intuitively given subject-relative evidence of the lifeworld – a form of evidence which does not merely function as an unavoidable, but otherwise irrelevant, way-point towards scientific knowledge, but as a permanent and quite indispensable source of meaning and justification.¹¹

The emergence of the question of the lifeworld also in the context of a phenomenological philosophy of mind widely understood, connected to recent discoveries and developments in cognitive sciences, and including such topics as consciousness, time, perception, agency, embodiment, self and person, represents a further and indeed relevant proof of what we said at the beginning of this Introduction. That is, a proof of

¹⁰ Figal (2010, § 16, pp. 150–151).

¹¹ Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, p. 89).

the stimulating variety of perspectives that philosophers can still nowadays derive from original and updated investigations of the lifeworld, with a special focus, in the present context, on the question of aesthetic experience (as testified by the subtitle that we have chosen for this issue of the “Continental Philosophy Review”). By the way, precisely the latter, namely the question of aesthetic experience, offers several examples of how a concept like the lifeworld can still prove today its philosophical fruitfulness both in the field of phenomenological aesthetics strictly speaking and also beyond this field, in connection and/or intersection with other relevant traditions and currents of contemporary aesthetic thinking. Limiting ourselves to just one reference, we can say that this is testified, among others, by the example of an interdisciplinary approach like Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, with “its concern for heightened somatic selfconsciousness in our increasingly mediatic lifeworld.”¹² On the basis of the Husserlian background that has been sketched above in very general terms, our hope is that this special issue will deepen the phenomenological dimensions and varieties of being-alive in the lifeworld.¹³

Funding Open access funding provided by {{orgName}} within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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¹² Shusterman (2008, p. 12). As is well-known, somaesthetics represents Shusterman’s original development of pragmatist aesthetics in the direction of a philosophy of the human body, or “soma,” in all its complexity; however, notwithstanding the main pragmatist background of a discipline like somaesthetics, also phenomenological thinkers like Husserl and especially Merleau-Ponty have played a great role and great influence in the definition of somaesthetics. To be precise, somaesthetics is understood by Shusterman as a “critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site not only of experienced subjectivity and sensory appreciation (aesthesia) that guides our action and performance but also of our creative self-fashioning through the ways we use, groom, and adorn our physical bodies to express our values and stylize ourselves.” The soma, i.e. “the sentient purposive body,” is philosophically conceived of by Shusterman “as both subject and object in the world,” as both *Körperhaben* and *Leibsein*, and this twofold constitution is revealing of the fact that “human nature is always more than merely natural but instead deeply shaped by culture,” thus expressing “our ambivalent condition between power and frailty, dignity and brutishness, knowledge and ignorance,” and thus proving to be “a single, systematic unity that however contains a multiplicity of very different elements (including diverse organs) that have their own needs, ailments, and subsystems” (Shusterman 2019, pp. 15–17).

¹³ As editors of this special issue of the “Continental Philosophy Review,” we would like to express our sincere gratitude to our distinguished authors for agreeing to join our project. Particular gratitude is also owed to Anthony Steinbock and Mohsen Saber, and to the anonymous readers for their important peer-review work and their useful comments.

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