Phenomenology and present-day psychology

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We must show how the core of genuine knowledge already acquired by investigators belonging to the criticized schools is conserved and becomes more intelligible in connection with a concrete noetic-noematic description.

Dorion Cairns (1901–1973)

Foreword

Written before World War II, this previously unpublished text by Edmund Husserl’s arguably closest disciple urges an approach by which phenomenologists can dialog with naturalistic-scientific psychologists that may be more relevant today than when it was originally written. This text appears to be addressed to fellow phenomenologists, who at that time were all in philosophy and might have been a dozen in number in the United States. It is likely that it was prepared for a meeting of the International Phenomenological Society, established under the leadership of Marvin Farber along with the Journal Philosophy and Phenomenological Research in the beginning of the 1940s. It seems not to have been presented, however, probably because of the onset of the war. This society ceased to function soon after the war.

Cairns studied personally with Husserl for three and a half years, was highly regarded by him, ventured a systematic exposition of transcendental phenomenology in his doctoral dissertation, The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Harvard 1933), and devoted his life’s work to the systematic examination and development of phenomenology. His first teaching activities were on the undergraduate level at Hunter College and elsewhere in New York City during the mid-1930s, and then at Rockford College in Illinois. He returned to New York to teach graduate courses at the New School for Social Research from 1953 until 1968, when he retired. He died in 1973. As was not uncommon in his time, about half of his early teaching was in psychology and he naturally used the then current undergraduate textbooks. His course notes include many reactions to that sort of psychology and this text must have developed in the same way.

Cairns always believed that the best route to philosophical – i.e., transcendental – phenomenology was through intentional or phenomenological psychology. This is a psychology of the sort earlier exemplified in William James’s Principles of Psychology (1890), which is to say – in James’s terms – a psychology focused on “thoughts and feelings” and the “objects of thought” that they “cognized.” Thus, what Cairns confronted in his time was either an introspective psychology of contents or a psychology of somatic events and behavior. Beyond both of these types of psychology there was what Cairns referred to as physicalistic reductionism, an interest in founding all science on mathematical physics. The background motivation of objectivism is too complex to summarize here.
While it is sometimes easier to lead the scientifically unsophisticated to reflect, Cairns focuses on those trained in objectivistic psychology. Implicit in his approach is a resort to an open and clear style and a minimum of technical terminology. More explicitly his approach urges such things as analyses that are concrete and specific, and on a par with what the naturalistic psychologists produced, rather than general descriptions; the appreciation of impressive accomplishments found in other schools of psychology, wherever possible; and the discovery of direct correlations between reflectively experienceable psychic processes and neuro-physiological and behavioral processes. He responded to the objections of objectivistic psychology directed at a psychology based on what James called “introspection,” and Cairns called “reflective experience.” On the one hand, he pointed out how natural scientists rarely seek to observe the same unique objects. On the other hand, he indicated how psychology can include “empathy,” which is an indirect experiencing or “appresenting” of the psychic processes of others based on the direct or “presentive” experiencing of their bodies and products.

Cairns’s chief difference with what might be called pure behaviorism is that the latter confines itself to behavior as encountered in sensuous perception and thus excludes direct and indirect reflective experiencing. Although the “introspectionist” psychology of his time recognizes something psychic in the traditional and Jamesian sense, his criticism of this approach is that it focuses on mental contents, i.e., the sensuous appearances of things. Cairns is concerned to foster reflective experiencing of acts of consciousness as well as contents, which Husserlians prefer to call noxes and noemata, respectively. What James called “the stream of thought” Cairns calls “the intentive process.” It is a stream or process because it flows out of the future, through the present, and off into the past, and this flow can be reflectively experienced. Such a process is composed of intentive acts, Cairns listing “perceiving, remembering, imagining, judging about, valuing, and willing.” The process and its noetic components are “intentive” because of their distinctive ways of being “of” things, i.e., perceived objects, remembered objects, and so forth. (For various reasons, intentive processes are called “experiences” and sometimes “lived experiences” by some other phenomenologists; Husserl’s term is Erlebnis; in French it is experience vécue or simply vécu. In Castellano one says vivienca.)

In sum, the text presented here seeks to outline how phenomenologists might politely challenge objectivistic psychologists of good will and encourage them to include reflective experiencing among their methods. Deep in the background is the hope that some of those who learn to explore their intentive processes might go on to consider the methodological suspending of the acceptance of the being-in-the-world of such processes through transcendental epoché and thus engage in transcendental phenomenological philosophy. Fruitful dialog with scientists of other orientations within psychology would ultimately be a means to that end, but of course a psychologist does not need to become a philosopher and phenomenological psychology is worthwhile in its own right.

The manuscript edited here was found in hand-corrected typewritten form in the Cairns Nachlass held in the Manuscript Repository of the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Inc., where it is pp. 9611–9623. It appears to be complete. Attached to the title of the MS is a footnote reading, “Copy of a MS written before 1942.” The linguistic changes made in blue ink of ‘objects’ to ‘things’ and ‘intentional’ to ‘intentive’ suggest that it was favorably reviewed by Cairns after he came to the New School. Because he uses ‘intending of’ rather than ‘intending to’ (a later preferred phrasing), that review probably did not take place before his very last years. The transcription was made by Samuel J. Julien, the William