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AGENT, ACTION AND AGENT'S AWARENESS. A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF OUR EXPERIENCE

abstract

In this paper I propose two genuine philosophical approaches to action and I compare the different positions about this topic. I attempt to show that Heidegger's elaboration about the "worldlessness of world", about "poverty in world of animal" and about the "world-formation of Dasein" can bring to mind Gallagher&Zahavi's distinction about "oriented-towards-something movements", "action", and "action with sense of agency". In this sense I try to reflect about act, action, agent and about the agent's awareness to be an agent towards a phenomenology of action, towards a phenomenological clarification of our experience. In the first part I propose some philosophical elements about phenomenology of action showing how it is difficult to identify two or more experiences "as the same experiences". In the second part I recall very briefly the main line of Gallagher&Zahavi perspective that we can find principally in "The Phenomenological Mind" where they try to explain the different aspects of movement and action proposing some reflections about agency. In the third part I expose Heidegger's position that we can find in the "The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics". In the fourth part, I present the synergetic attempt of comparison between Heidegger thought and Gallagher&Zahavi perspective.

keywords

Phenomenology of action; agency; Heidegger; Gallagher; Zahavi

**Introduction:
philosophical
elements
about the role
of action**

In this paper I compare Gallagher&Zahavi perspective and Heidegger position in order to present a genuinely philosophical *phenomenology of action*. Introducing my speech I want to underline some phenomenological elements that can point out my considerations. Quoting *The Phenomenological Mind*:

To put it differently, our primary way of encountering worldly entities is by using them rather than by theorizing about them or perceiving them in a detached manner.

In this way, as Whitehead did, I can affirm that we are *where we are able to produce effects*. A “simple thing” is not *simply* a “thing among the others things”: it is *handling*, it is *ready-to-hand* because we *take care of things*. What can we say about the role of experience? How can we distinguish phenomenologically the experience that is usually the natural attitude of cognitives science consider superimposable? How can we phenomenologically argue about it? The natural attitude asserts that there is a neutral view capable of showing the “real things”, without the mutable outcomes of the first-person perspective. On the contrary Gallagher&Zahavi say:

Some people mistake phenomenology for a subjective account of experience; but a subjective account of experience should be distinguished from an account of subjective experience. In a similar way, some people confuse an objective account of experience with the idea that we can understand subjective experience by turning it into an object that can be examined using third-person methods.

So, there is not any pure third-personal perspective as there is not a “view from nowhere”. Phenomenologically it is very hard to identify two or more experiences as *the same experiences*. It is very doubtful to argue that “a, b, c” are *the same actions* observed from different positions. Quoting Gallagher:

Despite the similarity and perhaps the identity of the actions at the motor level, however, these are two different actions at the level of intentions. (Gallagher, in press)

A phenomenology of actions has to explain *how* we can observe the same common elements at the motor level (or neurological level) but at the same time we understand a *difference of meaning*. So, *how* can we explain that the *same* action is not *equivalent*? The answer has to be found in the phenomenological perspective of action and in the intentional givenness of consciousness: the different

intentional givens (remembered, regretted, judged) can take root in the common physical elements (the body movement, the airplane landing): in this way a non-phenomenological view mistakes the experience and unifies the givens. On the contrary, a phenomenology of action tries to underline the common physical elements, (that is “mechanical” or “motor” elements), of different intentional givens. Only with a phenomenological analysis of action we can argue meaningfully about our experiences and go beyond the ingenuous prejudice of natural attitude.

1.
The Gallagher&Zahavi
phenomenological
perspective

I want to recall very briefly the main line of Gallagher&Zahavi perspective that we can find in *The Phenomenological Mind* and in particular way in the chapter titled “*Action and agency*”.

The philosophers try to explain the different aspects of *move* and *act* proposing the distinction between *movements* and *actions*. A phenomenological attitude asks to attend to the world strictly as it appears; a phenomenological perspective about action problem involves a reflective approach about first-order and high-order experience. I quote *The Phenomenological Mind*:

For a movement to be an action it has to be goal-directed and intentional. A movement that is a reflex, or passive, or subintentional, or preintentional is not an action, although it might be interpreted as an action from the outside, that is, by some other person.

Quoting again *The Phenomenological Mind*:

What makes a movement intentional? What makes it an action? What does it mean to have an intention to act? We said: all intentional movements – all actions – are goal directed. So to have an intention to act means that we have some kind of goal in mind.

In this book we can find some interesting examples that could clarify the subject: the example of the handgun, the friend’s visit that obliges me to stand up in order to open the door, the example of the dress. These examples show how we can distinguish the different kinds of movements that can be discerned in the range between *reflex movement* and *intentional action*. In other words: there is a distinction between *movement* and *action*, but it is not always simple to consider the broad range between *reflex movement* and *intentional action*. Another very important element in the research about phenomenology of act is the concept of *agency* and the connected notion of *sense of agency*¹. In a general way, I can say that the sense

¹ It is possible to discern agency from sense of agency considering some neuropathological disorder. Cfr. Pacherie *et al.* 2005.

of agency is the experience that *I am the one who is causing or generating the action*. Nonetheless several theories and brain-imaging experiments show that there is not consensus about how to define the sense of agency.

Quoting Gallagher:

In some cases the sense of agency is construed in terms of bodily movement or motor control, in others it is linked to the intentional aspect of action. For some theorists it is the product of higher-order cognitive processes, for others it is a feature of first-order phenomenal experience.

However, beyond the doubts and the multiple perspectives that the philosophers can engage, I want to return to *The Phenomenological Mind* analysis; in this way I quote:

In its proper sense, we understand agency to depend on the agent's consciousness of agency. That is, if someone intentionally causes something to happen, that person is not an agent (even if they are a cause) if they do not know that they have intentionally caused it to happen.

In other words, if someone or some animals causes something to happen, that person or animal is not the agent if they do not know in some way that they have caused it to happen. So, if an action is something goal-directed and with an intentional reference then someone has *agency* when he knows to be the agent of the action. The main point of the argumentation is this one: we can phenomenologically describe an *action without sense of agency*, namely an action without the agent's awareness to be an agent. In the Gallagher&Zahavi perspective an action can be realized by an actor that has not awareness to be the actor, even if this actor has carried out the action following an aim and involving an intentional reference.

In summary, in Gallagher&Zahavi perspective about phenomenology of act I can emphasize three levels of experience:

- the oriented-towards-something character (for example, a hurricane);
- the action (differently from movement, an action is intentional and goal-directed but the agent can be not-aware to be the agent of the action);
- the action with sense of agency (the agent is aware to be the agent of the action).

2. Heidegger's considerations towards a phenomenology of action

We can extrapolate some very interesting analysis about *phenomenology of action* in the Heidegger reflexion (Heidegger 1983). In fact we can find three theses about the relationship with the world: the first one affirms that the *stone is worldless*; the second one that the *animal is poor in world* and the last one that the *man is world-forming*. I argue that these theses involve three levels of experience concerning a *phenomenology of action*, and I compare them with Gallagher&Zahavi results.

Quoting Heidegger it is possible to make some considerations about worldlessness of stone:

The stone is without world. The stone is lying on the path, for example. We can say that the stone is exerting a certain pressure upon the surface of the earth. It is 'touching' the earth. But what we call 'touching' here is not a form of touching at all in the stronger sense of the word. It is not at all like that relationship which the lizard has to the stone on which it lies basking in the sun. And touching implied in both these cases is above all not the same as that touch which we experience when we rest our hand upon the head of another human being. The lying upon..., the touching involved in our three examples is fundamental different in each case.

Indeed we can say that the stone *lies upon* the earth, but does not *touch* it. If we throw the stone into the river, then it will lie wherever it falls. The stone follows the circumstances, crops up here or there, amongst and amidst a host of other things; nevertheless everything around the stone remains essentially *inaccessible* to the stone itself. The stone is worldless: it signifies that the worldlessness can be characterized as not having access to beings. The stone lies on the path, it rests on the path without being aware of lying on the path and without intending to lie on the path.

Concerning the *poorness of animal* Heidegger says:

The lizard basking in the sun on its warm stone does not merely crop up in the world. It has sought out this stone and is accustomed to doing so. If we now remove the lizard from its stone, it does not simply lie wherever we have put it but starts looking for its stone again, irrespective of whether or not it actually finds it. The lizard basks in the sun. At least this is how we describe what it is doing, although it is doubtful whether it really comports itself in the same way as we do when we lie out in the sun, i.e. whether the sun is accessible to it as sun, whether the lizard is capable of experiencing the rock as rock. Yet the lizard's relation to the sun and to warmth is different from that of the warm stone simply lying present at hand in the sun.

It is true – and Heidegger exposes it very clearly – that the lizard cannot propose a “mineralogical analysis” about rocks; then, the sun where the rock is warming is not given for the lizard as sun; at the same time we cannot say that the lizard is *amongst* other material things (the rock, the bush etc.). Heidegger suggests that what we identify as the rock and the sun are just *lizard-things for the lizard*. When we expose the example about the lizard lying on the rock, we ought to cross out the word “rock” in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given *in some way* for the lizard, nevertheless the lizard does not know *the rock as rock*. The *dealing with* the

world of the lizard is not simply a *lying* on the rock: the lizard is not put on the rock in the same way the stone is put on the path, because if someone moves it far from the rock the lizard will try to reach the warm rock again. In this way the lizard is not simply subsisting nearby the rock and amongst the other things but it has a special relation with the rock, with the sun and with all the material things. The presentation of the third thesis has to be connected with the clarification of the notion of “world”. I can underline four principal steps in this Heidegger’s argumentation about this concept: firstly, he naively considers the world as the totality of beings; then as “accessibility of beings”, successively as the “accessibility of beings as such” and finally he speaks about the world as “the manifestness of beings as such as a whole”. The thesis about the man world-formation allows to open the perspective towards the last section of Heidegger phenomenology of action and explains the “manifestness of beings as such as a whole”. I propose a consideration about this topic: the accessibility of beings as such is the specific structure of the “metaphysic practice”. Indeed the peculiarity of metaphysic action is the possibility to be in relation and to be positioned face to face with the beings as such. An example can clarify the topic; the cat could be interested in the mouse or desire to catch it and then eat it. The cat observes the mouse only inside a practical situation, only inside a situation of (its) life. Contrary the man could have another different experience: he can fear the mouse, he can be worried about its presence but he can also think about the mouse as such, independently and separately from every practical connection. The reifying practice of metaphysic human language brings us to see, to observe, to deal with *things as things*, *thing as such*. Contrarily the animal can only be inserted in a practical situation with (a lot of) things: properly we cannot say that the cat looks for “the mouse”, but we have to show how the cat is *behaving with respect to* the mouse; the mouse for the cat is not “a mouse” but it is “cat-food”, “cat-enemy-to-hunt”. In fact, the last step in Heidegger’s argumentation tries to explain that the world – for the *Dasein* – is not a manifestness of just any kind whatsoever, but rather *manifestness of beings as such as a whole*; therefore “as a whole” signifies “in the form of the whole”. I can conclude quoting Heidegger again:

We shall now describe the site of the problem in a preliminary fashion by explaining in general what we mean by world-formation. According to our thesis, world belongs to world-formation. [...] For it is not the case that man first exists and then also one day decides amongst other things to form a world. Rather world-formation is something that occurs, and only on this ground can a human being exist in the first place. Man as man is world-forming.

I have been obliged to limit my considerations in this paper. Heidegger analysis permits us to pose the guiding-problem of acting from a different perspective. Now it is the time to propose the comparison between Heidegger perspective and Gallagher&Zahavi position.

3. A synergetic attempt to propose a genuinely phenomenology of action: a comparison between Heidegger's thought and Gallagher&Zahavi's perspective

Considering the analysis suggested in this paper, it appears lawful to propose a comparison between Heidegger perspective and Gallagher&Zahavi position that we can find in *The Phenomenological Mind*. This attempt conducts us to outline a genuine phenomenology of action that tries to distinguish three different degrees of experience involving three parallelisms: *the worldlessness* of the stone in Heidegger perspective could be connected with the *oriented-towards-something character of experience* which Gallagher&Zahavi speak of; *the animal's poverty in world (behaviour)* with the notion of *action*; lastly, *the man's world-formation (comportment)* with the action with sense of agency.

	GALLAGHER&ZAHAVI		HEIDEGGER
A	"Oriented-towards-something character"	↔	Worldlessness of the stone
B	Action	↔	Poverty in World of Animal (Behaviour)
C	Action with Sense of Agency	↔	Man's World-Formation (Comportment)

A) In Gallagher&Zahavi's perspective I can distinguish different kinds of "movements-displacements" that I cannot name "actions" even if they are directed to something and even if they produce some consequences. The philosophers speak about a hurricane: it surely causes some modifications on the earth; it operates on the trees and on the plants (*oriented-towards-something character*) but it does not *act* in respect to trees and plants. Heidegger speaks about worldlessness of the stone: he explains how a stone, a tree or a leaf lies on the path. They are directed-towards-something (the path) but they cannot be aware of it and they cannot try to reach it: the stone cannot strive to lie in the river, it falls into the river. For this reason its "touching" the path is essentially different from the animal or human experience of "touching".

B) In *The Phenomenological Mind* the philosophers speak about a particular kind of action completed by an agent even if he is not aware to be the agent

of that action. They call it an action without sense of agency for the agent. In this sense there is a real intentional reference inserted in a finalistic purpose, even if there is not explicit awareness of these elements. When I get up to open the door because my friend is arriving, I flex my legs and I grasp the arms of the chair (to get up) without awareness of this specific act (even if I am aware of the final goal: to go to the door and open it); so this is an action (because it is goal-directed and intentional) but I do not have awareness to be the agent of this action.

Heidegger positions seem more structured: the animal is the living being properly characterized by a *have* and *does not have world* (the animal is poor in world): an animal has the accessibility to the beings in an intentional manner (the dog making for the steak) and it is guided by aims (the dog wants to eat the steak), but at the same time it does not know the steak as such, it sees and it wants the steak as dog-nourishment. Briefly: while it is certain that all instinctual behaviour is a “relating to...”, it is just as surely the case that in all its behaviors the animal is incapable of *ever properly attending to something as such*. The dog makes some actions but it is not aware of being the agent of these actions, so it does not have the sense of agency.

C) In Gallagher&Zahavi perspective, the high-order phenomenal experience appears limited to human activity: differently from the first-order experience that can involve non-conscious and sub-personal processes, the human high-order experience presents to us an intentional horizon structure in the sense that it “aims at” or “intends” something beyond itself; furthermore it is goal-directed and the awareness about these elements is called agency. *Stricto sensu*, we can speak about *action* only for the human experience that is an intentional and goal-directed experience acted by an agent aware of being the agent of this action.

In Heidegger perspective – coherently with a typical metaphysic theoretical prejudice – only the *Dasein* is world-forming, and he is separated from the other beings from an *absolute oppositional limit*. Man is the only being that can have the access to a *thing as thing*, to a *thing as such*. This typical and exclusive human *openness* permits to the *Dasein* to *see* the things as such: the man is the only animal that can see, use and deal with *things as things*.

4. **Some conclusive considerations:** I think that the comparison between these three levels of experience in Heidegger perspective and in Gallagher&Zahavi position is definitely convincing. We have to clarify how some apparently equivalent movements (at the level of sensory-motor processes and body schematic processes) are phenomenologically different. Proposing an attitudinal change we have to diverge from a reductive materialism and we have to return to *the*

things themselves in order to attend to the world strictly as it appears. If we want to clarify our experiences we have to reflectively dwell and refrain from naturalistic approaches; following this way, I want to propose some conclusive considerations. In the analysis suggested, it clearly appears the attempt to explain and to discern the difficulties connected to the role of action and the agent's awareness to be an agent. So in this perspective I have tried to present an attempt of phenomenological reflection about acting forward an outline of a phenomenology of action. What I have sought to do, it is not a rereading of *The Phenomenological Mind* by means of the Heidegger perspective or vice versa. Rather, I have researched for a phenomenology of action as the attempt to return retrospectively to the phenomena of our experiences as they appear, showing the genesis of our beliefs and biases. Nevertheless, there are, obviously, some aspects that would be more attentively researched. I can briefly remember some open-ended considerations :

- Developing Heidegger perspective, it seems that also man sometimes acts in the same way as an animal: sometimes man acts without sense of agency, that is he acts without considering the typically human openness to *beings as beings*. This explication allows us to give light to some controversial human experiences and it gives a plausible explanation to the question about the action without sense of agency, which Gallagher&Zahavi write about.
- In opposition to Heidegger, Derrida tries to show how animals – like men – *can suffer*; this element would cancel the supposed structural difference between humans and *what-the-humans-call-animals*. It is very clear in Heidegger perspective the purpose to manifest the human superiority, coherently with his metaphysic commitment: we can say that the “animalist care” does not worry Heidegger simply because it was not an element of his discussion. Nevertheless, the Derrida position is more complex but – I think – not resolute.
- At last – properly – Heidegger does not speak about “action” and he does not use the expression “phenomenology of action”. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Heidegger ontical analysis about “world” can be connected with the Gallagher&Zahavi perspective about action. Obviously, it would be necessary to ask *why* Heidegger does not approach directly a *phenomenology of action*. We can hypothesize to find the answer in the ontological field.

Concluding my paper, I would like to stress that further research would obviously be needed. My purpose was very simple: proposing two genuine phenomenological approaches to action and compare the different positions about this topic, trying to connect the elements and suggesting some

conclusions. I think that Heidegger elaboration about the *worldlessness of world*, about *poverty in world of animal* and about the *world-formation of Dasein* can bring to mind Gallagher&Zahavi distinction about *oriented-towards-something movements, action*, and *action with sense of agency*. In this sense I have tried to reflect about act, action, agent and about the agent's awareness to be an agent towards a phenomenology of action, towards a phenomenological clarification of our experience.

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