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### Articulating and understanding the phenomenological manifesto

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## Articulating and understanding the phenomenological manifesto

### Abstract

In the mid-nineties, Routledge brought out *The Mechanical Mind*. Authored by Tim Crane, this was a readable introduction, overview and rationale for approaching the philosophy of mind from a particular outlook. Specifically, it identified and defended the core and foundational assumptions that inform mainstream analytic philosophy of mind. The book advanced a kind of 'ideological argument' in that its author recognized that attraction to its central idea "depends on accepting a certain picture of the world; the mechanical/causal world picture. This picture sees the whole of nature as obeying certain general causal laws – the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, etc. – and it holds that psychology too has its laws, and that the mind fits into the causal order".

### Keywords

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## ARTICULATING AND UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL MANIFESTO

**Daniel D. Hutto**

In the mid-nineties, Routledge brought out *The Mechanical Mind*. Authored by Tim Crane, this was a readable introduction, overview and rationale for approaching the philosophy of mind from a particular outlook. Specifically, it identified and defended the core and foundational assumptions that inform mainstream analytic philosophy of mind. The book advanced a kind of ‘ideological argument’ in that its author recognized that attraction to its central idea “depends on accepting a certain picture of the world; the mechanical/causal world picture. This picture sees the whole of nature as obeying certain general causal laws – the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, etc. – and it holds that psychology too has its laws, and that the mind fits into the causal order” (Crane 1995, p. 62).

Endorsement of causalism about the mind lay at the heart of this view. Thus Crane acknowledged, “the causal picture of thought is the key element in what I am calling the ‘mechanical’ view of the mind” (Crane 1995, p. 58). Mental life is, accordingly, not merely expressed or made manifest in what certain living creatures do; rather to adopt the kind of causalist understanding of the mind (that is today widely accepted) is to think of mental states as productive. They do the behind the scenes toil that brings about and reliably generates experience and thought. Thematically, it is easy to see how acceptance of this sort of functionalist characterization of the mental, as a collection of causally efficacious ‘inner states’, is linked with other standard notions that are axiomatic for analytic philosophers of mind. For example, it fits neatly with the idea that mental states are not directly perceptible but at best inferred. Typically, this last thought is combined with yet another, the claim that putative mental states are, in fact, theoretical entities of the kind that are either familiarly described by commonsense psychology or which our best scientific psychology seeks to identify.

Of course, there is – as yet – no exact agreement about what our best scientific psychology is or ought to be. Yet, exactitude aside, in certain circles there is broad agreement about the list of features that any credible product of scientific psychology

must have. Thus “the cognitivist research programme is unified primarily by the core assumptions about the complexity and representational nature of mind, and by very little shared substantive doctrine” (Flanagan 1991, p. 179). Although there have been many variations on the basic theme (indeed some going to remarkable extremes), the bottom line commitment of analytic philosophy of mind, shared by cognitive scientists, is that – in some way or another – the mind is responsible for the production of intelligent activity by means of manipulating representations computationally. For many thinkers, this much cognitivism (at least) is a non-negotiable starting point for an adequate understanding and study of the mental. As such this sort of approach to the mind stands in stark and hostile contrast to scientific behaviourism, its forerunner in psychology, and certain philosophical attempts to cast the mind as essentially expressive, embodied and embedded within its environment in constitutive ways.<sup>1</sup>

Gallagher and Zahavi’s *The Phenomenal Mind* is meant to be the 21st century reply to this entrenched and dominant line of thinking about the mental. Indeed when I was asked to give my opinion of the pre-publication manuscript, the senior editor at Routledge cast it in just this light; it was meant to be compared directly to *The Mechanical Mind* (the similarity in titles is no accident) and the framework promoted therein. For times have changed, debates about the mind, its nature and how to study it have moved on in interesting ways from where we were over a decade ago. Hence *The Phenomenal Mind* (PM) is not only supposed to be a rich and philosophically exciting introduction into what phenomenology is and why it matters, it is also a manifesto designed to show why current thinking about the philosophy of mind cannot afford to neglect the offerings of the phenomenological tradition. It succeeds brilliantly in this. The book’s greatest virtue is not just that it gives a sense of what is distinctive about phenomenological approaches but also maps out their place in the big picture. The individual chapters (all well written) enter into discussions that are gripping and which unfold in ways that draw in the reader, providing insight into both the character of and the need for the various phenomenological contributions. Collectively, they reveal that only by taking phenomenology seriously will important problems become properly visible and new ways of approaching old problems emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> Not every kind of functionalism is straightforwardly incompatible with embodied-embedded approaches, at least not in every respect. For a recent attempt to combine the latter with an extended functionalism see Clark (2008).

There can be no doubt that this sort of work is timely and much-needed. But readers may have reason to wonder whether the expressed ‘overarching’ claim of this book, as stated, truly indicates the revolutionary nature of the work. It is “that these phenomenological-based theoretical accounts and descriptions can complement and inform ongoing work in the cognitive sciences. In fact, we do think they can do so in a far more productive manner than the standard metaphysical discussions of, say, the mind-body problem that we find in mainstream philosophy of mind” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 10, emphasis added). The authors are not shy of critiquing analytic philosophers. For example, the introduction reveals that the latter are unclear even about the details of the recent history of the science of mind and often their own motives for rejecting certain positions and endorsing others.

But really the problems with what we might call the Mechano-Representationalist Approach (or MRA) run much deeper still. Indeed, they run so deep that it is difficult to see how the insights conveyed in PM could merely ‘complement and inform’ the existing work in the cognitive sciences in the absence of a fundamental philosophical reform of the latter. After all, the so-called cognitive sciences tend to aid and abet the core assumptions of the MRA that are plainly and directly antithetical to the ‘Phenomenal Approach’ to the mind (or PA). If so, there is a tension in the overarching claim that warrants comment and clarification.

Let me be clear, PM admirably demonstrates the contemporary need for phenomenology to inform the empirical sciences of the mind, but it blatantly supposes that its proposals can peacefully co-exist with those of science because the two domains are autonomous and non-competitive (see, e.g. p. 7, where it is held that phenomenology comes at things from the first-person perspective and cognitive science from the third-person perspective). With this sort of division of labour in mind, chapter two on ‘Methodologies’ shows that the common myth that phenomenology is hostile to scientific approaches is just that, a myth. There is little doubt that since it is just this misconception that turns many away from phenomenology, the authors decided to tackle that issue up front.

The fact is that while phenomenology and pure neuroscience may co-operate well, it is less obvious that the same is true of phenomenology and cognitive science. This is because the latter’s explanations are pitched at the subpersonal level of

description (into which we have no first-personal insight or access) but they nevertheless focus on phenomena above the level of interest to neuroscientists, who are concerned with the ground floor mechanics and implementation of mental activity. The root trouble is that in pursuing its own agenda, cognitive science seeks to operate with a mixed economy: it aims to give us theories at the subpersonal level that explain everyday psychological phenomena while at the same time incorporating and revising constructs from that very domain. Thus it offers computational or functionalist theories of perception, memory and thought that invoke notions of ‘content’ and ‘experience’ in ways that put its enterprise directly at odds with certain, non-theoretically laden phenomenological insights. This being so, it certainly seems that PA and MRA are straightforwardly incompatible. And if we take the commitment to some form of ‘representational theory of mind’ as central to cognitive science, the discussions of many chapters of PM make this tension abundantly clear.

For example, in several places throughout the book its authors state that their position, concerning central topics, such as perception and intentionality, is opposed to “the representationalist account of the mind” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 94). Yet in other places they talk in ways that can make it appear that they are less than fully hostile to the sorts of information-processing approaches that think of perceptual data as a kind of input that is received and manipulated (e.g. they say ‘perception is not a simple reception of information’ which seems to imply that it at least partly involves the simple reception of information; ‘experiences present the world in a certain way’ and so on). There are several such instances for the attentive reader to find. It might be thought that this is unproblematic. After all, such talk is, of course, the norm in the cognitive sciences. But for those who reject the MRA to mental states, such language deserves – nay, requires – critical reconsideration. It is not clear why the authors did not consistently distance themselves more entirely from their competitor’s theory of the mind.

To take another example, the authors are quite happy to talk of mental states exhibiting intentionality or aboutness (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 111) but they deny that the distinction of the inner and the outer, normally invoked when talking of our situatedness in the world, makes good sense. Now to talk of mental states does not entail that one has in mind ‘inner’ mental states, but I imagine many readers will have

overlooked that subtle but important difference. The interesting point, however, is that if one takes to heart the arguments against taking the inner-outer distinction seriously, then the very idea of an inner mental state is put into hazard. Let me be clear, the tension in question is not with the idea that there are mental states exhibiting distinguishing features, such as aboutness, but with the idea that we have any principled, metaphysically robust understanding of what it is for such a state to be ‘inner’. Again, accepting this demands a fundamental rethink of many standard claims made by cognitive scientists.

Other examples of this tension could be supplied, but the general point ought to be clear enough. The description of the book’s core claim appears to seriously underdescribe the true threat that PA, properly understood, offers to existing cognitive science. In this respect, I would have liked to see the authors go further in making clear just how revolutionary their ideas and proposals really are. This, in turn, may require a rethink of their stated ambitions.

There is one other matter I would like to see clarified. Another of the authors’ stated aims of the PA is that it seeks to be “non-dogmatic, shunning metaphysical and theoretical prejudices” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 10). The authors of PM don’t demur from theorising, but they do seek to avoid prejudice. But it is not clear that they have always and everywhere been sufficiently critical and managed to free themselves from certain favoured habits of thought. If this should prove true, it raises interesting methodological questions about the role of theorizing and what grounds it in the PA.

Gallagher and Zahavi make constitutive claims about what is putatively essentially required for the having of experiences. They maintain that all experience is necessarily self-conscious, where the form of self-consciousness in question is understood in a minimal, pre-reflexive sense. First-person givenness, manifesting a quality of felt mineness, reveals experiences to have an implicit self-consciousness that is essential and basic to any and all experience.

I have reservations about the existence of a minimal form of self-consciousness that is in some way integral to any and all experience, even if only pre-reflexively, tacitly or implicitly. This is because I have trouble understanding what justifies characterizing any pre-reflexive felt aspect that might be associated with such awareness as having a ‘quality of mineness’.

Some distinctions are in order. A condition on the possibility of knowing (or recognizing) that one has a point of view is that one is able to recognize and contrast it with other points of view (at least possibly). It would seem then, on the one hand, that one can only understand the having of first-personal and third-personal perspectives by first operating with concepts that are only made available in a second-personal, social space; a public, intersubjective space. On the other hand, it seems right to say that one can have experiences even if one does not know it. A creature can experience even if it lacks the concept of experience.

Noting this difference helps to explain how we can talk of experience as being, in one sense, shared and in another sense private. You and I can both have experience of a common object or situation. We might have qualitatively similar experiences of it (in certain circumstances) but we would not have exactly the same experience of it, quantitatively speaking. Token experiences ‘belong’ to the individuals in question even if we can only recognize them as so belonging (as being first-personal) from a second-person point of view.

So it seems that one cannot recognize or understand what it is to have a first-personal kind of experience unless one is able to operate with appropriate, intersubjectively grounded concepts (specifically, the concept of experience). This doesn’t preclude the having of non-conceptual feelings or experience *per se* (there are many sorts of experiences that one might have prior to mastering the concept of experience). But it raises questions about our justification for characterizing these in terms of feelings of ‘mineness’ or ‘first-personal givenness’. For what entitles us to employ these sorts of characterization in describing the felt character of such experiences to experiencers who lack the ability to make the relevant conceptual distinctions?

It might be thought that we have no choice but to accept that first-person self-consciousness is fundamental to all forms of consciousness; i.e. that first-person givenness is a constitutive aspect of consciousness, without which there could be no experience at all. Thus it might be argued that unless we presuppose a capacity for minimal self-awareness (and thus the existence of a minimal self), experience would be ‘given to us’ pre-reflexively in an anonymous and undifferentiated manner. But surely this does not follow if we cannot make clear sense of the idea of what it would be to



experience ‘felt mineness’ in the first place. If so, there would simply be no question of understanding their quality in terms of a felt difference of ‘mineness’ (or its opposite). The trouble with that idea and its alternate (anonymous feelings) is that they both seem to imply some capacity, if only nonconceptual, for recognizing a difference between one’s own experiences and those of others. How could one experience things in this way without having some appropriate contrast? And if this is not implied it becomes even harder to make sense of what ‘felt mineness’ might consist in.

It is for reasons of this kind that I am suspicious of characterizing experience in terms of first-personal givenness and in seeing this as a necessary ingredient of minimal self-consciousness. As Wittgenstein once said (paraphrasing), solipsism may truly describe our psychological situation but any attempt to state this truth would constitute nonsense. It might be thought that attempts to talk about a pre-reflexive quality of mineness that features in our experiences faces logically similar obstacles. But the concern I am raising is more fundamental, since I have yet to see why we should be persuaded of the truth of the description, full stop.

Note that since my point concerns what justifies (or not) a certain way of characterizing our experiences, it does not follow that experiences would be ownerless if we rejected such a characterization as unwarranted. Experiences may have owners (they may even have owners, necessarily) but whether the owners of experiences experience their experiences as being owned or themselves as being owners of them is a quite different question.<sup>2</sup>

Down the ages, great minds have recognized and explored the idea that sentient life incorporates a distinctive and elusive feature – a feature that cannot be wholly captured in terms of the qualitative character associated with what the individual senses are designed to track when performing their offices in enabling creatures to navigate the external world. From Aristotle onwards, rich attention has been paid to this alleged

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<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers, such as Galen Strawson take the claim that selves must exist to be a truism. Following in the footsteps of Frege, he insists that we must answer ‘No’ to the question, “Can there be experience without someone to experience it?” (Strawson 1994, p. 129). Note that: “A subject of experience is not something grand. It is simply something that must exist wherever there is experience, even in the case of mice or spiders – simply because experience is necessarily experience-for” (Strawson 1994, p. 133). Strawson also bids us to recognize that as stated Frege’s thesis is compatible with the idea that there is a different subject of experience attending each experience. Note that Strawson is not committed to the existence of long-term selves as single entities existing over the course of whole human lives. This logical possibility also raises other interesting questions about the nature of minimal selves.

sense (or feeling) of living, of existing, of one's lived body (Heller-Roazen 2007). The feeling in question purportedly is that which attends all unimpaired sentient activity (and possibly even its absence) – it has been thought of as a kind of animal feeling, that can be disrupted or made evident by certain psychological and medical disorders. Amongst the many diverse attempts to formulate and understand the nature of this special kind of sentience, it has been variously equated with certain functions assigned to the Aristotelian common sense, a central or master faculty that presides over and unifies the perceptual activity, a kind of inner touch or sensitivity, and as a form of apperception (distinct from explicit consciousness). What unites the great bulk of these attempts has been the idea that the feeling or sensation in question is non-intellectual and pre-cognitive in character. Even so, no two thinkers managed to corral the notion or render it intelligible in precisely equivalent ways. Perhaps that's to be expected, given the quarry. Indeed, allowing a certain amount of latitude on this front is probably wise when trying to understand a sensation or feeling that only manifests pre-reflexively.

This suggests that talk of 'minimal self-consciousness' gestures at something that needs to be understood. What I am proposing is that the particular modes of expression that the authors of PM invoke to characterize this may be in need of review; certainly they want careful interrogation and explication. This request trades on the authors' (quite healthy) admission that we should be on our guard against potentially misleading metaphors and that there is always room for improvement in the language used to express phenomenological insights. To be sure, this is an on-going process and one that will divide thinkers, even those sympathetic to the PA.

Importantly, any adjustment on this score could impact on the discussion of selves in Chapter 10 (which provides an excellent, concise and sorely needed overview of the different ways of understanding selves and persons philosophically). In that Chapter, it is argued that we can identify and should acknowledge the existence of a core or minimal self. This kind of self is not one that is 'opposed to' (or which can be distinguished cleanly from) subjective experiential activity, rather it is integral to it. Thus "the (minimal or core) self possesses experiential reality, and is in fact identified with the first-personal appearance of the experiential phenomena" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 204, emphasis original). Once again, the elusive quality of 'mineness' is asked to do some important work. It is this experiential feature that allegedly stays

constant throughout all experience. Experiences are ‘felt as’ or ‘experienced as’ mine, hence they “carry a subtle presence of self” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 204). First-personal givenness, an essential part of every phenomenal experience, therefore also encourages taking seriously the existence of a minimal self.

Although the authors make abundantly clear that the self in question is not a Kantian ‘I’ or Cartesian ‘ego’ – and although they also make clear they are adopting a non-intellectualist understanding of experience – it is not evident to me, in light of the above concerns, that they can so easily help themselves to the idea that basic experiences have the quality of feeling to be ‘mine’ as such. And if so, is there any real need to posit the existence of selves that have first-person perspectives per se?

This whole discussion raises a more general question about method. For by what means might we decide the right way to jump on this sort of issue? In Chapter three, the authors make clear that they, at least sometimes, want to operate by means of eliminating the existing theoretical competition. At times, they appear content to operate a strategy of supplying theoretical conjectures and inferences to the best explanation, seeking to test these somehow and eliminate those that do not stand muster. In the end, the last theory standing would be the best explanation (see, for example, their exemplary treatment of higher order theories of experience for an illustration of how this might work). This sort of thing has been tried many times before in philosophy; indeed it is a trademark of the analytic approach. Although, I myself have used it on occasion, I am wary of the idea that it can be made to work in all cases (see Hutto 2006 ch. 6, Hutto 2007). Its use seems especially suspect when it comes to deciding how best to characterize experience and its logical requirements. So I am curious to know if, in fact, Gallagher and Zahavi are attracted to it when it comes to dealing with the case in hand or if they would prefer to adopt a more descriptively-focused approach of the sort normally associated with phenomenology. And, if they should choose the latter, I am curious to know how they would respond to some of the concerns raised above about their preferred characterization of minimal self-consciousness.

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